



Interview with **George Romney**

Date: October 31, 1988

Interviewer: Sheila Curran Bernard

Camera Rolls: 2053-2055

Sound Rolls: 224-225

Team: B

Interview gathered as part of ***Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s***. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

Preferred Citation

Interview with George Romney, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 31, 1988 for *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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 #2053]

[sound roll #244]

[slate]

00:00:13:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark one.

00:00:16:00

Interviewer:

You told me that you had marched in Detroit in 1963 with Dr. King. Can you tell me about that march and about your involvement in civil rights?

George Romney:

Well, he wasn't actually here, but they had a march in his honor.

Interviewer:

Oh, I'm sorry.

George Romney:

And I marched in that, and then I marched in Grosse Pointe—

Interviewer:

OK, we—

00:00:30:00

George Romney:

—a place where they had a, a restricted housing.

00:00:34:00

Interviewer:

Will you tell me about the, I need to ask you, I'm sorry, to incorporate my answers a little bit into your question. Nobody's hearing me or seeing me.

George Romney:

I see.

Interviewer:

So you need to answer in full, in full sentences. Will you tell me about 1963, and the march, and what was happening in Michigan in terms of civil rights?

00:00:49:00

George Romney:

Well, I had taken the lead in bringing about civil rights provisions in our new state constitution. We had a constitutional convention in 1960-61. And for the first time we wrote right into our state constitution, complete civil rights provisions, including the establishment of a civil rights commission. So, I was very much interested in doing what I could to further civil rights, and when they had the marches here in Detroit, I participated in them to evidence my support.

00:01:20:00

Interviewer:

This was the biggest march, civil rights march, Detroit had ever seen.

00:01:23:00

George Romney:

That's correct, that's correct.

00:01:25:00

Interviewer:

Can you describe it for me?

00:01:26:00

George Romney:

Well, there were thousands in it, and we marched, it actually, took place twice. We marched up Woodward, and then we marched out into Grosse Pointe, the place where there was restricted housing.

00:01:40:00

Interviewer:

In 1967, Watts had erupted, Newark had just burned. Did you think a riot would happen in Detroit?

00:01:47:00

George Romney:

No. I think it was quite a surprise to everyone.

00:01:50:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

I need to ask you, when I, when I ask a quest—

[cut]

[slate]

00:01:56:00

Interviewer:

Did you think a riot would happen in Detroit?

00:01:59:00

George Romney:

No, I didn't. Most other people didn't. As a matter of fact, it's quite a surprise to people in Detroit, because Detroit had been treated very favorably by the Johnson Administration. Had been given a lot of special help in meeting urban problems. So, it was a surprise.

00:02:14:00

Interviewer:

When did you first hear about the rioting?

00:02:16:00

George Romney:

Well, they called me Sunday morning. The Sunday morning it started, to tell me that there was a riot. My counsel called me. He's now chief justice of the Court of Appeals here in Michigan. And he said that the, the mayor and the other city officials thought they were gonna be able to handle it. So, unless I was called back, why, I didn't need to be concerned about it.

00:02:41:00

Interviewer:

And, when did it become something you had—

00:02:43:00

George Romney:

About the middle of the afternoon they called back to indicate that the, it was out of control, that the city officials felt they needed state help, and that's the first time I knew that the situation was as serious as it was.

00:02:57:00

Interviewer:

That night, on Sunday night, you toured the city by helicopter. Can you describe for me what you saw and what was going through your mind?

00:03:04:00

George Romney:

Well, there were fires all over a good part of the city, particular along Grand Boulevard, 12th Street, and it looked like a battlefield. I mean, it was a very ominous sight. It was, I've never seen anything quite like that before.

00:03:23:00

Interviewer:

I wanna ask you that again, and can you give me more? Can you paint a picture?—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]]

Interviewer:

—Oh, I'm sorry.

[cut]

[camera roll #2054]

Interviewer:

More description of what—

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

00:03:33:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark three.

[slate]

00:03:36:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me about touring the city by helicopter on Sunday night?

00:03:39:00

George Romney:

Yes, well, I flew over it. There were about three square miles that had huge fires, dozens of them. They weren't small fires. They were huge fires. That was a terrifying sight, because it was obvious that there was a terrible disaster taking place. So, it was very distressing to see the scope of it and the, the destructiveness of it.

00:04:02:00

Interviewer:

When was it decided that federal troops were needed and why?

George Romney:

It was decided the, the second night, that we needed sec—federal troops. Matter of fact, I, wait a minute, now. Let me back up. Was it the second night, or the first night?

