Interview with **Harry McPherson**
Date: December 5, 1988
Interviewers: Sheila Curran Bernard (Interviewer #1) and Paul Stekler (Interviewer #2)
Camera Rolls: 4068-4072
Sound Rolls: 428-429
Teams: B and D

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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 #4068]
[sound roll #428]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:00:18:00

Interviewer #1:

After the passage and signing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, was there optimism at the White House about the future of the civil rights movement? And what, as you thought, as you saw President Johnson, what did he feel there was left to do?

00:00:33:00

Harry McPherson:

President Johnson, after the Voting Rights Act was signed, said to several of us in the Oval Office, that this was the beginning of big change, that when Blacks in the South got the vote, they would start demanding things and have the power to demand things that would make big

changes there, that politicians who had been ignoring them for a long time would begin to have to listen, and, pay attention to them. And in that, he was absolutely right.

00:01:09:00

Interviewer #1:

Was it an exciting time to be in the White House?

00:01:12:00

Harry McPherson:

It was tremendous. There were all kinds of problems that came up as a result of the, of the passage of many of these civil rights laws. Let me give you an example. The 1964 Civil Rights Act contains a provision known as Title VI that says no federal funds shall be granted to any agency or organization that discriminates on grounds of race or sex. The…shortly after that, the Medicare Act was passed.

00:01:47:00

Interviewer #1:

I'm sorry. Cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Stop down?

Interviewer #1:

We're not getting into the Medicare.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes.

Harry McPherson:

I'm sorry?

Interviewer #1:

I don't think—

00:01:54:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Stop down?

[cut]

[slate]

00:01:57:00

Interviewer:

So, is there a particular story that you remember from this time that describes Johnson's commitment to civil rights?

00:02:03:00

Harry McPherson:

President Johnson, after the Voting Rights Act was passed, felt exultant, and, with hope for the change in the South but he knew that there were major problems that the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Acts would not address. They would help. They freed Black Americans from many of the institutional, legal, and political shackles that had bound them for centuries, but they didn't do anything about the enormous number of Blacks who had moved from the South to the North, to the cities, from the Midwest and the Great Lakes, to the East Coast, and who were now living in bad conditions with insufficient education, healthcare, training and jobs. So, he made a speech at Howard University, the commencement speech in 1965 in which he said that these acts that we have passed, what we have now done to break the institutional shackles from Blacks, we now must go beyond and to, to a real program of education, healthcare, employment and the rest of it, so that we will, we will begin to move people who have been oppressed for many generations into the sunlight of the Twentieth Century.

00:03:48:00

Interviewer #1:

What kind of a risk was he taking politically do you think?

00:03:51:00

Harry McPherson:

It was a…the risk of failure to begin with, it, it contained within it probably, a, the risk of, for want of a better word, favoritism, that many White Americans, including a lot of blue-collar workers, who had supported through their unions and through leadership in the North, supported the civil rights movement, would see a vast federal program that was aimed, if not exclusively, at least very largely, at Black poverty in the cities as being a, too, singling out Black Americans for a favored treatment that they were not getting, and that they would resent it. That was the risk.

00:04:49:00

Interviewer #1:

How did the President react to the Watts riot? Did he see it as an affront to his civil rights record and programs?

Harry McPherson:

Well, he was dismayed. I wrote—

Interviewer #1:

I'm sorry, can I tell you—can you begin the sentence with "President Johnson?"

00:05:01:00

Harry McPherson:

I'm sorry. President Johnson was dismayed by the Watts riot and by all the riots that followed. I wrote a speech for him.

Interviewer #1:

I'm sorry, I need to ask you to just answer in terms of the Watts riot, in terms of our chronology.

Harry McPherson:

OK.

