

Interview with **James Forman**

December 11, 1985

New York, New York

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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*.

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[camera roll 589]

[sound roll 1539]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: FLAGS.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK, WE'RE GOOD.

INTERVIEWER: OK, WHY DONT YOU TELL ME A MIN—THAT IS INTERESTING TO ME THAT THE LEADERSHIP FELT THAT SNCC'S INVOLVEMENT WOULD PRELIM ROY WILKINS. CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THAT?

Forman: Well, yes. When the—Bayard Rustin first conceived the March on Washington he asked John Lewis and myself to a meeting and we met with him and A. Philip Randolph and he wanted to make sure that we were in agreement with the proposed March on Washington. And we certainly, certainly were and based upon that meeting we then went and talked to Roy, Roy Wilkins along with some other people to make sure that he would also agree. And he did agree. And then was taken to the civil rights leadership conference and they agreed on the concept of the March on Washington and then it began to involve other people including some of the religious leaders.

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INTERVIEWER: JOHN, JOHN LEWIS'S SPEECH. WHAT DID, WHAT DID HE WRITE AND WHAT HAPPENED TO THAT SPEECH?

Forman: Well, the—there were two speeches actually. We, we prepared a speech in, in Atlanta for him to deliver and, you know, on—in the March on Washington. We all worked on the speech. And then when we got to Washington DC apparently there was, there was a meeting the night before the march and some of the people were objecting to some of the various statements in the, in the speech. And the next morning, just before the March on Washington, this discussion was still going on and some, I think, it was, basically, it was the Catholic bishop that objected mainly to, “we cannot support wholeheartedly,” was the first phrase that was in contention. And so, after discussion, you know, I mean, we felt that it was—would not be very much to say, we support with reservations because I really, I really—now, you know, I didn't think that it, frankly, made that much difference between saying we support wholeheartedly or we support with reservations. But there, you know, we did rewrite the speech. There's no question about that. I mean but—and that, you know, we submitted the speech. But we felt that the speech was much stronger, you know, after the rewriting process and that it was really a, a question of words, you know, and that there were no substantive compromises or anything like that that we made with regard to the speech. But, you know, the, the—I guess, perhaps, you know, semantics is a very, very interesting subject and the different people mean—different words mean different things to different people and so perhaps some of the alterations that we made, you know, meant more to some people than they meant to us. I mean, but to us it was a stronger speech, you know. There was no, there were no compromises.

00:02:52:00

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME THE STORY OF REWRITING THAT SPEECH, BECAUSE THIS WAS DONE SORT OF UNDER THE GUN. I MEAN THE CEREMONIES WERE GOING ON AND, AND—

Forman: Well—

INTERVIEWER: WE HAVE A PICTURE OF YOU BEING VERY INVOLVED. BUSILY REWRITING.

Forman: Right, well we, you know *the rewriting took place at the, the Lincoln Memorial and, you know, the—and it was done out of a spirit of unity, you know? We wanted the March on Washington to go forward and we wanted, you know, the SNCC's participation to be very visible and we certainly weren't interested in withdrawing from the March on Washington.* And when we were trying to resolve these conflicts, these differences, I mean, and they mainly were coming from the, the Roman Catholic participation, I think. I, I don't recall the name, you know, of the Roman Catholic representative at that particular time. So, you know, we asked them to explain what were their objections to the speech, you know.

And then decide that we, those, those things could be met. You know, and *so the three of us—John Lewis, Courtland Cox and myself—you know, we, we, we huddled and sat together and*, and I was mainly the person responsible for redrafting the speech which I did and I certainly don't think that there were any compromises. As far as I'm concerned the speech was much stronger, you know, in the, in the redrafting of it and it was done out of a spirit of unity, you know, to try to make sure that, that we had the cooperation of the Roman Catholic Church. I mean, they were the ones, as I understand it, who was threatening that, well, if the speech was not changed we would leave. You know, but these were processes of negotiations. I mean that's not—you know, we didn't see it as anything major.