Interviewer:

It was Sunday night.

00:04:20:00

George Romney:

All right. Let's start over. I'll recall the circumstances.

00:04:25:00

Interviewer:

When and how was it decided that federal troops were needed?

00:04:28:00

George Romney:

Well, it was decided early Monday morning after midnight, when it was clear that the riot was increasing in magnitude, it wasn't being reduced. And furthermore, it was clear that the National Guard, plus the state police, plus the local police, would probably not be able to handle it. It wasn't certain that they couldn't handle it, but after all, we had a group of people out there trying to deal with it who were, who were not trained to deal with riots. The National Guard had arrived late anyway, because the National Guard had been on encampment up in northern Michigan. So, they had to be brought all the way down. Of course, the situation grew worse as they were being transported down to the riot area. So, it was in the early morning of Monday that we decided we needed federal assistance, might need federal assistance.

00:05:21:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me about the series of phone conversations you had with Ramsey Clark?

00:05:23:00

George Romney:

Well, the first conversation was one that Cavanaugh and I had with Vice President Humphrey. And Vice President Humphrey indicated that we ought to call Attorney General Clark, that he was responsible for making such decisions. So, we called Attorney General Clark, *and he indicated that we would get federal assistance, that the, the troops would be, be made available. Then, he called us back several hours later to indicate that he'd have to have a written statement indicating that the riot was completely beyond our ability to control. Well, the difficulty with, of that was that it would've nullified all of the insurance policies over the whole area.* So, and furthermore, we didn't know with certainty we couldn't control it—we didn't—we thought we might not be able to. So, I indicated that to him. And then, it took some time to work out the, a, a written request that was agreeable to him that wouldn't nullify all the insurance contracts in the area. And several hours later, we were able to get an indication that they would give us federal assistance.

00:06:34:00

Interviewer:

Was Ramsey Clark, on behalf of President Johnson, playing politics with lives?

00:06:39:00

George Romney:

Well, I'm sure the president was involved in the process, but whether he was playing politics with it, I, I don't know with certainty. I do know that, in the case of the Newark riot, that the president himself called up the—there—the then-democratic governor of New Jersey and offered the troops. Hughes, who was then governor of New Jersey, indicated he didn't need them. But in my case, they were not prepared to send them in unless they had a written request.

00:07:09:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me in terms of that, this, this dialogue with the president, you weren't just another governor asking, you were a presidential contender—

George Romney:

Well it had happened at that point—

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, I'm talking over your answer.

00:07:21:00

George Romney:

Well, at that, at that point, I was very much in the national limelight, because I was ahead in the polls. I was ahead of Johnson in the polls at that time. So, sure. I'm s—

00:07:32:00

Interviewer:

Stop for a second. I'm sorry.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

I have to put words in your mouth. What you said on the phone was that you were the leading contender, which is what you were at that point.

George Romney:

Well all right.

Interviewer:

If you could just be even clearer.

George Romney:

I said I was ahead in the polls.

Interviewer:

I know.

[laughter]

[cut]

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

00:07:43:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark four.

[slate]

00:07:46:00

Interviewer:

So, what was the additional political part of this conversation?

00:07:51:00

George Romney:

Well, I was the leading contender for the presidency at that point. The polls indicated that I was ahead of Johnson and everyone else. So, that wa—that obviously was a factor in the situation.

00:08:03:00

Interviewer:

The troops finally arrive, but they're kept on the outskirts of the city, and you told me about touring the city with Cyrus Vance late in the afternoon, and were critical of that choice of time, because Vance decided that things were calm. Can you tell me that story again, about going out with him?

00:08:19:00

George Romney:

Well, Vance and General Throckmorton arrived about noon. And late in the afternoon, about—in the evening actually, Throckmorton and Vance decided to tour the city. Cavanaugh and I had been urging him to get the federal troops on the street. But before doing that, he wanted to go, go out and take another look. And they, unfortunately, went out about mealtime. So, probably some of the rioters [laughs] are getting something to eat, because things had quieted down some. So, Vance and Throckmorton decide at that point not to commit the federal troops. And so, to several hours later, before they were committed.

00:09:00:00

Interviewer:

Do you think if the troops had been put in earlier, when they arrived in the morning, that some of the, some of the deaths, some of the—what happened might've been prevented?

00:09:07:00

George Romney:

I think the riot could've been stopped a day earlier if the troops had been put right on the street. They were here. They were experienced. They had training to deal with such conditions. And consequently, in my opinion, if they'd have been put on the street immediately, the riot would've ended a day earlier.