00:05:17:00

Interviewer #1:

So, how did the—

Harry McPherson:

President Johnson was dismayed—

Interviewer #1:

I was talking—

00:05:20:00

Harry McPherson:

President Johnson was dismayed by the Watts Riot. I wrote a speech for him on the morning after the riots. He was to address several hundred people on the South Lawn of the White House, people who had come from all over the country to talk about equal employment opportunity. I wrote a very tough speech saying that the violence of the looters and rioters in Watts was really no better than the violence of the Ku Klux Klan, that it was a, an anti-civil violence that would provoke a violent reaction and would end up crippling the efforts that we were trying to make in the field of civil rights and improvement of Black life. President Johnson made the speech that I wrote and that made the news, but he went on, on that same occasion, and made another speech, one that he felt in his heart, and he made it extemporaneously, and said conditions are so bad in some of these cities that it's small wonder that people riot and until we learn how to do things better in this country f-for the millions that are living in poverty in the cities, then we can expect more of this. So, it's your job, he said to them, always giving his audience a job to go do, to go out and try to make some real changes in, in employment conditions in the cities. That speech wasn't included, but in the p—in the news accounts, because it wasn't, it wasn't put out to the press. But it, he was, as hurt, as hurt, as mystified, as troubled and as he could be by the riots. He sent Ramsey Clark, the Attorney General, out to Los Angeles.

00:07:37:00

Interviewer:

[unintelligible]

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]

Interviewer #1:

That's a great answer.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Cut?

00:07:41:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes, let's cut.

[cut]

[slate]

00:07:45:00

Interviewer #1:

In September of 1966, you submitted a memo to President Johnson in reference to the demise of the '66 Civil Rights Bill, and you wrote that White resentment was great and that the Negro community was becoming fragmented. Can you tell me about the memo and what you were warning the President of?

00:08:02:00

Harry McPherson:

What happened in 1965 and 1966, so far as the White House and its understanding of what was going on in the Black community is that a movement toward justice that had resulted in a series of ever-stronger Civil Rights Acts had produced the desired result insofar as legal rights and political rights were concerned. Blacks could, would now vote. They would use public facilities that Whites used, they would have the power of the federal government behind them insofar as money from the federal treasury going only to those who did not discriminate on grounds of race. There were many things, many legal rights that were achieved by those statutes. What they did not do was to change the conditions of Negro life in the cities or in the rural areas quickly. And, you had in the White House at that time, a Texas liberal who was, for many reasons, desirous of achieving both political and legal justice and social justice for Black Americans, partly politically. He wanted to be the president of all the United States. He wanted to be president of North and South, Black and White, to be perceived as a leader of all the people and not just a Texas White leader. He had been put into the senate majority leadership earlier by a southern White group of politicians. He had grown into na—national stature as majority leader. President Kennedy had been assassinated in his state and suddenly, mistrusted by many, unknown to many as a national figure, he is suddenly president. And one of the avenues he chose to establish his national leadership was to bring civil rights to fruition. That was part of his, his political purpose as well as something that squared with his nature as a can-do, big-government man. He—

00:11:06:00

Interviewer #1:

[unintelligible]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Just [inaudible] Cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

[cut]

[camera roll #4069]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Camera roll 4069. Timecode oh four, oh six.

00:11:13:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:11:15:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, so it's a year after the Voting Rights Act, by 1966, what's going on?

00:11:20:00

Harry McPherson:

Can we back up a little bit? The Voting Rights Act of '65, the Civil Rights Act of '64 were the Mount Everest of the civil rights effort, the ascent toward justice in legal and political terms. That was the agenda of the civil rights movement. That was the agenda of its friends and it became the agenda of America to achieve those acts over vast political opposition was

the, was the summit of our effort. Done in 1965. Now what? Now you look at the reality of Black life in America after two hundred years of slavery and oppression and you see that there is an enormous amount yet to be done. Doing it, what you do precisely is not very clear. And you are now no longer protected by the, the all-consuming purpose, the justifying purpose of the civil rights movement. You, it's now not very clear to everybody how much the federal government ought to be doing. Now, local politics enters and it becomes difficult to change things on the local level.

00:12:59:00

Interviewer #1:

What happened to the old, what about the old civil rights leaders? Where, where were the White people? Where was the White liberal at and, what happened to him by 1966?

