Interview with **Charles Diggs**
November 6, 1986
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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.*

00:00:03:00

[camera roll 165]

[sound roll 1135]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK IT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: SELECT ONE.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER 1: OK, FIRST QUESTION I WANT TO ASK YOU ABOUT IS THE VOTER REGISTRATION RALLY AT MOUND BAYOU IN 1955. THAT OCCURRED ON—NOT TOO FAR FROM MONEY THAT SUMMER AND I WANT TO KNOW IF YOU CAN TELL ME ABOUT THE RALLY AND ALSO YOUR IMPRESSIONS ABOUT THE BLACK COMMUNITY IN MISSISSIPPI AT THE TIME.

Diggs: Well, the State of Mississippi has a very special significance to the Diggs family because that's where my father came from, my grandfather, minister, and so on. And adding to the fact that I was the first black to be elected to Congress in many years and the first from Michigan, the invitation to come to Mound Bayou, Mississippi for this customary rally that they had involving voter registration was very significant to me and it was the first major speech that I made after having been elected to the Congress of the United States.

00:01:15:00

INTERVIEWER 1: CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE RALLY IN TERMS OF THE SIZE AND THE IMPACT IT HAD ON YOU AT THE BEGINNING?

Diggs: Well, the—it had a great—the Mound Bayou rally had a great impact on me because my father was there, probably the first time he'd been in Mississippi since he was a child and he was up on the stage with me. and that audience at Mound Bayou was five thousand people under the tent and there was another five or ten thousand people outside of the tent that was listening to the program over the over the loud speakers. And given the state of matters in Mississippi at that time and the, the kind of security problems that I had had already, in Mound Bayou it, it had a tremendous impact.

00:02:14:00

INTERVIEWER 1: YOU MENTIONED WHEN WE WERE TALKING—CAN YOU DESCRIBE WHAT THE BLACK COMMUNITY WAS LIKE IN MISSISSIPPI? YOU WERE SAYING THAT THEY WERE IN A SENSE READY FOR A LEADERSHIP BUT THAT THERE WAS NO LEADERSHIP THERE.

Diggs: Well, they certainly were ready for leadership and the leadership potentialities were there, in Mound Bayou, but among independent kind of potentials that the reason that my Dr. Hosts was so effective in the State of Mississippi was the fact that he was independent of the system. He, he his earnings through being a medical doctor were sufficient to keep him from being dependent upon the local economy, and the same is true for certain other kinds of people, like the black morticians. Anyone who, who, who was not dependent on that economy. And Mound Bayou was an all-black community and therefore that helped to undergird the kind of independence that, that was necessary because so many people were dependent upon the system that they were compromised in terms of, of seeking relief from the, the, the kinds of the lack of citizenship rights that, that the average blacks had in that area.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CAN YOU STOP A MOMENT.

[cut]

00:03:59:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK IT.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: TWO.

INTERVIEWER 1: CAN YOU DESCRIBE FOR US GENERALLY THE SYSTEM OF SEGREGATION IN THE SOUTH AT THAT TIME AND IF IT AFFECTED YOU BEING

A CONGRESSMAN FROM THE SOUTH.

Diggs: Well, segregation in the South was alive and well when I came to Mississippi. I was not a stranger to the South because I had been stationed in the South during the war, World War II, and I, as an enlisted man and, and as an officer and, of course, my family coming from the South had also raised my, my level of, of, of interest in the area but it was very stark. By law it affected every, every aspect of, of, of society. I can remember, for example, when I went to Fisk University in 1942 when you crossed the river when you, when you left Cincinnati you were moved from on the train up to the, to a segregated part as you went into Kentucky. I can remember traveling from the North to the South as a, as an enlisted man when I first went into the army in 1943 and I traveled across the country and once I crossed the Mason-Dixon, Dixon line the and, and went in into the dining car, they pulled a curtain around me so that I was technically separated from the rest of the people who were in the, in the dining room. And I could go on and on about being directed to go up in the balcony in theaters in the South not being able to sit on the first floor and matters of that type. And it affected, obviously, employment and, of course, it affected politics because they had fixed the primary system in, in, in these Democratic states so that blacks could not, could not vote or they would be limited in their, in their voting potentialities.