00:04:32:00

INTERVIEWER: I WANT YOU TO GIVE ME A LITTLE MORE OF THE COLOR OF REWRITING THAT SPEECH. I MEAN WE SEE THAT PICTURE AND BECAUSE THE CROWD'S OUT HERE, PEOPLE ARE AT THE PODIUM, I MEAN, YOU'RE BACK THERE LOOKING LIKE YOU'RE SWEATING. I MEAN I'D LIKE TO KNOW, I MEAN, WERE YOU SITTING THERE AND COURTLAND COX SAID, NO MAN TAKE THAT OUT OR—YOU KNOW, GIVE ME A LITTLE BIT MORE OF WHAT, WHAT, WHAT ACTUALLY THAT WAS—

Forman: Well OK then. In order to understand that you have to understand that John Lewis was elected as chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1963. And the March on Washington was the first major event in which he participated as a chairperson. And that he wanted me to speak at the March on Washington as the Executive Secretary and I felt that he should speak as the new chairperson. I mean, he had just been elected as a part of the Nashville student movement and we were attempting to try to project Southern young black leadership in the organization. And so, we felt that, you know, that he should be the one, who should, you know, accept the invitation and give the, give the speech. And that was something that he and I worked out together which was legitimate. And so, when we got to Washington he, along with some of the other civil rights leaders, had a meeting with the President. So they went off to see the President and the rest of us in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee were assembling here in Washington and we were participating in a very orderly fashion. That's why I don't, I don't agree with anyone's statement that we had plans to come to Washington to disrupt Washington and not to participate, because we were a very integral part of the march—March on Washington and very much involved in its planning. And John Lewis participated as a chairperson in many, many planning meetings. But, anyway, on this particular day he was meeting with President Kennedy along with other leaders. And so, when we got to the March on Washington, we got to the Lincoln Memorial, I mean, I was told that there had been a lot of trouble that they, you know, some people were objecting to John, you know, delivering his speech. Now, it's important to understand that there were sort of like two approaches to the March on Washington. There was the official approach, you know, of negotiations that John was—in which he was involved and then there was the official approach of the org—of, of the organization. That we didn't want the March on Washington to, to in any way kill the student protests and the protests of community organizations. And so, we felt that during the summer of '63 it was necessary to intensify the local protests and—I'm sorry.

INTERVIEWER: I WANNA STOP YOU, BECAUSE YOU'RE HEADING TOWARD IT, BUT—I REALLY WANT—FOR A PERSON WHO HAS NO IDEA—WOULD YOU STOP? [laughs] I'M SORRY.

[cut]

00:07:11:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND MARK. FLAGS.

[sync tone]

Forman: Well, the representatives of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee were attempting to make the March work. We wanted to make sure that no one left the March, especially, the Roman Catholic representatives. We wanted to try to meet whatever objections that they had to the speech. And as we were attempting to do this, A. Philip Randolph was there, I mean, for instance, someone to give you—someone objected, say, he has in his speech, he has the word “masses” and “revolutions.” So A. Philip Randolph said, there's nothing wrong with those two words. I mean, he does not have to, you know, those words don't have to be changed, because I use them myself. Now, we didn't feel in any way, in—intimidated. I mean, we—the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee always operated from a position of strength. And we, you know, we always felt very secure about what we were doing and we knew we were right. So that we didn't in any way feel that, you know, we were being compromised or anything or that we were under the gun or we had to do this. Now, one of the things that we know happened is that the speech had already been released to the press galley. I mean—and so that the, that these distortions, I mean, you know, a lot of people, lot of people s—you know, talked about how we had to change these things, but these things were not, I mean, they were not that, I mean, they were not great changes to us. I mean, like, you know, it really, you know, was a question of unity for us and that and what we changed we felt that the speech was stronger and I'm very serious about that. We felt that the speech was much stronger after meeting the objections and its rewriting.

INTERVIEWER: OK. CAN WE STOP DOWN?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YEAH.