00:13:08:00

Harry McPherson:

By 1966 the, the White liberals were still very much in favor of good things. Who could be against education and healthcare and the rest? Precisely how to achieve them, whether through the Community Action Agencies of the poverty program or through Head Start or how exactly to achieve something, particularly as we're talking now in, in time frames of decades, to make big changes. That's very difficult and it's not really the kind of thing that most people, even well-meaning White liberals, have the, the tenacity to do. They have run a long race. They've achieved the Civil Rights Acts of '64 and '65 and now, it's not that they want to rest, it's just that they don't know quite how to focus on a new thing that is of, of equal significance. At the same time, another thing is entering the, the arena. Another thing is entering the political arena and diverting the attention of White liberals from the civil rights movement and that is Vietnam.

00:14:31:00

Interviewer #1:

Can I ask you just about, and it's, it's specifically this memo. You, you told the President the civil rights movement was in a mess? The leadership was fragmented, the Black community was fragmented, and White resentment was growing. Can you just explain what you were warning the president about in those terms?

00:14:46:00

Harry McPherson:

In, by 1966 there had been a number of riots. The, the traditional Black leadership of, in the civil rights movement, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, Whitney Young of the Urban League, A.

Philip Randolph was the leader of the Leader-Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. These men had been just as unable as Lyndon Johnson or any other well-meaning White liberal, or any White conservative, for that matter, to cause the riots not to happen. They were just as powerless to cause people to, not to go out and break store fronts and loot and set fire to the homes that, that people lived in all around them. And they, they felt frustrated. They called, in the case of Bayard Rustin, one of the great leaders of the day, had, who was an advisor to Martin Luther King, they called for a hundred-billion-dollar freedom budgets.

00:16:04:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Can we cut. That's great. That was good. I'm going to move on to—

Camera Crew Member #2:

So, cut?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes.
Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer #1:

A long time ago, if you could be a little more specific about, about certain memories and, and people talking to you or memories that you have. So, a little more storytelling and less, theory about these events.

Harry McPherson:

OK.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it please.

00:16:27:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Marker.

[slate]

00:16:31:00

Interviewer #1:

Continuing on the line about Stokely Carmichael, how, how did the White House see the rhetoric of people like Stokely Carmichael affecting their own civil rights policy?

00:16:40:00

Harry McPherson:

Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown were bad news. They were infuriating a lot of White moderates. The vast majority of the people of this country were not consumed with thoughts about civil rights. They were willing to go along. It was a good idea to rid the country of its oldest shame, preventing Blacks from voting, preventing Blacks from going to school, making Blacks sit on the back of buses. Get rid of that and the people were for that. When Black, young radical leaders began talking about guns, "Burn, baby, burn," that kind of thing, it infuriated people who had been willing to go along, the White moderates. And it left the Black older leadership feeling powerless. What could they do, how to respond to this? Not very much.

00:17:50:00

Interviewer #1:

What did you see as President Johnson's response to Stokely and Rap? Was he—

00:17:55:00

Harry McPherson:

He never…President Johnson never talked to me about Stokely Carmichael or Rap Brown. He never had to. I knew what he thought about them. The, President Johnson was in something of the same fight over civil rights and political—let me back up. President Johnson believed that his troubles in the field of civil rights were pretty much like his troubles in Vietnam. Contrary to the view of many, Johnson didn't think his big troubles in Vietnam were from the left, the anti-war people. He thought the big trouble was that he wasn't doing enough to win the war, that most Americans were furious with him, not because he was in the war but because he wasn't beating this little country, North Vietnam, into

rubble. He thought that, on the civil rights side, that the problem was not Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown and the radical liberals except insofar as they exacerbated, made worse, the anger on the part of the conservative White majority in the country. That it, that their intemperate, radical speeches, their, their invitation to violence was exactly what would infuriate the White majority to the point where all further progress would be blocked.

00:19:41:00

Interviewer #1:

That was a great answer! I wanna move up to July '67, the Detroit riot breaks out, Governor Romney requests federal troops. President Johnson has to go on television and tell the nation that he's sending federal troops. You drafted a speech and found out he had already written one with the help of a lawyer which you then read and he read over the air. Can you tell me about, about your speech and his speech and about him, the misgivings you had when it was, when it was being aired?