00:06:32:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WOULD YOU TALK TO US ABOUT GETTING INVOLVED IN THE TILL CASE BECAUSE YOU FIRST OF ALL THOUGHT OF YOURSELF AS BEING A CONGRESSMAN AT LARGE FOR THE BLACK COMMUNITY, FOR BLACK AMERICANS, AND ALSO BECAUSE YOU THOUGHT THAT BEING THERE AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF CONGRESS MIGHT BE ABLE TO ENSURE A BETTER, MORE HONEST, AND MORE FAIR TRIAL. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THAT AND OTHER THINGS THAT GOT YOU INVOLVED IN THE TILL CASE?

Diggs: Well, when I read about the Till, the Emmett Till case involving this young boy that had been fished out of the Tallahatchie River all mutilated because he, as I understood it, dared to talk back to white people down in that community. I became immediately interested, first of all, because it was Mississippi and which was the, the bottom line for the arch segregationists in, in the United States. And secondly, again, it was the home state of my, my parent, my father, my, and my grandfather and all the people on the Diggs side of the family. And, and thirdly, I thought that, being a member of Congress and being a pioneer member of Congress that I had a, I had a special security kind of, of dimension there that could serve the purpose well. And be a, a witness to the execution of—or the prosecution of a case of this type and be able to speak firsthand about it all over the country and, and, and back in Congress. Hopefully, with an enhancement that would be in back of laws that would correct the system and, and, and, and give inspiration to, to, to other interested parties all over the country.

00:08:49:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT WAS IT THAT YOU—WHAT WAS IT THAT MADE THIS

CASE SO WELLKNOWN? WHY DID THIS PARTICULAR CASE HAVE SUCH A NATIONAL IMPACT IN YOUR OPINION?

Diggs: Well, I think I, I contributed to the kill—the, the Till case being well-known by my presence. I—it was a, a focus for national media. I was the only Congressman that was there and behind the fact that I was a black congressman and, and just elected I think it added a whole lot to media interest in this matter and because it was not the first time that, that a black person had suffered these—this kind of fate in that state. But my presence without question added to the, the media dimensions and, and it stimulated concern all over.

00:09:49:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WERE THERE OTHER THINGS THAT MADE THIS CASE TAKE SUCH A HIGH PROFILE?

Diggs: Yes, I think the, the picture in the Jet Magazine of the, of the Till boy showing his mutilation after he was removed out of the river, I think that, that was a—that's probably one of the greatest media products in the last forty or fifty years because that picture stimulated a lot of interest and a lot of anger on the part of blacks all over, all over the country. And I think the fact that the Till boy was just a child also added to, to—added to this, this matter.

00:10:39:00

INTERVIEWER 1: CAN YOU GIVE US A SENSE OF THE WAY THE TRIAL WAS CONDUCTED JUST YOUR IMPRESSIONS BEING IN THE COURTROOM AND THE IMPACT THAT SEGREGATION HAD ON THE TRIAL AND THE WAY IT WAS CONDUCTED THERE.

Diggs: Well, it was the first time I had been in a courtroom. And the—

[phone rings]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: STOP PLEASE.

INTERVIEWER 1: STOP FOR A SECOND.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE'RE ALMOST OUT OF FILM TOO.

00:11:05:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE NEED MORE.

INTERVIEWER: YEAH.

00:11:07:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 166]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ROLLING.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARK IT. THREE.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. CAN YOU, AGAIN, CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE SENSE OF THE WAY THE TRIAL WAS CONDUCTED AND WHAT WAS IT LIKE BEING IN THE COURTROOM?

Diggs: Well, it had a considerable impact upon me personally because it was the first time I had ever been in any courtroom. And when I entered the, the chambers, which was segregated, all of the, all of the black spectators were in the back. And identified myself at the door to, to the bailiff who took a note up to the judge and when the judge saw who I was, by, by my card, that I was a member of Congress he invited me to sit with the, with the media people. As a matter of fact, that's the only, the only space that was available anyway, because that little courtroom was—every seat was almost, every seat was taken except up there in the media, in, in, in the media gallery, which was, which was right up, right up front. And ***there was, of course a lot of buzzing, when I entered*** the, ***the place and was placed in that, area, and I think the judge said something about, yeah, have that boy come on up here and sit down*** over ***here with these news reporters, you know? [laughs]*** So—

00:12:36:00

INTERVIEWER 1: HOW DID—WERE YOU, WERE YOU SEGREGATED IN THE COURTROOM? DO YOU REMEMBER WHETHER YOU HAD TO SIT WITH THE BLACK REPORTERS OR—

Diggs: Well, there weren't, I, I, I don't, I, I, I sat with the, in, in the media—with the media people and I, if there were any, any, any blacks, there were very few, maybe one or two and they were—we were all in, in that area together at that particular point, But when I reflect upon it, I don't remember any blacks being in that group. So they may have been out there sitting in the back someplace.

