

Interview with **Mayor Joseph Smitherman**

December 5, 1985

Production Team: C

Camera Rolls: 568-571

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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 568]

[sound roll 1531]

CAMERA CREW MEMBR: ARE WE [laughs]?

Smitherman:—well, we operate on adrenalin, when you get to this age—

[sync tone]

—and you get started. And, you know, so—I'll be worn out when I'm through.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WE'RE COOKING.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: [pause] IT'S ALL YOURS.

00:00:16:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, FIRST THING I WOULD LIKE YOU TO GO BACK BEFORE YOU WERE MAYOR AND, WHEN YOU WERE A BUSINESSMAN, WHAT WAS YOUR ATTITUDE TOWARD SEGREGATION—

Smitherman: Are we on now?

INTERVIEWER:—AT THAT TIME. WE'RE ON NOW. THIS IS FOR REAL.

Smitherman: Well, I ran an appliance store. When I got out of high school, I got married. People get married very young in the south in those days, and I got married and I got a job selling appliances, first with the railroad and then appliances. We didn't have much industry in Selma in those days—mainly cotton and agricultural. But I got a job selling appliances with Sears Roebuck, and then later on went into an appliance business with two partners on a shoestring. And, some of my best customers were black school teachers. Well, you know, you'd often get caught in a—and they were genuine friends, these were the, the few jobs blacks had in those days, and professions, and, you know, you'd dare not call them Mister, or Mrs., you dare not put it on their stationery, Mister or Mrs., and sometimes it would really bother you. You would meet them in a bank or something like that and they were one of your best customers and yet you might have a white person that might be one of your worst customers and, you, you would try to walk around, or get to the other side because you had a lot of white pressure, it was just built up in you that—we never had the Ku Klux Klan in this area, we had what you'd call the White Citizens' Council which—and I was a member of it—that, we promoted, separate-but-equal philosophy, and, one of the things was to bring economic pressure on any blacks that tried to integrate restaurants, or get out of line, so to speak, or this sort of thing and, then the whites also put pressure on each other. If a white person was shown sympathetic or so-called liberal to a black, or had a black waitress or something, you'd get a group to go by and say, well, hey, what are you doing? You're helping promote these radicals and civil rights idea, integration. So, you had that sort of pressure on you in those days. And all politicians that ran for office had that, 'cause I came from a poor background. I grew up on welfare, it wasn't food stamps. My mother was a widow woman, with six children, I was the youngest. We moved to Selma when I was a month old. And my father died when I was two months old, no hard-luck story but just facts. And, we had, we got a welfare check and, we had, surplus food. We had the powdered potatoes, the powdered milk, the barley bread, the apples and cheese and so forth and you got food, you didn't get the stamps that you could swap for beer or whatever, but we had a lot of pride and I was ashamed to go get it. You know, because I lived in the railroad section of town, and these other kids had food, but I would go get the welfare food, and I was ashamed of it and I wanted to get out of that environment. And, I struggled through those days, getting married young and the appliance business and what. And I guess, in some instances blacks had it better than I did and many of them worse, but they would take jobs that whites would not take, like being maids and things like that, or taking washing, even though many times I wish we did because, if you went hungry for a day and a half, you know what it means. So—

00:03:26:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET, LET ME JUST JUMP IN HERE. CAN WE JUST SHUT DOWN FOR A MOMENT?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SURE.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: FLAGS.

INTERVIEWER: OK, WE'RE BACK. OK, I'D LIKE TO MOVE AHEAD NOW, YOU WERE NEWLY ELECTED WHEN ALL OF A SUDDEN, THE KING CAMPAIGN GOT STARTED HERE. WHAT WAS YOUR REACTION TO ALL OF THAT?

Smitherman: Well, I was elected to the city council in 1960, which is a part-time legislative job. Out of eleven council members I was elected at age thirty to the city council, and it was all white obviously. And I was a rebel with those other council members and the former mayor, because—we all were segregationists, but I was for, I really got in politics for, to try to get industry, pave the streets, streetlights, because segregation was not a [sic] issue, everybody was a segregationist, it was in politics. So I was elected to the council. I could do very little, in, on the council and, I determined, I wanted to be the Mayor, that's where the, you had a lot of authority. So at age thirty-four I ran for the office of mayor and, uniquely so, while the black vote didn't amount to any percentage, we had about nine thousand white voters and about two hundred black voters, maybe, and so, in fact you tried to run from the black voters. I believe not because of my racial views but because of progressive views for jobs, industry and things like this, I would have gotten what black vote was there, but I didn't solicit it or seek it. As opposed to now we do, but—and genuinely so—but, I ran for the office of mayor and I, interestingly enough, Jim Clark backed me and Wilson Baker backed me. Jim Clark, the sheriff and the former police chief who had run against Clark, backed me. And I put together a coalition of people from moderate, low-income moderate, middle income whites and some of the upper income financial institutions.

00:05:18:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET ME JUST MOVE YOU UP TO THE KING CAMPAIGN, DID YOU FIND THAT THREATENING? WHEN YOU FINALLY CAME IN?