00:20:09:00

Harry McPherson:

When the Detroit riot occurred in '67, Governor Romney was the Governor of Michigan. The law says that troops can be sent in by the President upon the, the expression by the Governor of the State that there is disorder that he is unable to contain. Johnson wanted Romney to say that before he, Johnson, ordered troops in. All during the night while fires were breaking out in Detroit and violence was taking lives, Johnson moved troops up from Kentucky to the outskirts of Detroit. But he kept insisting that Romney make that statement. Romney, a potential candidate for president in '68, did not want to make the statement that he could not control the riots. He wanted Johnson to commit the troops and bring order to Detroit without his having to make that statement. The two of, there was a standoff for a long time. Johnson had sent Cyrus Vance, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, to Detroit to serve as his representative and it held off all night. There are photographs of me and J. Edgar Hoover and Johnson and Joe Califano reading the ticker, going back, getting on the phone with Cy Vance, waiting for this statement to be made by Romney. Finally, Romney made a statement which, while not squaring in all ways with the statute, was close enough. And Johnson made a speech that assumed that the Romney statement had been made. He can't, the Governor tells me he can't maintain order, so I'm sending in the troops. At the last minute as he was making it, it struck me that he was making too much of this, "The Governor tells me that he can't maintain order." It seemed too—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Harry McPherson:

—political. It seemed as if he was trying to nail Romney into a position.

00:22:43:00

Interviewer #1:

Sorry, we ran out of film.

Camera Crew Member #3:

OK. That's the rollout on camera roll 4069.

Interviewer #1:

Let me just pick up on the last part of that.

[cut]

[camera roll #4070]

Camera Crew Member #3:

OK. Camera roll 4070. Time code oh four, oh seven, 428 sound.

00:22:55:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:22:57:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, so if you could just tell me about writing the speech.

00:23:00:00

Harry McPherson:

I was, as President Johnson's counsel and often his speech writer, I went upstairs in the White House and wrote a speech for the President to make on television. When I got back downstairs I s—he already had one. And, I worked with him and some others on the language. We compromised it and I thought I was satisfied until l heard the President giving

it. And he made such a point of Governor Romney not being able to manage things in Michigan that it seemed too political to me. What he was trying to do was to establish that he had complied with the statute that the president only sends troops in when the governor of the state says, I can't maintain order. But there was, there seemed to be a certain pleasure on his part in saying that Romney can't maintain order in Detroit, and so I've sent troops in.

00:24:02:00

Interviewer #1:

Let me move on to, President Johnson was committed to improving the lives of American Blacks. He was sending enormous amount of money into the cities, and yet in city after city in America, Black neighborhoods were going up in smoke. What was the President's personal response to this? Was he, was he frustrated? Was he angry?

00:24:22:00

Harry McPherson:

I'm gonna talk now about some ideas I've got about Lyndon Johnson. And some of it is based on old conversations, some of it is based on my own feelings about him. Again, I think the analogy with the Vietnam war is probably apt. President Johnson thought he was doing the right thing in committing American troops to Vietnam. He thought he was doing the right thing in committing hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of bureaucrats and millions of hours of time to the anti-poverty programs and the Head Start programs and the civil rights programs. He thought he was doing the right thing in both cases. When the war went sour, when we could never get the North Vietnamese to make peace with us and when there were riots on the campuses in the United States, of, of, by students protesting the war, he sometimes thought that there were malign forces, that there were saboteurs in effect, intellectual saboteurs who were trying to stir up trouble on the gr—on the campuses. He thought the same thing about the slums and the ghettos where the riots were breaking out, that there were bad people there trying to stir up problems in the cities and start riots and burnings and lootings in the ghetto. That, both of those attitudes are very understandable from some, on the part of someone who is trying to do, what, in his view, is the right thing for the country, when the response is riot.