00:09:26:00

Interviewer:

Can I ask you again just to be sure I have it, since I only asked you once, so tell me again about calling, this, it just sounds like an incredible night-long conversation between Detroit and, and the, and Washington, requesting federal troops. Can you tell me again? You called Vice President Humphrey, and he's told you, you have to speak with Attorney General Ramsey Clark.

00:09:46:00

George Romney:

That's right. We were told by Vice President Humphrey that we should talk to Attorney General Clark, that he was the one who was to be contacted in connection with such situations. So, that's what we did. And, he committed, committed at that point orally, the availability of federal troops, but then called back later, in the morning, to indicate he had to have a written request, and he had to have a written request indicating that the situation was beyond the ability of our state and local people to control. And that, I couldn't give, because it would've nullified all of the insurance policies in the area, plus the fact that it wasn't certain that we couldn't control it, but we'd, we felt that, that we ought to be sure that we would be able to control it by having federal assistance.

00:10:39:00

Interviewer:

OK. Cut.

[cut]

[wild sound]

George Romney:

Well, that came afterwards. See, we stopped short of that.

Camera crew member #1:

Scene 11, take five.

Interviewer:

I know. OK. I'll, I'll keep going ahead [inaudible].

Camera crew member #2:

And speed.

[picture resumes]

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

00:10:49:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark five.

[slate]

00:10:52:00

Interviewer:

So, it's, the, the troops have been postponed still, and the city has started to pick up in violence, again?

00:10:59:00

George Romney:

Yes, it began to pick up after the dinner hour, and General Throckmorton and I were co-co-vering the figures to indicate the intensity of what was occurring, and as it continued to mount, I became terribly distressed and concerned, and asked to see Vance again. And confronted Vance with the necessity of getting those troops out on the street. Well, at that point, he asked me to give the, the same sort of written statement that Clark had asked me to give him, that I was unable to give. So, I had to tell Vance, Look, I've been through that. There's no point in going through that again. We need those federal troops out on the streets. If you wanna blame me, blame me, but let's get the federal troops out on the streets. Now, he didn't order them at that point. I'm sure he had to confer with Washington. I think with the White House. I don't know it was the White House, but it was only two, two or three hours later, that he ultimately indicated that the troops would be out on the streets, and then President Johnson went on the air and announced that they were going to commit the federal troops.

00:12:02:00

Interviewer:

When President Johnson did that, he also made it a very big point of mentioning your name several times as the person who couldn't handle the insurrection. And how did that make you feel?

00:12:12:00

George Romney:

Well, I knew that he was, taking political advantage of the situation. I knew that we were doing everything we could.

00:12:19:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me in terms of President Johnson, what—President Johnson was on—starting with President Johnson, you felt President Johnson was taking advantage of the situation by using his name. I just need a complete answer. How did you feel watching President Johnson?

00:12:35:00

George Romney:

Well, I, I felt that President Johnson was taking advantage of the situation politically. And I f—knew that he must've known that the local police, and the state police, and the National Guard, they're not trained to deal with riots of that intensity, and that he had troops here who could deal with it, because they were trained to deal with it. So, I was convinced that he was undertaking to shift the blame from, any blame from himself to me.

00:13:04:00

Interviewer:

Was there a sense, you had reason to believe that the federal troops could handle it much better, was there a sense that the National Guard and the local police were just tired, they were just out of control at a certain point?

00:13:14:00

George Romney:

Well, I don't know that it was that, as much as it was that they didn't have the experience in the, the federal or the National Guard and the local police to deal with such a situation.

00:13:25:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me the, you have said, you told me on the—or I read it, the Detroit riot was caused more by national conditions than by Detroit conditions.

00:13:35:00

George Romney:

Well, two things contributed greatly to the Detroit riot. One was urban renewal, and the other was the freeway program, because those two programs bulldozed many poor people out of their homes, and, and with the suburban wall that was built around most of our central cities by the suburbs to keep poor and minority citizens out of the suburbs, the, the people had to congregate in an area along 12th Street. And that became over-congested. It was too heavily populated, and consequently when the incident occurred, there was just an explosion. It was hot. It was in the summertime, and I'm of the opinion at least that, that over-concentration of people as a result of those two federal programs played a big part in the intensity of the riot.

00:14:24:00

Interviewer:

But, what about the good intentions of some of the federal programs? There was the War on Poverty. There was Great Society programs. What was missing?