Smitherman: Oh, I, well, I came into office, I took office after being elected October 1 of 1964 and somehow I'd blocked out, I was on a cloud having run on these, progressive steps, I, I thought we could handle the racial situation. I offered a thing that was very big then. Anybody could come to my office, which was unheard of, I got a lot of rack for it, but—and I even called three prominent black leaders down—I won't call their name now—and tried to make a deal with them. I said, just little things; I've got some state money. If you three will come out publicly and demand I pave a road, which back then, practically all the streets in the predominant black area were dirt. Now they're all paved. I said, you'll get credit for this, and I'll respond. And we don't need this Martin Luther King in here. He was announcing from Atlanta he was coming to the most segregated, biased city in, in, in the South, as representative of the South as a whole, to promote voter rights, and he would make these announcements and while we, we did what we thought was a good job trying to defuse it and keep him out of here and work with local leaders, it was impossible. And then his very announcements brought in radical whites, that would come in from other parts of Alabama and Georgia. And—

00:06:38:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU TOLD ME A STORY ON THE PHONE ABOUT A BLACK CON MAN WHO OFFERED TO KEEP—

Smitherman: Oh yes, we, [laughs] we even had, black conmen to come in, they, they, we—a group had formed after my election, before I took office, of prominent old Selmanian civic leaders, financial institutions and things like this. And they would meet at night. Not bi-racial, it was all white, but they would be considered liberal in those days, and finally they disbanded. But, you had this black going around to the various counties where you had, a large black population and he was selling influence. He claimed that for ten-thousand dollars he could keep Dr. King out of here. And I think the local group here paid him about seven to eight hundred dollars before we convinced them he was a con artist and, that—and he got some more out of some other counties. I don't know where he is today.

00:07:24:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. NOW YOU MENTIONED SOMETHING ABOUT YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BLACK MOVEMENT, AND—OK. IN THE MIDST OF ALL THIS, WHY DID YOU BRING WILSON BAKER BACK? AND—YOU OKAY?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: YEAH, IT'S FINE. HE'S FINE.

INTERVIEWER: OH, OK. WELL, WHY DID YOU BRING WILSON BAKER BACK?

Smitherman: Well, in order to win the election, for mayor, I had to have support from various groups and while I probably was closer to Jim Clark in those days, 'cause he was the sheriff and had beat [sic] Baker who was the police captain, the former police chief when I ran for mayor had walked the streets against me. I had to have a new police chief, it was part of my campaign pledge, Baker was well-qualified, and he wanted to come back. And Clark was afraid if Baker'd come back, he would run against him, and Baker gave him his assurances he would not run. And, so I tried to make it up with Clark, but it didn't work. And things, got, such a, a resistance built between them that civil rights people split them up and, between the city and the county and so much politics, that—finally, at one time Clark was going to run for governor, and he told me he was going to run for governor, so that released Baker of his pledge not to run against him.

INTERVIEWER: OK, I THINK YOU'RE JUMPING OUT OF OUR TIMEFRAME A LITTLE BIT.

Smitherman: OK. Alright.

00:08:32:00

INTERVIEWER: OKAY, BUT DID YOU BRING WILSON BAKER BACK EXPRESSLY TO, BECAUSE OF THE KING CAMPAIGN, OR?

Smitherman: No, I brought Wilson Baker back because he was a political ally and it took his help because I only beat the incumbent mayor then, something like, two-thousand five-hundred to two-thousand, and that was a big election, probably the biggest they'd had here in thirty years or longer. And an unknown and from—not a Selman at that—and from the wrong side of tracks, and all those things. And so it took the support of Wilson Baker. And people wanted a change, many of the people that supported me in the police department.

00:09:01:00

INTERVIEWER: AND WHAT WAS YOUR VIEW TOWARD, JIM CLARK AT THAT TIME?

Smitherman: He was a very close friend and, you know, I know you—

INTERVIEWER: OK, START THAT OVER BECAUSE NOBODY HEARD WHATEVER—

Smitherman: Jim Clark was a very close friend and supporter and—Jim Clark was a very affable guy, everybody liked him, so you, you know, these things switch. Jim Clark had been—when he first ran for office, he got what Jewish vote it was we have a big Jewish community for a city this size. Jim had got the Jewish vote, the Catholic vote, what little black vote it was out there the first time he ran. He was appointed by Folsom, then ran against Baker, a popular police, captain. Baker at that time was the hard-core conservative in racial matters and Clark was a liberal, and it just reversed. You know, similar to Governor Wallace and Governor Patterson. When Governor Wallace first ran for office, he carried the black vote and he lost. Patterson called him a liberal. Next time Wallace said, nobody will out-seg me again. And he stood in schoolhouse doors, and all those things which, he carefully articulated. But last time he ran against a republican he got two-hundred thousand black votes, or practically ninety-nine percent of the black vote.

00:10:05:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, I DON'T WANT TO KEEP BADGERING ABOUT JIM CLARK, BUT I AM CURIOUS 'CAUSE, WHEN YOU SAY THAT HE WAS, HE WAS, USED TO BE A MODERATE, WHAT MADE HIM CHANGE?

Smitherman: Well, community climate, Jim Clark was an outsider, similar to me—even more so. He had been appointed by a governor of Alabama, Big Jim Folsom, who he was kin to, which was very unpopular in this particular county, the, old heart of the black belt. And that's named the black belt because of its rich black soil, and this is where all the farming and cotton were. And when he ran for reelection, that's when Baker ran against him, and Baker had all the prominent whites and so forth, and Clark had a mixture, of the whites, and, so, but when he got into office with the White Citizens' Council, which, was a big factor—it started in Mississippi, and next to that we had the largest contingent. And this was made up of prominent business people, farmers and middle and low income whites. And you had people

elect—

[cut]

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: Sir, we are just about running out here.

Smitherman: Well, this is what—

00:11:02:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 569]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: I HAVE FLAG, AND SYNC.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: GREAT.

INTERVIEWER: I JUST WANT TO PUSH A LITTLE BIT MORE ON JIM CLARK—

Smitherman: OK.

INTERVIEWER:—BECAUSE THERE WAS ALWAYS A TENDENCY TO MAKE CLARK THE GOAT, TO MAKE HIM THE BAD GUY. WHAT, WHAT WAS HE REALLY LIKE? WHAT, WHAT REALLY HAPPENED WITH JIM CLARK?