INTERVIEWER 1: HOLD ON A SEC. SURE.

[cut]

00:13:18:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: FOUR. MARK IT.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER 1: CAN YOU GIVE US A WORD PICTURE OF WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO SIT THERE IN THE COURTROOM FOR THE DURATION OF THE TRIAL?

Diggs: Well, there was a great deal of tension at the Till trial because of the circumstances, obviously, the racial element. The community where the court was located is, is—although Mississippi is, is a rural state this was a very, very rural community. And they were not used to the kind of attention that was generated by the Till case and, and also by the racial dimensions brought in a whole lot of people from the outside, black and white from the north, that is—was always ana—anathema to, to the whites residents of, of the area. And the tension not only existed in the courtroom, but outside in the area across the street at the—around the courthouse people were sitting around spitting tobacco and, and discussing this case and, and its racial implications in a way that is pretty typical of that area at that particular time.

00:14:51:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WAS THERE KIND OF A—AMONG WHITES WAS THERE AS MUCH TENSION, BUT WAS THERE—HOW DID THEY REGARD THIS, THIS CASE AS FAR AS YOU COULD SEE?

Diggs: Well, they, they were tense too not, not, not, not in anticipation of the results. I think it was almost a foregone conclusion that the, that these people would not be found guilty. But they were tense because of the attention that the case generated. And, they were tense because it brought in a whole lot of people from the outside and that, that they always considered to be their enemies anyway: people from the North, the reporters the—and other leadership elements. And just plain people from, from outside of that area even within Mississippi they, they never seen anything like that.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK.

[cut]

00:15:48:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK IT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: FIVE.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER 1: IF YOU COULD TALK TO THE—WHY YOU THINK IT IS THE WITNESSES, THAT THE BLACK WITNESSES WERE ABLE TO TESTIFY AND THE INFLUENCE YOU MIGHT HAVE HAD ON THAT.

Diggs: In talking about the Till trial one has to repeat the atmosphere. This is Mississippi in 1955 and with a long history of intimidation of witnesses, fear on the part of blacks to testify in the racial situations in particular. And for someone like Moses Wright and, and others to testify against white defendants in a situation like this was, was historical. And I think that one of the reasons that they had that kind of confidence was the fact that I was present, a member of Congress, who obviously would relay his, his thoughts and, and the images there to a much larger crowd. And the fact that national media was present, that was going to accurately portray the story of, of Mississippi justice at that particular time. In, in a way that would, would reflect adversely upon the status of justice in that state.

00:17:40:00

INTERVIEWER 1: CAN TELL ME ABOUT THE, THE, THE DECISION AND HOW YOU LEARNED ABOUT IT AND WHAT FEELINGS THAT THAT INVOKED [sic]?

Diggs: Well, I had already concluded that that however the Till trial decision went it would create animosity and, and have, have other, perhaps, dimensions of security on both sides. And so after the—all of the witnesses, after the case had been heard I gathered Mr. Moses Wright, who was the chief witness, and I gathered him together and, and started—and, and left. I put him in my car and we drove to, to Memphis, Tennessee and then I flew him back to—I flew him to Chicago. And so, I heard the verdict, we heard the verdict over the radio as we were traveling from Tallahatchie to Memphis heard that, that the defendants had been found not guilty.

00:19:00:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT—HOW DID THAT MAKE YOU FEEL, THAT, YOU HAD BEEN IN THE COURTROOM AND YOU HEARD THE TESTIMONY AND YOU EVEN BEING A CONGRESSMAN, THERE IN PRESENT, YOU—IT HADN'T CHANGED ANYTHING, DO YOU HAVE ANY FEELINGS ABOUT THAT?