00:14:32:00

George Romney:

Well, many of those programs had unforeseen side effects, and that's what happened here, in my opinion. Now, when I was in the federal government, I stopped the urban renewal program—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

George Romney:

—because I became convinced that, in the case of most big cities it was bad rather than good.

00:14:51:00

Interviewer:

OK. Great.

Camera crew member #1:

Rollout.

Interviewer:

Are we ready?

George Romney:

—they still have a use, don't they?

Camera crew member #2:

Oh, yeah.

George Romney:

[laughs]

Camera crew member #2:

OK, coming up is 11, take six.

Camera crew member #1:

Got it.

[cut]

[camera roll #2055]

Camera crew member #1:

Speed.

00:15:06:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:15:10:00

Interviewer:

As someone involved in major civil rights legislation in your state, what was your sense in July 1967 of what the cost of the rioting was gonna be, both in terms of the community itself, the black community, and also in terms of the white backlash?

00:15:25:00

George Romney:

Well, it was gonna be a heavy cost, and we were deeply concerned about that.

00:15:29:00

Interviewer:

I mean, I'm sorry. It, it was gonna be a heavy cost to the rioting. I just need a fuller sentence.

George Romney:

Oh. OK. [laughs] Start over.

Interviewer:

OK. Oh, sorry.

Camera crew member #1:

Cut.

[cut]

[wild sound]

George Romney:

You want me to just say it, or?

Camera crew member #1:

I'm sorry, [inaudible].

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, it's just—

[cut]

00:15:46:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:15:49:00

Interviewer:

What did you think the cost of the rioting would be?

00:15:53:00

George Romney:

I thought the cost of the rioting would be intensified racial difficulties in the area. And that's why we undertook to organize New Detroit. We felt that it was necessary to establish communication, group better communication in the community. And also, we were concerned about the impact on housing, and jobs, and things of that character, and the flight to the suburbs. So, the cre—creation of a means by which there could be more effective contact between whites, and blacks, and particularly leader, at the leadership level, was considered very necessary.

00:16:31:00

Interviewer:

As, as the week went on, did you think at the time that the rioting was going accomplish anything positive? Did it seem at all likely?

00:16:40:00

George Romney:

Well, the only thing positive it did was to create this mechanism for communication between black leaders and white leaders. But as far as the effect of the physical destruction and so on, it was bad. After all, the people who rioted destroyed facilities that they needed for housing, and for shopping, and so on. So, I think one reason we haven't had urban riots since then is because they were counterproductive. The people who engaged in the rioting suffered greatly from the results of the rioting.

00:17:18:00

Interviewer:

You, you testified before the Kerner Commission, and, and eventually they came out with the finding that our country was splitting into two societies. Can you talk about your involvement with the commission, about whether you agreed with their findings?

00:17:33:00

George Romney:

Well, I testified and presented the facts with respect to what had happened in Detroit, and basically I was in agreement with their finding, yes. I was concerned that we were dividing, and I don't think we've solved the problem yet completely. I think we still have a major problem in our central cities, our bigger metropolitan areas. After all, as long as you have a, a multiplicity of governmental units in these metropolitan areas, you're, you're gonna have problems, because you can't deal with the problem of housing and other problems that need to be dealt with, with all these separate governmental units in the big central cities.

00:18:21:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. Cut.

[cut]

00:18:24:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:18:30:00

Interviewer:

There is a lot of criticism in the black community about the show of force in a town that was mostly a white show of force. Can you explain what a governor's response is when something like this happens? What's the, what's the concern, what's the first thing you have to do?

00:18:47:00

George Romney:

Well, when a governor's confronted with something like that riot, the first thing he has to do is to assess the situation, and then take action, and the only means he has of dealing with a situation is to make use of the state police and make use of the National Guard, and consequently that's what I did.

00:19:06:00

Interviewer:

The, the Kerner commission came up quite critical of the Guard, because they were so untrained for a riot situation, because they were so young, so rural, and so white. Was there any, were you, did you have any trepidation about sending the Guard in at the time? Or was there a choice?

00:19:24:00

George Romney:

Well, the Guard helped. After all, even after the federal troops came in, they put the federal troops in the areas that were the easiest to handle. The National Guard still were kept in the areas where the intense riot was taking place, so it's the National Guard that ultimately had to control the worst parts of the riot.

00:19:46:00

Interviewer:

And they, and you felt that they had done that well.

00:19:49:00

George Romney:

Well, I [laughs] again, that's difficult to say. Obviously, the cost of the riot was much more than anyone would like to have seen. But, you had to deal with it, with the resources you had, and as I say, the federal troops, even after they came in, they relieved the National Guard to some extent, but the National Guard was still, still required to deal with the most difficult parts of the riot.