Smitherman: Well, it was politics. You had the White Citizens' Council. What they did—at one time prior to Dr. King coming and even John Lewis and all of those, the Citizens' Council got the Sheriff and he formed a posse, he had a riding posse and he had a walking posse. You know, in the state laws, statutes like the Old West, you could have a posse. Well, they had brown shirts and they had, bought their guns, and they would have parades down the main street and go out to a ball field and practice, and of course, if you rode a horse you were higher up in there, you was, those was big landowners. And that got to be a big political arm for him, but it's tied directly to the Citizens' Council and segregation. And he built up state-wide notoriety. In fact, at one time, I think the airborne unit in Kentucky, I had a friend in it come down here one day, whispered to me they'd called him into a meeting, they had portfolios on all of us, and were figuring out how to make a drop on Selma. They thought we was having insurrection. And you know, we didn't pay that much attention to it, I mean, it was an honor for a lot of these people to be in the posse. He must have—

00:12:22:00

INTERVIEWER: SO YOU'RE SAYING BASICALLY THAT HE KIND OF GOT CAUGHT UP IN HIS OWN—

Smitherman: Yes, and then you had the thing where the tail was wagging the dog. A lot of the extreme elements were in the Citizens' Council and if you had a good leader, which we had in the Citizens' Council, kept things at a low level, it kept down violence, but elements of it working back through the Sheriff provoked him into a lot of these things, saying that, if you don't react stronger to these demonstrations, when they actually started, Baker's going to run and get your job because Baker, prior to that had been the, stronger on the segregation issue. So, I think, it was a case of Sheriff Clark, some of it just literally being provoked, just like I was. I mean, you know, here you are in a city, you just been elected and he's got his thing going and, you're for jobs, and paving streets and all of that. In comes a civil rights leader, with a lot of national, TV and newspaper—we had close to 200 people from, various news media, all your networks in here, and they converge on your city. And the first march you see things that you've never seen before, and I'd say two-thirds of the three hundred-fifty marchers, the first march, were out-of-town people. You would have a black woman carrying a white baby with a white man, or you'd have a blonde-headed white woman with a black man and a black baby. And, course, while we kept the marchers concentrated in a given area from the Brown's Chapel by city, old city hall to the courthouse, you'd have people on the sidewalks jeering them and jeering us to stop them. Which, we were trying to handle it peacefully and hope we would wear them out and they'd get out of town and leave town. And everyday they would do something new, but—and every day the sheriff, when they got to the Courthouse, would do something, different. He'd be provoked by his followers. And while, Baker, who later became sheriff, handled it very professionally, very professionally, the press would praise him for his professionalism and damn Clark for being an extremist, and that just widened the gap between various people of Selma. And, you know, it, this is some of the things. But, Clark—

00:14:32:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT ROLE DID THE PRESS PLAY IN ALL THIS?

Smitherman: The press had played an—without the press there would have been no voting rights act, because every day—and, it's, a lot of young people don't realize it now, but every day for about three months, Selma was headline news. Now they see marches all over the country, and other countries too, but this is where they really started the mass, day-by-day marching. And everyday it was something different.

00:14:56:00

INTERVIEWER: WELL LET ME ASK YOU ABOUT THIS, THIS WHOLE ISSUE OF VOTING RIGHTS, I MEAN THAT WAS REALLY A STATES ISSUE AT THAT TIME, DID YOU THINK IT WAS UNFAIR THAT YOU BECAME A GOAT?

Smitherman: Right, well, I mean, you've hit the, you know, they hit us—

INTERVIEWER: [inaudible]

Smitherman:—this city, they hit this city for voting rights which, frankly, we wouldn't have done it had we had the power, but we had no power to handle that. The Sheriff had no power; that was in the Governor's hands. The Governor appoints three Board of Registrars that just happen to have an office at the County Courthouse, and under state law, they could register only on certain days, but that really didn't matter. They wouldn't have allowed [laughs] blacks to register anyway, maybe one here or there. But we had no power to change that and, or, I don't think we would have if we had, and, neither did the sheriff or the probate judge, or whatever. And the Governor, would dare not do it and we wouldn't have either. But the issue was at the state capitol, but, that came about later. *They picked Selma just like a movie producer would pick a set. You had the right ingredients. I mean, you would have had to have seen Clark in his day. Oh, he had a helmet liner like General Patton, he had the clothes, the Eisenhower jacket, and a swagger stick. And then Baker was very impressive, and I guess I was the least of all. I was 145 pounds and a crewcut and big ears. So you had a young mayor with no background or experience* or, I don't guess it would have counted had you had. And you had this dynamic figure of Wilson Baker, a professional law enforcement officer—a moderate, if you please. And you had Sheriff Clark, that was a military figure, and, you know, that's quite a, scene, and you had the old South, an example of the old South, and here they came.

00:16:37:00

INTERVIEWER: ALL RIGHT LET ME, LET ME JUST FOLLOW UP, THOUGH, NOW. YOU WERE A BIG SUPPORTER OF GEORGE WALLACE. WHY COULDN'T YOU JUST GET ON THE PHONE AND SAY, GEORGE, GEORGE, THEY'RE BEATING ME ABOUT THE EARS. CAN'T YOU JUST OPEN THESE DAMN OFFICES SO THAT THEY CAN REGISTER VOTERS FASTER?