Diggs: Yes, I, I, first of all felt that I had made the correct decision in leaving before that decision was rendered in the, in the Till case. Because of the, the reaction that took place. Whites, for example, all jubilant about the fact that the, that these white men had been found not guilty. I'm sure that if Moses Wright, had been there, he would've been the subject of a, of a great deal of hostility and, and perhaps and not perhaps, but harmed on a part of, of whites and, and, and as far as a verdict was concerned I was not surprised at that because that was typical of Mississippi justice at that particular time.

INTERVIEWR 1: STOP FOR A SECOND.

[cut]

00:20:14:00

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER 2: —I'M SURPRISED AS WHEN YOU DIDN'T?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SIX.

Diggs: Oh yes, I, I certainly was angered by the, the decision although I was not surprised by it. And I was certainly strengthened in my belief that something had to be done about the dispensation of justice in, in that state. And, I, I returned to Congress that week determined to try to get some corrections by, by the Congress of the United States and also to report to the Administration at that time in an effort to get the President and the Justice Department to do something about this, this kind of injustice in, in, in this state.

00:21:22:00

INTERVIEWER 1: DO YOU REMEMBER IF, IF MOSES WRIGHT HAD ANY REACTION, IF YOU REMEMBER, WHEN HE HEARD?

Diggs: Not really. He was a young fellow, he, he—not very talkative he, he certainly was determined to give a true story and I certainly admired him for that, but we—I took him back to Chicago and that was, that was the last I saw of him.

00:21:51:00

INTERVIEWER 1: AFTER THE TRIAL YOU WENT TO, ON TO AN NAACP SPEAKING TOUR AND YOU TALKED ABOUT THE CASE IN, IN DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE COUNTRY, THE MURDER IN DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE COUNTRY CAN YOU TELL ABOUT THESE RALLIES—

00:22:07:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER 1: —AND THE NUMBERS OF PEOPLE THEY ATTRACTED?

Diggs: Well—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: LET'S CUT.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK, SORRY.

00:22:15:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 167]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK IT.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: SEVEN.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE SPEAKING TOUR ENGAGEMENT THAT YOU WENT ON SPONSORED BY THE NAACP AND THE SIZE OF THE CROWDS AND THE IMPACT THAT YOU THINK THIS HAD ON SPREADING THE STORY?

Diggs: Well, following the Till Trial the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, NAACP, had been impacted too by their membership and their leadership around the country. And they wanted to schedule me in for speaking engagements in, in various communities and I agreed to do this and proceeded to carry out these engagements in the several states of the union, both north and south. All of these rallies were overflowed by, by the, by spectators and well publicized by the media and obviously had a special impact to hear firsthand from somebody who had been at the trial about the, the dimensions of the injustice of the Mississippi and southern judicial system that I, that I described very vividly.

00:23:58:00

INTERVIEWER 1: DO YOU REMEMBER ANY OF THE, ANY EVENTS OR THINGS THAT HAPPENED SPECIFICALLY AT, AT RALLIES ANY—WHAT WAS OR WHAT DID, WHAT DID IT FEEL LIKE TO BE ON THE, TO BE THE TARGET OF SO MANY PEOPLE COMING TO HEAR THIS?

Diggs: Well, it, it, it, it, it simulated a lot of, a lot of interest a lot of people who had not were not members of NAACP took out memberships, they made contributions it, it raised their level of concern about these various matters, and, and it dramatized the need for corrective legislation and dramatized the need for changes in, in the—our national justice system to correct these, these kinds of, of inequities at the local level. And so it, it stimulated a lot of people to make contact with their, their members of Congress. A lot of people wrote to the president at the White House and of course the media expanded upon these, these items also.

00:25:20:00

INTERVIEWER 1: I'D LIKE TO JUMP AHEAD TO MONTGOMERY AND TALK ABOUT THAT FOR A MINUTE. COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR FUNDRAISING EFFORTS THERE AND, AND HOW YOU RAISED MONEY AND ALSO WHO THE CONTRIBUTERS WERE WHO GAVE YOU MONEY?