00:26:25:00

Interviewer #1:

In terms of the, his programs did you ever see any evidence of congressional backlash from members of congress coming to you and saying, Those people are burning their own neighborhoods. They're so ungrateful, we're not going to give them any more money. Did any of that kind of sentiment come through your office?

00:26:42:00

Harry McPherson:

At the time the riots were going on, most of what I heard, despite the White backlash that occurred and was occurring in those days, most of what you heard from Congress and from the Executive Branch in those days, we're talking now about days of the Great Society, of many social programs being addressed to social problems. Most of what you heard was a frustrated questioning, a, a desire to come up with the kind of programs that would bring about the right kind of change and would give hope to people who otherwise were rioting. People were really looking for ways to spend money successfully, despite the fact that we were in a budget crunch. We were looking for, for ways to use the government to heal wounds in the cities, not at that time, trying to put more money into police to, to quell the riots but to try to help people.

Interviewer #1:

Let me just move ahead to the Kerner Commission.

Harry McPherson:

OK.

00:28:04:00

Interviewer #1:

And specifically, you had talked about you had written letters of thank you to the Kerner Commission and Johnson couldn't even sign those and Roger Wilkins has told us he was very angry at the President for refusing to acknowledge the Commission's report. Can you talk about what happened when the Kerner Commission came up with its findings and why Johnson couldn't sign them?

00:28:23:00

Harry McPherson:

The Kerner Commission was appointed to, to examine the causes of unrest that were creating the riots. And they reported back with a finding and a proposal. The finding was that we were headed toward two societies in America, Black and White, affluent and…or, relatively affluent, and poor. And the proposal was that we come forward in the, on the federal level with a vast budget of social change. Johnson was, I believe chiefly dismayed by the size of the budget. He was being asked by the Congress to cut the budget that he had submitted to Congress that year in order that there did not have to be a tax increase. And at the same time, the Kerner Commission was saying, Don't cut the budget, increase it by thirty or forty billion dollars. He didn't know where he would find the money. He was frustrated and outraged that somebody would be putting that kind of pressure on him. Other people thought the, the two

societies, description was even more of a problem. Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King's aide, thought that he would, a whole lot rather have a lot of money for social programs than a psychological description.

00:29:59:00

Interviewer #1:

Can you tell me the story about—

Harry McPherson:

Can I have, a break just a minute.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, sure.

Harry McPherson:

OK, let me just—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yeah, he's taking a—

Harry McPherson:

—a short break.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

[cut]

00:30:07:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:30:08:00

Interviewer #2:

Why don't we start with this? The nation's mood is obviously changing. Can you tell us how the nation's mood is changing using the speech example?

00:30:15:00

Harry McPherson:

Yeah. A, a speech writer for a president in those days, in the days of Lyndon Johnson and John Kennedy, had learned to use language—

00:30:30:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Can you stop one second. Stop. I have to, I have to—

Interviewer #2:

Stop down.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yeah, OK. I have to keep—

[cut]

00:30:36:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:30:38:00

Harry McPherson:

A speech writer for Lyndon Johnson in the middle 1960s wrote an awful lot of sentences in the imperative, "We must." They were, the president addressing the nation saying, We must eradicate poverty. We must change the conditions under which people are living. We must make it possible for little kids to get a good education. We must change the infant mortality rate in this country. And by 1966 and '67, I think driven in part by the riots and the wonder and anger that they caused driven in part by the war, by budget crunches and perhaps just a

general change in attitude, you were, you felt lucky if you said, if you had the president saying, Will we stop this forward march? Will we give up when children still can't read, and so on. In the old days, you knew the people would yell, No, we won't stop. And you got to the point where you were, you felt lucky if people didn't say, Yes. Stop it. It's too much. What I think was happening also and I'm not sure about this, is that people, the White voting population, the blue-collar worker particularly, was getting tired of having a load of guilt put on top of him by most, not just President Johnson but by speech writers in general, and, and by people who addressed this problem. That it's Am—White America's guilt that is, that has got to be eradicated. We are oppressors, and that, I think people began to resist in the late '60s.

00:32:47:00

Interviewer #2:

The view from the White House of politics, are we going to roll out?