Smitherman: Well the reason I couldn't get Governor Wallace to change, that's why he's Governor now. And it wasn't time for him to change and he would, he would say it's a local issue, but don't allow violence, because if you do we'll have to send the National Guard in and, President Johnson will mobilize them and you'll have the United States Army in control, and I don't want the Army in charge of one of my cities, or in my state. And, he said I want you fellows to keep, keep control, and he knew it was division over here, and, but Clark was so popular and even his, Public Safety or Trooper Director, the late I.O. Lingo, Clark really dominated him and, but we'd—and course, the Governor was supporting my efforts, and Wilson Baker's efforts, but he didn't want to have a public issue with Jim Clark. He had become that big, and he wanted to fire his Highway Director—I mean, Trooper Director, but he couldn't because, because of Clark. They had the support of the Citizens' Council throughout Alabama. And he wasn't ready to make the issue. He finally did almost make the issue after the incident at the foot of the bridge. But we, you know, they used to call me, Clark would call for fifty troopers, or a hundred troopers, 'cause they would come in riot gear under Lingo, who he had controlled, all that, and, I'd call the Governor and the Governor

finally made a policy. He wouldn't send them unless me and Clark both, and we'd argue back and forth. I'd say, we don't need them, and, but then you'd worry, what if something did happen? And I'd say, we'll send ten and we'd finally work it out and get fifty. You know, Clark wanted a hundred and I didn't want any, but I'd say twenty-five and we'd compromise on fifty. And then they'd turn on the sirens and head over here and it created an atmosphere.

00:18:23:00

INTERVIEWER: WELL, IT SOUNDS TO ME THAT WHAT YOU'RE SAYING THEN—
HOW WE DOING ON ROLL HERE?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WE'RE OKAY.

INTERVIEWER: OK IT SOUNDS TO ME THAT WHAT YOU'RE SAYING IS THAT
ULTIMATELY IT WASN'T CLARK IN CHARGE, IT WASN'T BAKER IN CHARGE, IT
WASN'T WALLACE IN CHARGE, IT WASN'T JOE SMITHERMAN IN CHARGE—

Smitherman: No.

INTERVIEWER:—IT WAS THE WHITE CITIZENS' COUNCIL IN CHARGE.

Smitherman: Well, when you say the White Citizens' Council, yes. You know, it was a climate or an atmosphere that, not just here, but people come in. Don't give up, stand your ground, you're fighting for the white man's rights and all of this stuff and, so, you really, you just roll with the situation. I mean, nobody, really, was totally in charge. Because, we felt Baker had a [sic] idea that we ought to go ahead and register some, but we couldn't convince the appointed registrars to do that. I wouldn't have publicly done it, anyway. But, we even talked, I went and visited Katzenbach, quietly, and he said if you people don't register, put out card tables and register, give everybody the right to register down there, the government's going to come in and register everybody that can breathe. And, obviously we didn't do it. And I even had a Republican Congressman that, come in and tell us that, and, but, the climate wouldn't allow you to do those things.

00:19:34:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: CLOSE. CUT.

INTERVIEWER: I MEAN, I'M ENJOYING TALKING TO YOU. [laughs]

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SYNC TONE.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: GOOD.

INTERVIEWER: I'M CURIOUS ABOUT SOMETHING, JUST A COUPLE OF YEARS BEFORE, ALL THIS HAPPENED IN SELMA, THERE WAS OF COURSE ALL THE DEMONSTRATIONS IN BIRMINGHAM, THE EXAMPLE OF BULL CONNOR. THERE WAS ALBANY, GEORGIA WITH LAURIE PRITCHETT. DIDN'T THESE THINGS COME INTO THE THINKING WHEN YOU WERE, IN THE MIDST OF ALL THIS?

Smitherman: Well, you would tend to tune them out, as best I can remember. You, in retrospect you knew they were wrong, and even then you knew it was wrong, but then what would always, you would rationalize why were they pushing this far and why were they trying to, tear up the society with, coming on this strong with demonstrations and things like this. Why didn't these outside agitators leave us alone to work out our own problems? Well, that was, generally the attitude, and of course we knew it was wrong to shoot fire hoses and turn dogs loose, or, or whatever. We never did that here, but that was in Birmingham, but we all share the blame. I mean you know, I can't sit here because, in my, I'm in my sixth term, four-year term, full-time Mayor's office. In my fourth term I got seventy percent of the black vote and I carried the white boxes too, not by that percent, but in my fourth, fifth term I got eighty percent of the black vote, 'cause—

00:20:53:00

INTERVIEWER: OKAY, I'M SURE, I'M SURE ALL THAT'S TRUE, BUT THAT'S A LITTLE BIT OUT OF OUR TIMEFRAME.

Smitherman: I got you.

INTERVIEWER: I'M REALLY JUST TRYING TO UNDERSTAND WHAT, IF YOU DIDN'T SIT DOWN WITH, WITH, WILSON BAKER AND JIM CLARK AND SAY, LOOK THIS IS WHAT HAPPENED IN ALBANY, GEORGIA, THIS IS WHAT HAPPENED IN BIRMINGHAM. WE, WE CAN CALM THIS THING DOWN IF EVERYBODY JUST STAYS COOL.

Smitherman: Well—

INTERVIEWER: CLARK, STAY COOL.

Smitherman: We offered concessions behind the scenes, that, we would start hiring more people and, all of these things—paving streets; and we needed time, we were always asking for time, but the blacks had solidified their leadership through Martin Luther King. People like the, former City Councilman F.D. Reese, or Reverend Reese, and other pastors here, their leadership then was mainly preachers. And they solidified their leadership not to give in on anything. In fact, you look back and see how much you learn from those leaders, even after the demonstrations they would come in after Dr. King left and they looked around and nothing had really happened, they had the right to vote, but, it hadn't really accomplished anything at that time. They'd come in with ten demands and you would listen to them three hours and give them one. They'd come back next month with ten more and you'd give them

one you'd look around a year later and say, hell, they got all ten of them, and 'cause, and, so what we did in the 70s [laughs]—

00:22:06:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: WE JUST RAN OUT. [laughs]

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 570]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WE HAVE FLAGS. AND ROLL SOUND.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: THANK YOU. OK, GENTLEMEN, IT'S ALL YOURS.

00:22:19:00

INTERVIEWER: MAYOR SMITHERMAN WHERE WERE YOU THE DAY OF THE PETTUS BRIDGE INCIDENT?