Diggs: Well, after [coughs] the Montgomery bus boycott matter began under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I began to make an appeal through a radio program that I was conducting, back in Detroit, and as a result of that program, I collected some ten thousand dollars to help finance the execution of the Montgomery boycott because people were not using the buses, but there were expenses involved in transportation and, and, and, and related matters. And—so after raising this this money I contacted Dr. King who at that time was a, a Baptist minister who hadn't been heard of too much outside of that area. And he invited me to come down they were having their nightly rallies to maintain the concern of the local people in, in the whole Montgomery matter and the—these rallies were held at at Dr. King's church, and I was invited to come down to speak at one of the rallies and I came down and, and brought this money. It was the first time I, I met Dr. King and never forgot that, because the only, only time that he ever spoke at a, at a testimonial dinner, a rally, a testimonial was for me. I think it was 1963 was the first and only time, he, he had thousands of engagements and invitations to speak but he never forgot that, that I brought that first piece of money down there and so he spoke at my—came to Detroit and spoke at my rally.

00:27:37:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT KIND OF A, OF A MAN WAS KING AT THAT TIME? YOU GAVE US AN INTERESTING DESCRIPTION OF HIM AS BEING SOMEONE WHO WAS CATAPAULTED FORWARD BY CIRCUMSTANCES. CAN YOU EXPLAIN THAT FOR US?

Diggs: Yes, I I think that if things had moved along normal lines in Montgomery he probably would have also moved along normal lines and been a, a very popular Baptist minister. I did not, I did not detect anything in his makeup that suggested that unless they—unless these extraordinary circumstances had arisen I did not detect anything that would have projected him beyond being a, a Baptist minister in Montgomery and perhaps beyond that or he may have stayed there or he may have ultimately gone to —back to you know to Atlanta and succeeded his father, but there was no history of any involvement of Dr. King before that time.

00:28:53:00

INTERVIEWER 1: IN, IN, IN THINKING ABOUT KING HOW, HOW DO YOU THINK THAT HE EVOLVED OVER THE YEAR-LONG BOYCOTT? DO YOU—HOW DO YOU THINK HE, HE CAME INTO HIS OWN IN TERMS OF LEADERSHIP?

Diggs: Well, Montgomery, at that particular time, didn't have much leadership as we know it today. I had—I knew something about Montgomery because for fourteen months from 19—

from May of 1944 until June of 1945 I was stationed at Tuskegee, Alabama about forty miles away. The Army Air Force, which was the headquarters for the the black pilots, and I—it was a typical rather small black community where most of the practices of, of racial segregation had been accepted and people went, went, went on about their business. And the fact that Dr. King saw fit to take the leadership role in this situation was, I think, the, the thing that in addition to Mrs. Rosa Parks' refusal to compromise on this question was a thing that really, really brought it about. In addition to that there's another person that was involved in that situation that has not gotten nearly the kind of recognition that he ought to and that happened to be a former, a former lieutenant at Tuskegee who at the time of the boycott had gone to medical school and was a local physician Moses Jones, Dr. Moses Jones. And he became the treasurer for the Montgomery boycott situation. He was independent financially and he had served in the segregated armed forces as I had and had, had his problems in—at Tuskegee forty miles away, as I did, and he, he was one of the, one of the prime stimulants for the kinds of activity that, that the Montgomery boycott proceeded to take.

00:31:42:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WHO—DO YOU REMEMBER GOING BACK TO THE FUNDRAISING? WHO, WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE GAVE YOU MONEY? DO YOU REMEMBER?

Diggs: Well, it I had, I had a radio program back in those days. It was a very popular program, and these contributions came through the mail—from various sources, people who listened. They, they came from people who were unemployed, people who were professional people and just, just other citizens, black and white, male and female.

00:32:17:00

INTERVIEWER 1: DO YOU REMEMBER THE SOUTHERN MANIFESTO AND CAN YOU TELL US WHAT THAT WAS?

Diggs: Well, the Southern manifesto, as the, as the name implies was a statement of policy regarding racial matters on the part of the congressional representatives from the, from the southern states and it was a, a statement designed to draw the line regarding how far they would be expected to go to try to correct some of these matters or on the other hand it was a, a method of, of explaining what their position was—

00:33:16:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Diggs: —and the rationale behind it and their determination to maintain that system which they considered to be not only in the interest of the South but in the interest of the country.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: LET'S CHANGE PLEASE.

00:33:34:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 168]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ROLLING.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: EIGHT.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER 1: AND IF YOU COULD RECOUNT FOR US AGAIN THE, THE SOUTHERN MANIFESTO WHAT, WHAT IT WAS AND IT'S MEANING AND ALSO YOUR, YOUR REACTION AND THE REACTION OF OTHER CONGRESSMEN AND BLACKS TOGETHER.