00:20:18:00

Interviewer:

During the week, where, you were at the police station, you said.

George Romney:

Oh, sure. I stayed right there, day and night.

Interviewer:

So what can you tell me? Can you describe what was going on?

00:20:26:00

George Romney:

Well, the deputy police commissioner, Nichols, John Nichols, who's still here in the area, was the one who was most fully-informed as to what was happening, because they were reporting in, to him from the field as to what was taking place. And I was following that closely, and consulting as there was need to consult, but of course as soon as Vance put the federal troops on the street, then the responsibility for dealing with the situation was his and Throckmorton, not mine. You see, when I came in as governor, I took over from the mayor. But when Vance and Throckmorton came in, they took over from me, so they were the ones in command at that point. But I continued to stay there until the whole thing was resolved.

00:21:21:00

Interviewer:

Can you? I, I know I've asked you this again, but I need to, to ask. Detroit was really a city that people, they had put down a, a near-riot the year before, and it was a city that people really thought was going to be immune from the long, hot summers that were hitting so many other cities in the country. Can you talk about that? What was, what was going right in Detroit, and, and what it, what the sense was when it turned out that Detroit was actually hit with the worst riot of all?

00:21:49:00

George Romney:

Detroit was receiving special treatment, really, from the Johnson Administration. Cavanaugh was a very popular mayor, and he was very popular with the federal officials as well as in the community here, and consequently, when the Great Society program was started, Detroit was given really special treatment, and they—given larger support than other cities were given, given. So it was rather surprising to people when this occurred. Also, the city had dealt previously with a, a smaller incident that had occurred earlier in the year, and I think that's why they were overconfident in dealing with this, and why they didn't bring the state in

earlier than they did. If the state had been brought in earlier, of course, we'd have had the National Guard and the state police in dealing with the situation earlier. But they felt that they could handle it, and that was a mistake as you look back, because they couldn't handle it, and it wasn't until the middle of the afternoon that we were asked to give state assistance.

00:22:53:00

Interviewer:

OK. The Republican Coordinating Committee issued a statement about the president being unable to control what was happening in the country, and, and talked about finding factories that were making Molotov cocktails and things like that. Did you, at the time in Detroit, think that there was some organization to summon the violence that was happening? Was there?

00:23:16:00

George Romney:

There was no way of, there was no other way of knowing whether there was some outside influence in the riot in Detroit. One of the disturbing things was that men like John Conyers and others who were respected black leaders in Detroit tried to go out and persuade the people to stop the rioting. They'd been able to do that earlier, when there was a, an earlier incident in Detroit. But this time, they had no influence whatsoever. So, whether there was some outside influence involved, I never really knew.

00:23:48:00

Interviewer:

OK. Wanna stop?

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

Is there—I'm telling this period of history in 25 minutes?

[cut]

[camera roll #2056]

00:23:54:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:23:57:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, if you could just tell me again, Why, why was it so important that the federal troops come in, and come in sooner, and, and what was the holdup in Washington?

00:24:05:00

George Romney:

It was important for the federal troops to come in earlier, because we didn't have any assurance that we could handle the situation. And furthermore, they were experienced in handling riots and problems of the character we were dealing with. And they didn't come in earlier, in my opinion, because they adopted a process in relationship to Detroit, that they hadn't followed in connection with other riots. As a matter of fact, in the case of the Newark riot, the president himself called Governor Hughes and offered the federal troops. But in my, in my case, even, even though the attorney general had promised that we were get them, then they went through this long process of wanting a written statement in a certain form. And then even after Vance got in, they didn't put the troops on the streets. And, and then, in—at night, when it was clear that the situation was getting worse again, they went through, he went through the same process that I'd been through in the morning. So it was clear that they were treating the situation differently than they had treated the Newark situation.

Interviewer:

I'm sorry—

George Romney:

It's also interesting that a year or so after the Detroit riot, they established a process that should be followed, and the process was that, if a governor requested federal troops, he'd get them.

00:25:28:00

Interviewer:

Ramsey Clark says, of course, that none of this happened, and it was just routine, that, that—

00:25:33:00

George Romney:

Well, if Ramsey Clark says that, he do—he's [pause] prevaricating.

00:25:36:00

Interviewer:

[laughs] OK. I think we have it. OK, cut?

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

Yeah, no, it's funny. He does. He says, Oh no, this—

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:25:48:00

Copyright 2021 Washington University Libraries