[cut]

00:08:59:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 590]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: LET'S ROLL.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: FLAGS.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK, IT'S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER: WE'RE ASKING SOME SELMA QUESTIONS NOW.

Forman: OK.

INTERVIEWER: WHY DID SNCC GO TO SELMA IN 1963?

Forman: We went to Selma in 1963, because Selma—working in Selma which is the capital of, of Lowndes County, I mean, Dallas County was a part of our original plan to work in the black belt areas of the Deep South. We had decided that voter registration in the rural black belt counties was very important because of the enormous amount of power that the counties had in the, in, in politics in the United States. And we were working in Albany, Georgia and we opened up a base in Selma, Alabama.

00:09:50:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW, PRIOR, BETWEEN '63 AND '65, PRIOR TO '65, I'M GONNA MOVE TO SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT THAT IN A MINUTE. WHAT WAS THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT DOING OR NOT DOING TO ADDRESS VOTER REGISTRATION FOR BLACKS IN DALLAS COUNTY—IN ALABAMA, LETS PUT IT THAT WAY?

Forman: Well, in Alabama the Federal Government didn't have any program hardly at all in terms of voter registration. Unlike say, like in Mississippi, where there was some attention of the Federal Government to voter registration programs. And when we went into Selma, Alabama we didn't hardly have any backup support, but we, you know, that support began to come more after two or three years of work. And that we had a tremendous struggle with the Federal Government, especially, with the Federal Bureau of Investigation about protection of people who were attempting to register to vote.

00:10:44:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT ABOUT LAWSUITS THAT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT HAD FILED? WERE THESE, WERE THESE IN ANY WAY EFFECTIVE IN MOVING ANYTHING ALONG TO REDUCE THE DIS—DISCRIMINATION AGAINST BLACKS WHO WERE TRYING TO VOTE, REGISTER TO VOTE?

Forman: Well, yes. The, the, the Selma to Montgomery march has a person whose name is

John Doar who was one of the key people for the Federal Government in prosecuting voting rights suits throughout the South. I had met him in, I knew of him in Fayette County and I'd met some people on his team or met a person on his team, and that he came up to me at the Selma to Montgomery march and he said, well Jim, I know you must be feeling very bad. So I said, well, why? He said, because the, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals is about to hand down all of these court decisions which are gonna make a tremendous difference in voting, you know, throughout the South and in Selma. And this is your work. I said—and here Dr. King is getting all the credit. I said, well, don't worry about that. I mean, you know, we never worry about credit. The main thing is to have the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals to hand down the decisions. Say, well, I just want to say that to you because I know how hard you've been working here in Alabama.

00:11:52:00

INTERVIEWER: LET MET BACK UP. THAT'S VERY INTERESTING AND I'M, AND I'M HAPPY FOR THAT RESPONSE. PRE '65 THE LAWSUITS THAT WERE, THAT WERE GOING ON FROM THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT? WERE THEY DOING ANYTHING?

Forman: Well, they weren't—they, they hadn't been decided. I mean we were laying a trap. I mean, I mean we were very conscious about what we were doing in Selma, Alabama. We knew when we went on the federal courthouse with signs saying register to vote and that the Federal Bureau of Investigation wouldn't protect us that this was further ammunition for a suit to make sure that people got their rights, because the federal law said that anybody who was registering to vote or somebody who was assisting someone to register to vote, should have or had to have the protection of the Federal Government. So we were trying to get the government to enforce that. And in order to do that we had, you know, it took about two or three years and so the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals handed down a lot of injunctions saying that the government had to enforce, you know, the civil rights laws. And that, that began to open up voting all throughout the South. And part of it, of course, you know, you have to give credit to the Selma to Montgomery march which we participated in, but a lot of it was this back up these federal suits that were in preparation for some two or three years.

00:13:06:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW, YOU MENTIONED CREDIT IN YOUR, IN YOUR, IN YOUR RESPONSE. SNCC HAD BEEN THERE SINCE 1963. IN 1965, WHEN SCLC WAS CALLED IN, WHAT'D YOU THINK ABOUT THAT? HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT THAT?