Diggs: Well, the Southern manifesto was a statement of policy that was produced by southern representatives in Congress, senators and, and, and members of the House also by southern governors and other elected officials to dramatize the position of the South in justifying se—segregation. And their determination to maintain segregation and to prevent any changes in, in those policies in those particular states. Not only in the interests of southerners but in the interests of the United States as they, as they saw it at, at that particular time. And of course the reaction was quite formidable on the part of blacks and other people who, who looked at our social economic and political system for solutions to the inequities that existed and it, it created quite a, quite a debate in the country. And this debate was the basis upon which legislation was fostered in, in, in the House and in the Senate of the United States to, to, to overcome this kind of resistance and it dramatized to the, to the, to the administration in particular, the national administration in particular, the necessity for modifying these, these kinds of statements and, and for pursuing with a great deal more aggression some, some positive answers to the problems that, that the mani—that the manifesto discussed.

00:36:02:00

INTERVIEWER 1: DO YOU REMEMBER ANY REACTION FROM THE EISENHOWER ADMINISTRATION OR FROM OFFICIALS IN THAT ADMINISTRATION TO THIS DOCUMENT?

Diggs: Well, Eisenhower, President Eisenhower, General Eisenhower always had to be pushed. His position on, on, on matters at best was neutral. And, in most instances he, he did

not want to make any kind of change and he, he never really took any aggressive actions. He always relied upon being pushed by the Cong—by the Congress of the United States really had to take the bull by the, by the horns and pursue a, a correction of these inequities. Eisenhower who, who, who grew up in a segregated military establishment was really not impressed with any kind of changes that, that were being talked about.

00:37:20:00

INTERVIEWER 1: DID THE A—THE ADMINISTRATION REACT AT ALL TO THE BOYCOTT THAT YOU REMEMBER?

Diggs: Well, they had to take notice everyone had to take notice of, of the, of the boycott and their reactions were varied and there were some areas and and some elements that were more aggressive than others, but it, it, it, it, it was not a matter that was nationally embraced. It all depended upon on what parties were involved and, and what influences they could bring to bear one way or the other or none at all.

00:38:14:00

INTERVIEWER 1: CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE SENSE OF COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT, THE CONFIDENCE THAT CAME OUT OF THE BOYCOTT, NOT JUST IN MONTGOMERY BUT ALSO IN, IN TERMS OF THE NATIONAL BLACK COMMUNITY?

Diggs: Well, I, I think it, I think the Montgomery boycott raised the level of attention and concern of the, of the black community regarding racial matters all over the country, north and south. And I think that it demonstrated that solidarity on the part of black people to, to correct these, these inequities can't—could be effective. I think it was a, a, a model that was the basis for other community actions around the country and so I think it was one of the real landmarks in the correction of injustice, and it was one of the landmarks in terms of stimulating black reaction and, and black corrective action around the country.

00:39:42:00

INTERVIEWER 1: I WAS GOING TO ASK, DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN THE BOYCOTT ENDED? DO YOU REMEMBER YOUR REACTION TO HEARING THAT IT WAS OVER AND HAD BEEN SUCCESSFUL? FINALLY?

Diggs: Well, I, I the the the general reaction certainly on the part of blacks and, and their supporters was one of jubilation and of relief that this method proved to be successful. Many people had been advocating this kind of solidarity in the past but to have it actually demonstrated in such a dramatic way as it was in the Montgomery boycott situation I think lifted the veil that had shut off consideration of blacks toward this kind of method in the past.

00:40:40:00

INTERVIEWER 1: I WANNA JUMP AHEAD TO SELMA AND I KNOW YOU WERE SAYING YOU WEREN'T SURE OF YOUR MEMORY, BUT IT'S BEEN TERRIFIC SO FAR, SO A FEW QUESTIONS. WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO TAKE A DELEGATION OF CONGRESSMEN TO, TO SELMA IN FEBRUARY IN, IN '65 AND WHAT DID YOU THINK THAT WAS GOING TO ACHIEVE GOING THERE?