00:32:49:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Forty-five feet.

00:32:50:00

Interviewer #2:

OK. In the 1966 election, President Ronald Reagan is elected governor of California, in lieu, after Watts. Lester Maddox is elected governor of Georgia. You have the resurgence of Richard Nixon. From the White House, did they view this as a conservative swing in America? Is that what you were feeling at that point?

00:33:08:00

Harry McPherson:

Let me tell a story. In 1965 at the end of the greatest legislative year in modern American history, Voting Rights Act, consumer legislation, environmental legislation, anti-poverty legislation, wonderful achievements, Johnson tried one last thing and that was home rule for the District of Columbia. That had been a long sought liberal goal. The bill was held up in the House of Representatives and to get it out required a two thirds vote. So, Johnson put all of us on the phone to members of the House, asking them for their vote to release the bill for home rule for the District. We ran into problems—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Harry McPherson:

—from people that I never expected to hear those problems from. People who had voted with us on civil rights legislation said, Well, you know the District of Columbia is different. It's the national city and not just a local city. I began to hear a tone that was different. And I think it had a lot to do with the District having become a Black city.

00:34:28:00

Interviewer #2:

Right. And we actually get that's where—

Camera Crew Member #3:

Oh, that's a rollout on camera roll twenty seven.

Interviewer #2:

—if you felt the same difference like in 196—

Harry McPherson:

OK, one important—

[cut]

[camera roll #4071]

00:34:34:00

Interviewer #2:

I wanna hear your version of 1966 with [unintelligible] and what that meant.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Camera roll 4071, sound 429, time code 0408.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK. Mark it.

[slate]

00:34:43:00

Harry McPherson:

In 1966, an awful lot of people in the House of Representatives who had been elected in the landslide in '64, elected in basically Republican seats, were defeated after one term. The President's popularity had begun to slide. We were in Asia during the campaign, Johnson was at a Manila Conference and then traveling around Asia and we lost forty seats. Most Presidents lose in the mid-term election. We lost a lot. What we really lost was the ability to push through the really big programs. If Johnson had wanted to push through a doubling of the s—what we might call the social budget, education and health and so on, to push through a tax increase to pay for them, at the same time taking care of the military expenditures in Vietnam. If he'd wanted to do all that, I think he could not have, because we had lost that cushion of votes in the Congress that had enabled the Great Society to be put through in the first place. There was still, on the Hill, a lot of committee chairmen who had served for decades with Lyndon Johnson as a senator and a congressman and they still got through some legislation simply, as they put it, Because Lyndon wants it. They would vote it through. But not the big things, not, not the heroic agenda of 1964 and '65. By '66, '67, it had become a much drier creek bed and not the torrent that it had been before.

00:36:53:00

Interviewer #2:

Cut please. That was very nice. Very nice analogy—

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:36:58:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:36:59:00

Interviewer #2:

OK, we're talking about King coming out against the war.

00:37:04:00

Harry McPherson:

Martin Luther King and Lyndon Johnson had a strained relationship. I remember sitting in the little room off the Oval Office with the two of them one evening, in which Johnson talked about his problems with, with trying to get over the agenda that King wanted in the cities and also tried to explain to King why we were unable to bring the Vietnam War to a close. It was a quite civil conversation on both sides. It was strained. And it reminded me, as I listened to them, that Johnson's relationships, his close relationships with Black leaders had been with those who, like him, were legislators, were legislative leaders. Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, Whitney Young of the Urban League, Clarence Mitchell, the lobbyist for the movement on the Hill, A. Philip Randolph of the Sleeping Car Porters who—people who were accustomed to dealing with the political machinery, going and lobbying the Congress, working with like-minded or reasonably friendly members to fashion a legislative result. King, was out there in the streets. King, I think, was the catalyst for the great movements that were made. King's suffering was the catalyst. His being beaten, his being hosed, his being put in jail. All the suffering that he endured, and finally his ev—his death in 1968, brought about, in every case, a legislative response. So that the legislators, the Wilkinses and the, and the Lyndon Johnsons used that national anger and, and, outcry against the treatment that King and his people had suffered at Selma and Birmingham and elsewhere, used that as the, the momentum builder to get the legislation through.