Forman: Well, the—I mean, we were, you know, you have to—we didn't, we didn't, we didn't object. I mean we had many, many discussions with SCLC but—

INTERVIEWER: I WANT TO STOP YOU RIGHT THERE AND ASK YOU AND TELL YOU—TELL ME WHAT YOU DIDN'T OBJECT TO. REMEMBER NOBODY WILL HEAR MY QUESTION.

Forman: Oh, I see, OK. Well, when the, the mass marches began in 1965 we were not in opposition, you know, to, to their efforts. We didn't, we didn't think that they were necessary, but we participated. John Lewis and, and—was—

INTERVIEWER: I'M GONNA STOP YOU AGAIN, BECAUSE NOBODY KNOWS WHOSE EFFORTS.

Forman: Oh, OK.

INTERVIEWER: [laughs] OK. IT'S GONNA BE GREAT THIS TIME. OK, ALL RIGHT.

Forman: OK. When the, the Selma—when, when the marches started in Selma, I mean, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee obviously didn't have any objections cause our chairperson was, was, was also participating in that. On the other hand, the Selma to Montgomery march, you know, crystallized many, many differences between the two organizations even though we worked together. I mean, that a lot of the tensions came to a head, you know, in the, in the Selma to Montgomery march. I mean, for instance, after the beating at the Pettus Bridge, you know, we went to a meeting in, in Montgomery where Dr. King had—was said that Judge Johnson had offered a compromise that if we would call off the march from Montgomery to—from Selma to Montgomery that he would hand down an injunction. And, you know, it was felt that the injunction, you know, should be accepted. Now, people were in, in, in Montgomery, I mean, in Selma at the church. You know, and so, Dr. King indicated that we would continue to march. I talk about some of this in my book on Sammy Young. I mean, there's a whole written—there's a big section on it. And that's a very important part of, of the history in actions. And so, we felt that, that, that, that the march should go on and that Dr. King should—SNCC, I mean, the SNCC representatives should say to the, to, to the Justice Department and to Judge Johnson that, that the demonstrations were gonna go forward. And we struggled with him for about four or five hours and he finally conceded, you know, about five o'clock in the morning that the march would continue.

00:15:30:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW WHEN YOU SAY THE MARCH ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT—

Forman: To Selma to Montgomery March.

INTERVIEWER: BUT YOU MENTIONED AFTER THE BEATINGS. SO YOU'RE TALKING MARCH 7th, BLOODY SUNDAY? I JUST HAVE TO BE VERY CLEAR.

Forman: This was after the Bloody Sunday, after the Pettus, after the beatings at the Petty [sic]—Pettus Bridge.

INTERVIEWER: OK. SO WHAT WE'RE REALLY TALKING ABOUT IS

TURNAROUND TUESDAY, THEN?

Forman: Right. Right. Right.

INTERVIEWER: [laughs] OK. LET ME ASK YOU SPECIFICALLY ABOUT TURNAROUND TUESDAY. IT SEEMS TO ME THAT YOU WERE, YOU WERE DISTRESSED ABOUT HIS, HIS DECISION TO TURN AROUND, TO NOT GO FORWARD, GO ALL THE WAY TO MONTGOMERY?

Forman: Well, there were a lot of other decisions before turn around. I mean there was, there was the meeting of Monday night, which I talk about in my book on Sammy Young, where—

INTERVIEWER: LET ME, LET ME JUST TELL YOU, SEE, NOBODY'S GONNA KNOW ABOUT THIS BOOK. [laughs] OK, SO—

Forman: OK. There was a meeting on Monday night prior to Turnaround Tuesday, where we had been informed that the Judge Johnson had offered a compromise that if we, if the march didn't proceed from Selma to Montgomery, that he would issue an injunction and that when we—so we traveled from Montgomery back to Selma. Before turnaround Tuesday, this is all Monday night, OK? *The announcement was made to the people in the audience that the march that Tuesday would go forward, all right. But some of us also knew that Dr. King had told, I mean, Judge Johnson, that he was gonna call off the march. So we had a meeting from about eleven o'clock to five o'clock that morning where we were trying to lay out to him the necessity to keep his word to the people that the march would go forward and it would not be called off.* And so, about five o'clock he called the Attorney General, I think it was Robert Kennedy, and said that, you know, that they were gonna go forward with the march, you know, that, that turnaround Tuesday. And that occurred. I mean we had this march and then we got—we marched across the Pettus Bridge and then, you know, the people came back across the bridge.