Diggs: Well, many of these members of Congress had never been south before. They certainly had no real understanding of segregation and, and how it applied to black folks in, in those areas. It was rather academic and so I thought that their, their coming to Selma at that time would, would give them a deeper understanding of the inequities and the injustices that existed in, in, in Alabama and, and, and, and other parts of the South. Secondly, I, I thought that the, the fact that a group of members of Congress would come to Selma, the first time that this had ever happened before would be an indication to the local officials that this matter was being seriously considered at the national level and that, that if these inequities continued that the Congress of the United States would be obliged to take, take action to correct, to correct those inequities.

00:42:34:00

INTERVIEWER 1: YOU AND YOUR CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATION MET WITH REV. KING AND OTHER LEADERS OF THE MOVEMENT THERE IN SELMA. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE MEETING IN TERMS OF WHO WAS THERE AND WHAT YOU DISCUSSED, THE TONES OF THE MEETINGS, JUST GIVE US A, A SENSE, IF YOU COULD, OF WHAT THAT WAS ABOUT.

Diggs: Well, I think it—the meetings served to indicate that Dr. King was being taken seriously and it indicated that the local people better start listening because members of Congress in that kind of, in that kind of a grouping obviously added a lot of credibility to, to Dr. King and, and the entire movement. And I think that that's, that's what it served as much as anything. The discussions were in—involved, you know, customary exchanges of ideas about segregation and, and, and discussions as to what action they were, they the, the congressmen were going to take legislatively and, and matters of that type.

00:44:13:00

INTERVIEWER 1: DO YOU REMEMBER WHO WAS AT THE MEETING WHO, WHO WERE AT THE MEETINGS, WHO THE, THE PLAYERS WERE?

Diggs: Well, Dr. King and his entourage which included Ralph Ab—Abernathy and, and people of that type. They were there were local people also that were involved and, and the congressmen. That was it.

00:44:38:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER 1: STOP.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I'M WONDERING—

00:44:41:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 169]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND NINE.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. IF YOU COULD TELL US WHAT KIND OF IMPACT YOU THINK THIS, THIS, THIS CONGRESSONAL TRIP HAD ON THE, THE WHITE CONGRESSMEN YOU BROUGHT DOWN TO SELMA.

Diggs: I think it had a considerable impact—

INTERVIEWER 1: IF YOU COULD START WITH THE—

Diggs: On the—

INTERVIEWER 1: EXCUSE ME.

Diggs: I, I, I think that the, the, the Congressional delegation that went to Selma had a considerable impact upon local circumstances and also on legislation that was finally enacted. I was the only black member of that delegation. The other members came from districts that were not predominately black and I think that the very presence of a group of that, of that type in Selma for the first time impacted upon the local people it, it gave credibility to our crusade for the correction of the inequities and I think that it inspired the Congressmen when they returned to Washington to sponsor and co-sponsor legislation that ultimately was enacted particularly involving voter rights and I think it added a whole new dimension to the, to the civil rights movement.

00:46:27:00

INTERVIEWER 1: DO YOU RECALL ANY INDIVIDUAL WHITE CONGRESSMEN WHO WERE MOVED FROM OPPOSITION TO THE BILL TO, TO SUPPORT OF THE BILL OR EVEN TO VOCAL SUPPORT OF THE BILL? DO YOU RECALL ANY MINDS BEING CHANGED?

Diggs: Well, I don't think if somebody was opposed to it I, I think they, they, they, they maintained their opposition that, that was really mostly southern members of Congress. There were few from areas in, in the north that were not but I—but more importantly I think it moved a lot of people who were either neutral or, or uninterested. I think it moved them to, to take active roles in, in this connection and that was the big impact.

00:47:25:00

INTERVIEWER 1: DO YOU REMEMBER ANY INDIVIDUALS WHO, WHO SAID ANYTHING PARTICULARLY TO YOU ABOUT THEIR SUPPORT OF THE BILL OR THEIR OPPOSITION TO THE BILL?

Diggs: Well, not opposition. They knew better than to talk to me in opposition to, to the bill, but there were without question you, you could see the, the rising interest in legislation after, after we made that trip along with these other members of Congress to Selma. And, and after we came back and spoke on the House floor under special orders to talk about our experiences and talk about our first-hand observation of these, these kinds of inequities, particularly the voting rights thing. And appearances before the various committees that was handling the legislation, House Judiciary Committee and, and so on, I don't think those members would have done those sorts of things without having had that first-hand experience.

INTERVIEWER 1: STOP FOR A SECOND. CUT.