00:39:58:00

Interviewer #2:

And Johnson was aware of King's mounting opposition to the war?

00:40:01:00

Harry McPherson:

Johnson was aware that King was beginning to make very strong speeches against the war. King had a sedulous enemy in the bureaucracy of the federal government, the head of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover. Hoover tapped King, had his phone tapped, had his office, his home, I suppose. And I believe, though I was never in the room when King gave Johnson—when [shakes head] Hoover gave Johnson—

00:40:44:00

Interviewer #2:

Though you said, you told me you saw the files though. Can you tell me about the FBI files that you saw?

00:40:49:00

Harry McPherson:

The FBI files were about King's personal behavior in some cases, and they were about his friends. There were several people who were advisors to King who had long FBI records, long—the FBI would, would often send over to the White House, a file on a person who was being proposed for some kind of federal job or for some, for a meeting with the president even. And it would frequently, those files would frequently include other people, who themselves had ties to other people, who themselves had ties to Communists. And very often, unless you remembered that you were getting further and further away from the subject, you, reading those files, you got the impression that the subject himself, Martin Luther King, was a Communist. This is, was hardly the case and Johnson knew better and never proposed to make such a finding. But, oh, he was, ***Johnson was, was bitterly disappointed with King's opposition to the war. And he was being told by Hoover, that King had lots of pro-Communist friends who were advising him.*** The combination of the disappointment, the fear that King would take large numbers of people that Johnson needed for his support, away from him, caused him to be quite upset.

00:42:47:00

Interviewer #2:

Can I go back one second, that's very good, to the files just one more time. Would you say that J. Edgar Hoover would frequently bring in FBI files on King to President Johnson?

00:42:57:00

Harry McPherson:

I think King…I'm sorry, let me back up. I think Hoover, on more than one occasion, brought files to Johnson that were derogatory about King. I don't know how often and I don't know if Johnson believed more than fifty percent of what he read. He might use what he read to belabor those of us who said, We have to be more understanding of King. Johnson would say, You ought to see what I've seen about King. But at the same time, he, he was too skeptical of J. Edgar Hoover to have believed everything he saw in FBI files.

00:43:43:00

Interviewer #2:

Cut for one second?

00:43:44:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes.

Interviewer #2:

That's fine. OK, there's, there's something I want to ask.

[cut]

[slate]

00:43:51:00

Interviewer #2:

Martin Luther King is, is going around the country talking about bringing poor people to Washington, he's recruiting poor people. He's gonna bring them here and he's gonna, he's saying he's gonna let them stay here till something happens. How does the White House react to this? What do they think is gonna happen?

00:44:07:00

Harry McPherson:

Martin Luther King announced that there would be a Poor People's March on Washington and, and, the reaction in the White House was one of, of a kind of a, shoulders sinking. I won't say despair, but of, the reaction of the White House was a very unhappy one. The, the notion of people m—coming across the bridge in their wagons and camping on the mall, camping in Lafayette Square just across Pennsylvania Avenue, from the White House, that image of hundreds and hundreds of people representing the poor but also, seeming to be the, the tools of a political leadership that was seeking to put pressure on the government to bring about change that could not be brought about overnight. As a matter of, it was a time of enormous frustration. Here, you have started these Great Society programs, they are having some good benefits.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Harry McPherson:

The country is torn up.

00:45:54:00

Interviewer #2:

We're, we're running out of film again. The magazine's—

Camera Crew Member #3:

Oh, that's a rollout on 4071.

[cut]

[camera roll #4072]

00:46:00:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:46:03:00

Interviewer #2:

King is making his announcements about bringing the poor to Washington, D.C. What's the reaction?