Smitherman: Well, when the incident at Pettus Bridge, that was after almost two months of daily marches and a different type march every day. One time the word went out—see they built up all kind of momentum. The first march you'd arrest say, six, eight hundred and they would, a lot of them juveniles. You'd let them out and, they'd march the next day and they would put them in a highway camp out here, where workers would stay, till they could process them and turn back over to the custody of the parent. The press kept score and at one time we'd arrested twenty-something thousand people down here, which was about the same fifteen hundred over and over and over, and these were the type things they would do, and then they would go have the shouting matches at the courthouse. One time a picture went out on Jim Clark, I never will forget this one. A big black lady would make them get in line, and the Federal judges would order you do it certain ways you'd wrap them round around the courthouse, 'cause registrars wouldn't see them. And, but anyway a black lady jumped Jim Clark, threw him on the ground, was lying on top of him beating on him and he, of course, had his billy stick in his hand, he rolled over on top of her and was putting his stick away. The press took that picture and they stopped it on him pulling back with his stick like this and it went around the world showing a picture of Jim Clark beating a black lady on the ground, when it was right the opposite. He was trying to get her off him. But these are the type, just one of many, many incidents that happened. Well, the bridge march was kind of an accident.

It was not a planned thing, so to speak. What would happen, Dr. King would fly in and out of here for a big type march, but other than that it would be held, the marches would be led by, always, Reverend Reese, John Lewis, and Hosea Williams. And the press—we used to, after a while we couldn't get from the leaders what they would do every day, and we'd always watch the TV cameras, they had a staging area down at AME Chapel and a housing project there, and, they were never on time, they'd never follow a schedule or what, and we used to watch the TV cameras. If, when they started moving, we knew something was going to happen. 'Cause they kept direct contact with the press, and the press from New York and your major networks would tell them, this thing is burned out we're going back to New York, there's no news down here. So they would come up with something different. And I think this particular march, without King's planning, or Andrew Young, or whatever these so-called people that, say all these things now, John Lewis and Hosea came up with this. They had about three hundred and twenty-five or three hundred and seventy-five people and they decided to march to Montgomery and carry their grievances to Governor Wallace. And at first the Governor, through his aides and what I was in direct contact with, was going to let them march. And some legislator convinced him that one of the counties between Selma and Montgomery, that there might be violence, and then he ordered a peaceful stop of it. And, we, Wilson Baker and a newspaper friend of mine, we stayed on the phone four hours with one of Governor Wallace's aides that was from Selma convincing him there was going to be trouble. Wilson Baker assured me that when they got across the bridge that they would be beat up and run back into Selma, then it'd be a local problem again. See, that's always the kick between the Governor's office and local. If it's something good, naturally the Governor, who I support, had a big part in it; if something bad happened, that's a local problem that the city or the county should've taken care of. Everybody politicians finds their hard ground, so, but *when that beating happened at the foot of the bridge, it looked like a war that went all over the country. And then people, the wrath of the nation came down on us.* That one incident caused Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act. Congress is a reactionary body, they don't ever pass anything, out of, statesmanship. If it's enough, commotion out there, or whatever, that the public comes down on them, they'll pass it. Other than that, it would've been years before they passed it, and that one incident—other than that we had it somewhat tempered because, through the efforts of professionalism like Wilson Baker and—

00:26:26:00

INTERVIEWER: BUT WHAT WAS YOUR REACTION WHEN YOU HEARD ABOUT THAT, WHAT, WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED THERE?

Smitherman: What happened? I was not there, you know, I would stay away, I was at City Hall. I didn't, I didn't understand how big it was until I saw it on television. I was only about 3 blocks from it, but, and then, you know, I didn't go out on the streets, I would stand on the, City Hall, 'cause I didn't want to be around, Dr. King, that was a political no-no and, but I was within fifty yards or five hundred feet of everything, and, this instance, two-and-a-half blocks but, see, we almost had a race riot—that's the closest we come to violence in the city. They ran them back over the bridge and then the city police did their share. And they ran into AME Chapel, and some of the posse members almost rode horses in there, and even the city attorney, who's deceased now, at that time, who was a big supporter of, naturally, of mine

and Jim Clark's and, it scared him. And we probably would've had violence, 'cause you know that's, that's the sacredest [sic] part of anybody is their church, especially blacks, but they almost rode horses, you know, they got scared away in the AME Church and that's the closest—

00:27:32:00

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU FEEL LIKE EVERYTHING WAS JUST—

Smitherman: Oh yes, yes,

INTERVIEWER: -GETTING OUT OF CONTROL?

Smitherman: I was just, you know, and, you know, the way the press could do it and, you know, I understand that now, but, one time we issued an edict that they could not march to the courthouse, and so they started assembling in Martin Luther King's street, it's Sylvan Street now, in front of that, and so they would keep, it was about three hundred, and they'd keep inching forward and we'd put a little rope across it and said, don't come beyond this point, peacefully. Then it, the crowd ended up—at one time, over about three weeks, ended up three or four thousand in there, and it looked like, and they didn't know when the press would come. They'd pull shifts. They'd go in the housing project, the church, rest, and when it rained they had stuff to pull over them, and what, but when the press showed up they would all come out and you'd see three or four thousand people in the street – it looked like we had the Berlin Wall, they called it the Selma wall. Like we were denying the people the right to go to the Courthouse, well they had the right to go in four or five down the sidewalk, but not a body of two or three thousand down the middle of the street without a parade permit. And, so these are the ways that the press did their job, because naturally they were sympathetic with the, Martin Luther King and the black movement and the right to vote. And, course, all Southerners—I say all Southerners, practically all Southerners, recognize that the South was wrong; that everybody should have had the right to vote, but it's not just the South, you had it in other parts of the country.

00:28:58:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU MENTIONED THAT YOU HAD TALKED TO KATZENBACH. DID YOU HAVE CONVERSATIONS WITH ANYBODY ELSE IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AT THAT TIME?