[cut]

00:48:41:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: TEN.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER 1: IF YOU CAN TALK WITH US IN PERSONAL TERMS ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE IN THE ARMY AND, AND WHAT THAT WAS LIKE AND THE IMPACT IT HAD IN YOUR ACTIVISM LATER.

Diggs: Well, I, I think that my army experience had a considerable impact upon my activity in the civil rights area later because I, I had, had some experiences with segregation in the North, in Detroit, for example. And I had, had experiences in the South when I was a student at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. So I was not a stranger to it and going into an army that was segregated and going into areas where black servicemen were segregated from, from the other, other servicemen in, in various states made me certainly determined to, to try to do something about it and as an enlisted man I was a, a sergeant. I went in as a private and as a private first class, as a corporal [laughs] in South Dakota as a, as a private in, in Michigan and as a PFC in, in Atlanta and as a sergeant in, in, in Florida. I, I certainly came

in contact with segregation in, in many ways and then after I—graduating from officer candidate school at Air Force administration at that time in Miami Beach, Florida and, and being assigned to Tuskegee from there—well, actually being a officer candidate, we we had to march on the inside of and to the rear of the ranks so we wouldn't be seen too much and, and all that sort of business. And then in Opelika, Alabama, for example, where they had German prisoners of war that could, that could go into the restaurants in downtown Opelika and, and I had to be handed food out the—through a hole in the wall in the back. All these things were recalled vividly. And one of the first things that I got into when I became a member of Congress was, was segregation and discrimination in the armed forces that was one of my principal subjects and I was sent by Eisenhower, for example, into all of the installations in the, in the, in the Pacific area all the way from Honolulu all the way to Tokyo including Okinawa and, and all of those places in between and it caused me also to get Kennedy to—President Kennedy to revive the, the Commission on Discrimination in the Armed Services. And from that it went into other areas—it, it, it raised my level of, of activism as it did to Congressman Bob Nix from Philadelphia, the black Congressman who, who had his problems during the war. It impacted upon Coleman Young, the present mayor of the city of Detroit, who fought segregation in officers' clubs in New Jersey and, and so on.

00:52:39:00

INTERVIEWER 2: COULD YOU TALK ABOUT THAT SENSE OF FIGHTING FOR DEMOCRACY? I WONDERED IF THAT WAS THE SENSE THAT YOU KNOW, WHO, WHO, WHO WERE YOU FIGHTING FOR IF YOU COULDN'T HAVE THE RIGHTS YOURSELF.

Diggs: Well, that's, that's true and it, it, it certainly was dramatized by, by these kinds of—

INTERVIEWER 2: I'M SORRY

Diggs: —experiences.

INTERVIEWER 2: INCORPORATE MY—WHAT—THAT CONCEPT IN YOUR ANSWER? I'M SORRY.

Diggs: Well, it—we went to war to preserve, to save, to expand democracy and if we couldn't come out of that kind of experience—

[phone rings]

Diggs: —and not fight for it ourselves here in the United States—

INTERVIEWER 2: I'M SORRY. I'M GONNA HAVE TO ASK YOU TO STOP. STOP ROLLING.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CUT.

[cut]

00:53:32:00

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ELEVEN.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK, ANYTIME NOW.

Diggs: Well, I went to war to help save and preserve democracy and to expand it and so to have had that kind of experience and, and, and, and come out of the army into civilian life and not continue the fight for democracy would, would have been inconsistent. And so that, that certainly was a very important motivation in, in the kind of activism that I was engaged in, regarding the civil rights movement in and out of Congress later on.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CUT.

[cut]

00:54:28:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ROLLING.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: HIT IT.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: TWELVE. OK.

Diggs: I think that the—after the war in the ‘50s and in the first part of the ‘60s our main thrust there was to raise the consciousness of, of Americans, black and white, about this whole question of segregation and discrimination and in—inequities politically, economically, socially. And then once raising their, their level of consciousness and concern then beginning to move into legislative corrections principally at the national level and also to impact upon the policy of our national administrations under Eisenhower and—

00:55:24:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Diggs: —and his successors.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ROLL OUT.

INTERVIEWER 2: STOP PLEASE. PERFECT THAT'S JUST WHAT WE NEEDED.

INTERVIEWER 1: JUST MADE IT.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:55:36:00