00:46:08:00

Harry McPherson:

When Martin Luther King announced that Ralph Abernathy and hundreds of people would march on Washington in a Poor People's March, would camp, it turned out, on, on the mall and in Lafayette Square right across from the White House, our shoulders sagged. They were gonna ask for things that we couldn't provide. And they were going by camping in the holy ground of the mall, and in Lafayette Square. They were going to alienate an awful lot of people. They were gonna make a lot of people mad. People who were already growing restive. The, the first effects of the affirmative action programs were being felt in the country. A lot of White people, a lot of White workers were getting sore from, with a feeling that they were being bypassed in order, not through any fault of their own, but in order to advance Blacks who had been held down. So that the, the temper was not a good one. I can tell you that from within the White House, sitting in the West Wing, with windows open, you could hear people singing "We Shall Overcome," in the tents in Lafayette Square, which was mixed-in, on occasion, with the sounds of people chanting along Pennsylvania Avenue, "Hey, Hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" So, you had the anti-war protesters on Pennsylvania Avenue and the anti-poverty protesters on, in Lafayette Square, both of them

asking for immediate change. And out in the country you had the, the polls, the public opinion polls changing pretty radically and people getting more and more angry, more and more looking for a president who would bring the war to a quick end, for the most part, by winning it militarily. And, perhaps also, a president who would enforce order in the cities where there were riots.

00:48:44:00

Interviewer #2:

That's perfect. Can I ask you one last question and just take this even further? In 1965, Lyndon Johnson, fresh from passing a landmark Civil Rights Bill, wins a Presidential election in one of the largest landslides in American history. Just four years later, the election is dominated by George Wallace and his issues, you know, law and order, and it's an election that produces Richard Nixon, a man who wins with probably the smallest percentage of Black votes of any modern president up that point in time. What happened in that election?

00:49:19:00

Harry McPherson:

Lyndon Johnson in 1964, won over half the White vote in America. He is the only Democratic nominee for President since the death of Franklin Roosevelt, to win as much as fifty percent of the White vote. After Johnson, only one Democrat won as much as forty percent of the White vote, and that was Carter.

00:49:49:00

Interviewer #2:

So, in '68 what's happening?

00:49:51:00

Harry McPherson:

By 1968, the South has decided, a large part of…by 1968, I'm afraid a large part of the White South had decided that Lyndon Johnson was a Benedict Arnold. Not only because he had pushed Civil Rights legislation with such vigor, but also because he had not won the war. The South couldn't—which supplied a very large proportion, for its own numbers, of the soldiers who fought in Vietnam, Black and White—could not understand why we had not defeated a small country like North Vietnam.

00:50:39:00

Interviewer #2:

Can I interrupt you for one second?

Harry McPherson:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #2:

Johnson himself sitting in the White House, seeing this whole election dominated by law and order, what did he think?

00:51:02:00

Harry McPherson:

[pause] I can only conclude that one of the main reasons Johnson didn't run for President in 1968 is because he felt a very strong tide of opinion in the country calling for steps that he was not going to take. He also felt that he had lost the confidence of the country, at least of that part of it that had helped him pass the Great Society. That it was unlikely that he would get the country back on the path, that he had had it on, he had helped to bring it in on in 1964 and '5.

00:51:54:00

Interviewer #2:

Did the Democratic Coalition and the Roosevelt Coalition fall apart in '68?

00:52:01:00

Harry McPherson:

It, it's possible, that the, yeah, I think that's probably so. The Democratic Coalition that had, that FDR had helped to put together, the South, the big city masses, as they were described, Blacks, that coalition was falling apart. An enormous number of White Southerners voted for George Wallace. Humphrey while he only lost to Nixon by a very small number of votes, lost to Nixon and Wallace by a huge number of votes. The Democratic liberal tradition had been, was voted down overwhelmingly in 1968 and again in '72. And it has had a great deal of trouble ever since. I believe race is one of, racial differences and racial animosities are one of the main reasons why that's so.

00:53:10:00

Interviewer #2:

Was it obvious to you in '68 that race was a core of the '68 election, or not really?

00:53:16:00

Harry McPherson:

It was a, it was close between race and the war, to know which was the greater problem for the liberal coalition, but combined, they were fatal.

00:53:38:00

Interviewer #2:

Thank you very much.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:53:42:00