Smitherman: Baker had most of them, Wilson Baker. John Doar was in here from the Justice Department, and—mine mainly was with the, Governor's office because, you know, it was, you didn't want to fool with any Federal people, you know, because everybody'd accuse you of a secret meeting and this sort of a thing. And, oh, we've had Congressmen that come in—all would do their politics here. Black Congressmen would come from Detroit; Conyers, I think he was from New York; all of those would come in here and try to get publicity and, we'd have crazy things happen. We became the march capital of the world. Kids would come in, students, to get their spurs in Selma. I remember I had a phone call from University of

Minnesota, and some young girl said, we're coming to your city to march, I said, I don't know what I told her, really; I didn't care for it, but they chartered an airplane, brought a group of students to Montgomery Airport, landed, rented a bus, came over here, marched two hours, got in the bus, went back, caught the plane back. And, I find today, in dealing with Federal Agents, there's many of them with prominent jobs marched here in Selma, that's part of their portfolio, that—I remember dealing with an Under-Secretary of HUD—later on we went after Federal Programs. I said, you know, back then you wouldn't take the Federal dollar and we had so many things that needed to be done. Today all of our streets are paved, all the houses have collection line sewage, and things of this sort. We got, we figured, it's our tax dollar, let's go after it and use the name Selma.

00:30:30:00

INTERVIEWER: WELL NOW, AFTER, AFTER THE INCIDENT AT PETTUS BRIDGE, COURSE, KING PUT OUT THE CALL FOR ALL THESE MINISTERS TO COME DOWN, INCLUDING JIM REEB, WAS ONE OF THE MINISTERS WHO CAME DOWN. HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT ALL THESE PEOPLE COMING TO YOUR TOWN?

Smitherman: Well, you, you—it was disgusting. I mean you, you didn't want these people in, you always fell back on, regardless of the mistreatment and not the right to vote, you fell back, if these outsiders would get out of here—I'm going to be frank with you, some of them were very scummy people and, you know we even had some people in there, sometimes we questioned who they were. And now we had some scummy people trying to stop them. But, I remember—and I, you know, I, I've got some of the closest Catholic friends in the world, we have an excellent Catholic community, cause we have a lot of preachers down here wasn't preachers, I remember one Catholic nun had a collar on and she was standing in line, I was stopping a march down there. And she winked at me several times, so, I don't believe she was a Catholic nun, I think she rented the uniform, but, and we had a lot of preachers—everybody was a preacher, they'd just, you'd go rent those collars, or say you were a preacher here or there. Now we had very legitimate ministers in here, too. We had people from some of the largest, institutions, Notre Dame. I forget the father's name that came here, and you know they were convicted, especially after this incident in front of the bridge. And—

00:31:44:00

INTERVIEWER: FINALLY THE MARCH WAS APPROVED, EVERYBODY FINALLY LEFT TOWN AND STARTED MARCHING. DID YOU THINK YOUR PROBLEMS WERE OVER THEN?

Smitherman: Yeah, but they wasn't, they'd just really started, because they had not gained anything at that time, other than Lyndon Johnson announced that he was going to give them protection, they were going to march to Montgomery, and with the Army, and so forth and so on. But then, it fell back on the local leaders and Dr. King came back in and out of here on a number of occasions. And then you had the local leaders that, we had marches on and off for four, five years. And a pattern had been set, and then—

00:32:19:00

INTERVIEWER: ON THE DAY WHEN THE MARCH FINALLY GOT UNDERWAY TOWARD MONTGOMERY WITH PROTECTION AND EVERYTHING, YOU DIDN'T THINK THAT—

Smitherman: I thought they were gone, I thought that was it. You know they're out of Selma, Montgomery's got them—that's great, but, they just went to Montgomery, and course, they didn't march all the marchers, they just, marched about three or four miles and then trains carried some of them to Montgomery, but about three hundred and fifty or somewhat marched all the way to Montgomery. And you had movie stars flying, and all that but, you had Walter Reuther with the AFL-CIO. You had all those people in here, the whole world, it seemed like, came in here, and from the news media, all your big broadcasters were in here, at least for one day. And—

00:32:57:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DO YOU THINK WAS THE BIGGEST MISTAKE THAT WAS MADE AT THAT TIME?

Smitherman: [pause] Well, obviously the foot of the bridge—well, you know, in retrospect, I don't think we made a mistake based on the prevailing conditions—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: I'M SORRY, WE'RE ABOUT TO ROLL OUT, HERE.

[cut]

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WE'RE NOT GOING TO MAKE IT.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 571]

Smitherman: Is she Jewish?

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER 2: I DON'T KNOW.

Smitherman: I don't know either. Got a hell of a body.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK. WE'RE, WE'RE COOKING.

00:33:33:00

INTERVIEWER: THERE WAS ONE POINT DURING ALL OF THESE CAMPAIGNS, I THINK THERE, THERE WAS EVEN TALK ABOUT TRYING TO GET A RECALL AND GET YOU OUT OF OFFICE. WHAT KIND OF THREATS DID YOU HAVE?

Smitherman: Get a recall? No, I got out of office one year.

INTERVIEWER: NO, I MEAN IN THE MIDST OF THE, THE SELMA CAMPAIGN WHEN ALL THE DEMONSTRATIONS WERE GOING ON. WHAT WAS THE—

Smitherman: Oh, yeah, well, yeah. I was new in office and, you know, because I didn't overreact or react as strongly, or did Baker react as strongly, cause he was in charge of the police under me and the City Council and, but directly under me, Baker was, and because of the, the, his reaction, a more professional or moderate approach to allow them to march, but peacefully, and keep whites from getting involved, radical elements of whites, there was an element that tried to organize a recall vote of me, that's the only way they could get rid of Baker and, but it never came off.