00:17:30:00

INTERVIEWER: SO YOU HAD URGED HIM TO DO IT, BUT YOU DID NOT KNOW HE WAS GONNA TURN AROUND UNTIL HE TURNED AROUND?

Forman: No, no we didn't know that—we didn't know anything about the decision that that once across the Pettus Bridge, the march would be turned around. We didn't know that.

INTERVIEWER: WHEN THAT HAPPENED AND YOU REALIZED THAT HE'D AGREED TO A, A COMPROMISE WITH LEROY COLLINS, HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT THAT?

Forman: Well, we didn't, we didn't like it. I mean, but it was, you know, we—it was all right. I mean it might have been the best thing under the circumstances, because it was, it was a very, very difficult scene. I mean you had Sheriff Jim Clark, you know, with tremendous amount of armed forces or hos—hostile forces and so forth. I mean we, we did cross the

bridge and we continued, but in that you had no—there's very little help. You know, I mean, I think we would have won out, but it very well may have been the best thing in retrospect. I mean because it was a very difficult scene. Yeah, go ahead.

00:18:25:00

INTERVIEWER: LET ME ASK YOU HOW YOU FELT ABOUT KING'S AND HIS LEADERSHIP AFTER THAT?

Forman: Well, I mean I have a lot of respect for Dr. King. OK. And I even have a great deal—I have more respect you know now that you know he's one of the long lines of assassinated black leaders and that I always had respect for him during the course of the struggle. We had differences, but we constantly worked those out and we had a lot, a lot of differences. But we attempted to constantly talk to him and, you know, most of the, the negotiations and discussions with Dr. King and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee are not recorded and, you know, and they never been, basically, revealed, but we didn't agree, you know, with the certain things about the Selma march. But I said we had a meeting with him from eleven o'clock at night to five o'clock in the morning. You know, trying to lay out the benefits of continuing with the march on that Turnaround Tuesday.

00:19:20:00

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU FEEL HE WAS BEING WEAK OR NOT HONEST OR WHATEVER AF—AFTER THAT, AFTER THAT DECISION THAT HE—WHEN HE TURNED THE GROUP AROUND AND YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT IT AND A LOT OF PEOPLE DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT IT?

Forman: Well, Dr. King was very upset with us. I mean, because he knew that, that we didn't, you know, we felt that the march'd [sic] go forward. I mean, but the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee attempted to block the double cross, if you may use the term.

00:19:46:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Forman: I mean we attempted to always try to make sure that we knew that people would sell you out and that different things wouldn't go your way.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SORRY WE JUST RAN OUT.

INTERVIEWER: JUST RAN OUT. THAT'S CHARMING.

00:19:56:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 591]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: FLAGS.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: HANG ON ONE SECOND, JIM. LET ME GET SETTLED HERE. OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YEAH.