00:34:21:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT KIND OF THREATS DID YOU HAVE DURING THAT TIME?

Smitherman: What kind of what?

INTERVIEWER: WERE YOU THREATENED DURING THAT TIME?

Smitherman: Oh yes, I've had threats and one time they even marched on my house, you know. We've had every type march. You know, one time we had, Jewish Rabbis from up east, embarrass the local Jewish community here, and they tried to—we wouldn't arrest them, we'd put them in the, the courtroom and let them sit there and call the local Jewish people down to talk them into going back home.

00:34:47:00

INTERVIEWER: HOW ABOUT THE WHITE CITIZENS' COUNCIL, DID THEY THREATEN YOU DURING THIS TIME TO, KIND OF, SUPPORT CLARK?

Smitherman: Oh yes, it was political threats, economic threats, your friends were threatened, all of this economically. Economic threats were mainly what we had here, you know. The whites would turn on you and not speak to you. It was a bad feeling. One day you was a hero and you know, you'd love to, that he—see, Martin Luther King would not break the law, we'd

go down and stop him in the staging area, and said, now, what you in [sic] constitutes a march. We wanted to arrest him, 'cause we wanted our hurrahs too. And we knew what Clark was going to do when he got to the courthouse, and we'd said, as he was getting to be so popular locally and Alabama-wide, we'd say, what you in, you're breaking the law, you can't go. He said, tell me how I should go to the courthouse, I'm a law-abiding man, I do not wish to break the law. Wilson Baker would tell him, two and three down the sidewalk. He would very, with his demeanor and all, do that. Get to the courthouse you'd have one of his leaders react, and you'd have a big scene, Clark would come out the hero to the local whites, but finally about the sixteenth day or whatever, I can't remember exactly, but, he told Wilson Baker, I do not recognize your law; it's an unjust law. He already has had his literature made out to be arrested in the Selma jail, I think he would have preferred the county jail, but, and you know to send out. So he said, I do not recognize, so we arrested two hundred-eighty-four, and I'll never forget, Baker said, anybody knows why they're being, don't know why they're being arrested hold up their hand, about twenty did and told them to go on home. But we put them in jail, let all out but Martin Luther King and Rev. Abernathy, they refused to bond out. And then here comes the press and, he sends out his literature, I'm in the Selma Jail, and, so forth and so on. But, after about five or six days, I'm not sure, he did decide to get out. He had accomplished his purpose.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS—

Smitherman: On that day.

00:36:35:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS THE BIG DEAL? I MEAN WHAT WAS IT THAT DROVE WHITE PEOPLE GENERALLY TO FEEL THAT, THAT GUARDED AND PROTECTED FROM—

Smitherman: Well, OK, well the biggest thing that was used, and it's, somewhat political, you hardly hear it now, but the biggest thing they would say—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK, I'M GOING TO STOP YOU FOR A MINUTE, YEAH—

INTERVIEWER: WHY DON'T YOU JUST TURN TOWARD—YEAH, YOU GOT IT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: YOU HAVE TO—IT'S IMPORTANT THAT YOU TALK TO JIMMY AND NOT ME.

Smitherman: OK. The biggest that was said and you grew up with that, if you give in to those black people they'll end up marrying your sister. It was a racial, bitterness from that standpoint. You want them marrying your sister, and, your son marrying a black, and this sort of thing. That was one of the overriding things, they would always use that on you. And even though, you had people that grew up, and blacks had a good relation with whites, poor whites, and they worked together, they would always split. And I think, over a, with jobs

scarce in the agricultural area then, the whites were threatened with their jobs, you know, in a sense. If you can't do better and you don't work for this price, we'll get a black to do it, and they didn't say black, you know. So, it was two things—race mixing and, economics. And you know, politicians, those days, worked, worked that issue. They worked it, you got elected that way in the South, and I imagine they do it up in Boston with the Catholics and the Protestants. I know they, do it in Ireland, I guess. You have, it's the same, similar type thing, it may be more sophisticated, and not as out in the open, but, they built up those things, fears, of losing the Catholic faith, or the Baptist faith; fears, then, of losing your white skin or losing your job.

00:38:14:00

INTERVIEWER: OK JOHN, I THINK I'M DONE. DO, DID YOU HAVE A QUESTION?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: LET ME JUST THINK FOR A SECOND. THAT WAS A IN—

[cut]

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1:—I LOVE THAT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: IS THAT A CUT?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: THAT'S CUT.

[cut]

Smitherman: Even some of your north Alabama area's more progressive but you had—

[sync tone]

Smitherman:—anyway.

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET, LET ME, THROW—

Smitherman: OK, alright.

00:38:31:00

INTERVIEWER:—AND THIS IS PROBABLY GOING TO BE THE FINAL ONE, BUT WE'LL SEE WHERE IT GOES. WHEN ALL OF THIS STARTED TO HAPPEN IN SELMA, THERE WAS A GREAT DEAL OF, PRESSURE BEING PUT ON IN WASHINGTON TO TRY TO GET THIS VOTING RIGHTS BILL. DID YOU SENSE HOW BIG THIS THING WAS GETTING, WHEN DID YOU KNOW WHAT WAS

HAPPENING HERE?

Smitherman: Well, it really didn't know till way after the incident at the foot of the bridge, how big it was. Course we knew certainly when the act passed, or when Lyndon Johnson came on, I remember we were around Brown Chapel, I was in the area and you had all of these people marching around, because after that they were in the staging area, we wouldn't let them march three or four thousand. And, we had the radio on, and all the blacks had the radio on, and you know, you'd mill around like a Roman holiday until the, it got ready to march, and then everybody'd regiment. I at one time had four hundred State troopers, Conservation Officers, and Game and Wildlife, and everything, ABC agents, under my direction, and we ringed around that sixteen block area. Nobody could come out of it, unless they were going back and forth. Not in a constituted march. But *Lyndon Johnson came on, the late President, and said, "we shall overcome."* And that just like, you'd stuck a dagger in your heart or something like that. I mean, you know, what's this guy doing? And, you know, you had respect for your country—the South's very patriotic—but it just destroyed everything you'd been allegedly fighting for and he said, we shall overcome and he called on Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act. And, then you'd felt it was hopeless, and then from, it just kept going downhill from the resistance side at that point. And then the, we went through a recovery stage, I guess, for three or four years after that, of pulling people back together, because the whites had split and, the county and the rural and the city people had split, taken different positions and—

00:40:18:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DID YOU THINK—

Smitherman:—the blacks were disenchanting.

INTERVIEWER:—PRESIDENT JOHNSON HAD DONE THERE? I'M NOT QUITE SURE IF, I UNDERSTAND—

Smitherman: He had—

INTERVIEWER:—YOUR ANSWER.

Smitherman:—he had gotten involved in states' rights. That was a big issue. You know, we still believed that the state had the right to govern itself, to set its standards. If we wanted a poll tax, if we wanted to set standards for qualified people to vote, we felt we had that states' rights; that a state had that, when it joined the union. You know, we still believed that. Oh, people today will say they didn't, but they did then. States' rights was a big champion, but the states' rights, also meant segregated public facilities and all those things, and, that part we didn't [laughs] look at, a big part we looked at, it was our right. It's hard for people from, away from here to understand, a battle was fought right in this particular city in the war between the states and you know, obviously the South lost, but you grew up, respecting that battle between the states, our, right to succeed [sic], and all of these things. And you know, you had very little—see, everybody thinks everybody in the South lives in a big mansion

home with columns and magnolia trees and horses running around. That's less than one half of one percent of the people, if that much, that has that. Most of your South was moderate and low income people that, rural people, that grew up very hard, but, you grew up, I guess, it might be with pride in, in your, Southern part of the country, and all of these things, and, you would read in your history books about how gallant the South was in the war between the states, and that we were used and misused that, so all those things. But states' rights was a big political issue, and we really believed that, and to some extent still believe it today, leaving out the racial thing.

00:42:05:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT HAD BEEN DONE TO ACCOMODATE THE 1964 ACT, BY THE TIME, I MEAN THIS, THIS WHOLE CAMPAIGN OF KING'S CAME, ON TO YOU ABOUT SIX MONTHS AFTER THE '64 ACT HAD BEEN PASSED. WHAT HAD BEEN DONE TO ACCOMODATE THAT?

Smitherman: No, it, oh it came after King was here.

INTERVIEWER: WELL, I, BUT NINETEEN, NOT '65, THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT, 1964—

Smitherman: Oh, the, yeah, well, while it came through, few people obeyed it, you know. And, few of the blacks had the courage to go in and integrate a restaurant, and few blacks went to the theater. You had three floors, the ground floor, balcony for the whites, and up, thirdly you had a place for the blacks and they just continued to go there, because they would get the economic pressure from various, groups, like your Citizens' Council of, and so forth that, you know you'll lose your job. Economic pressure. But you know, that's awfully hard, and looking back in retrospect, how you put economic pressure on somebody that's got no economics. But they would try.

00:43:04

INTERVIEWER: I'M, I'M OUT OF QUESTIONS.

[cut]

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: I'M ALRIGHT. JUST CUT.

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: FLAGS.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: LOOK AT ME AS YOU ANSWER THE QUESTION.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: LET ME GET THIS OUT OF THE WAY. OK.

INTERVIEWER: YOU HAD HEARD THE QUESTION.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WE'RE ROLLING.

INTERVIEWER: GO AHEAD.

00:43:21:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: GO AHEAD.

Smitherman: Well, even in the '50s as a merchant, or salesman of appliances, and OK. Even in the '50s as a merchant or salesman of appliances having grown up in a poor background with a widowed mother and, blacks lived on the street behind me and all around me, and yet we were totally segregated, I saw cruelty to blacks, I didn't like it. I, you'd, felt ashamed of it, but you, it, there wasn't anything you could do. And even when I was in the appliance business, you know, you'd see these people that were good customers and when they were the only ones in the store you could be friends, and they can tell, you know, you can't fool people, they, they, they knew you were playing out a role, and while I didn't believe in integration—I didn't believe in integration—I had a real, I think a common bond with the black people, and I think they could tell it, and they knew it, they knew who had to act out what, and I think had they had the right to vote, and certainly even though there wasn't about a hundred and fifty in Selma that vote, I think I got the majority of those that, that voted—

[cut]

[wild audio]

Smitherman: —because, they saw the things that I was for: industry, paved streets, and these are the very things that would benefit low and middle income whites, which was my coalition, but it would also help the blacks, and so, yes, now we go among the blacks and seek their vote, and, you know I can do things now that I couldn't do then, this is—

00:44:39:00

INTERVIEWER: IF HADN'T HAD THE PRESSURE FROM THE WHITE CITIZENS' COUNCIL, DO, WOULD YOU HAVE CAMPAIGNED FOR MORE BLACK REGISTRATION?

Smitherman: I doubt it, you know, it just was not—you just felt, and I guess this sounds silly today, but you just felt the blacks were satisfied with the type lifestyle they had, that—and I know that's very demeaning to say that, but you thought that you know, they were just satisfied with living in these shacks and, being—

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: [inaudible] RUNNING OUT.

Smitherman:—and they were happy people and, hell they wasn't, you know, I mean you just grew up with that sort of thing, 'cause you grew up knowing a lot of poverty yourself.

INTERVIEWER: OK, THANK YOU.

Smitherman: But—

INTERVIEWER: GOOD. I THINK THAT'S A WRAP. THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

Smitherman: OK.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:45:20:00

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