Forman: The—Dr. King was, you know, was rather upset, you know, with the, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And it probably could have been because, you know, that he, you know, that he went ahead with the march, I'm not sure. But, I mean, we supported, I mean, Dr. King broke with the Federal Government. I mean this is a thing that you have to understand that with the decision to cross the Pettus Bridge, the day that you call Turnaround Tuesday, I mean that there were some very positive things about this. I mean like one he called the Attorney General and said, that the people are insisting that I march, OK? And that I'm—I plan to march. And we wanted to support him in that decision, because we felt that this was a very important move that he was making that that he was not prepared to, to let any injunction, you know, stop him or other people, you know, from participating. And so, you know, we felt that he needed, you know, support. You know, in, in that particular action. And we attempted to try to mobilize people, you know, to, to, to march, you know, across the Pettus Bridge. On the other hand, I mean, I think that it's important to understand that that, you know, we in, in demonstrations, OK, and in, in public actions, you know, a lot of times people won't do what they say, you know, that they're gonna do and so you always have to prepare people and you have to be prepared, you know, for some, for, for activity like this. But, you know, we didn't—I mean I didn't lose any confidence necessarily in Dr. King. I mean cause we've had these struggles, because—and to illustrate I'd like to give you a little story, OK. I mean, I mean like doctor—or Whitney Young came from the White House and Lyndon B. Johnson asked him to meet with Dr. King and myself and ask—and Whitney was asking us for—see, said Lyndon B. Johnson wants to know if we will support him on the Vietnam War. And so, we, we pointed out to him that where we felt that he should not continue doing what he's doing in Viet—what he was doing in Vietnam. So he said, well, Lyndon is saying that, that he was with us on civil rights and we should be with him on Vietnam and so we had a long discussion. So I had a lot of respect for Dr. King. I mean—but remember his position on Vietnam and I remember, I mean, it took a long time because we were constantly ed—trying to educate him and work with him to take a position against the

Vietnam War.

00:22:36:00

INTERVIEWER: LET ME BACK YOU UP TO BLOODY SUNDAY.

Forman: [laughs] Right.

INTERVIEWER: S—SNCC DECIDED NOT TO PARTICIPATE IN THAT MARCH AND JOHN LEWIS DECIDED HE WAS GOING TO ANYWAY. WHAT—

Forman: Well, I don't know if it was like that, but may—maybe it was. I mean, is that how—what, what have you heard? I mean there's a lot—[laughs] I'm not sure in this interview what, what, what is—

INTERVIEWER: OK, NO. LET ME STOP FOR A MINUTE, JOHN.

[cut]

00:22:57:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: FLAGS.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ONE SECOND. OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK. GO RIGHT AHEAD.

Forman: Well, the, the—we disagreed with the, the character of the demonstrations in Selma and we disagreed, primarily, with the dally confrontation with the state troopers headed by Al Lingo because we had been up against Al Lingo many, many times before and that this man was extremely brutal in his command to the state troopers of Alabama. I mean that they had cattle prodders being used against people, you know. I mean up in Anniston, Alabama this had occurred. And that we had even some people from, from Hollywood who came to try to help us out; Marlon Brando and a couple of other people to try to help us with the state troopers. You know of, of Al Lingo, you know, who were brutally putting these cattle prodders on individuals. So we felt that there should be some way to break the impasse between the state troopers lining up and saying, you can't come any further, and, at the same time, we had been doing some local organizing at Tuskegee and there were seven hundred students who wanted to participate. So we decided to meet the students at Montgomery and to have demonstrations in Montgomery rather than, you know, to further reinforce a kind of a positional confrontation between the local citizens and the state troopers. And there were, you know, there were these barricades, you know, and the state troopers saying, you know—

you can't go, you know, you can't cross these barricades. And we didn't feel that, that, that we should participate in that any longer and that's when we began to go to Montgomery and have demonstrations.

00:24:39:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW, WE HAVE SEEN SOME ARCHIVAL FOOTAGE OF THE VIOLENCE VISITED ON THE DEMONSTRATIONS THAT, THAT TOOK PLACE IN MONTGOMERY AND THEY SEEM TO BE MUCH WORSE THAN WHAT HAPPENED AT BLOODY SUNDAY. AND I'M WONDERING WHY YOU THINK IT DIDN'T RECEIVE THE KIND OF MEDIA ATTENTION OR ANY OTHER AMOUNT OF ATTENTION THAT BLOODY SUNDAY ATTRACTED?

Forman: Well, I'm not sure about that, but the, you know, it—Montgomery was a very, very difficult situation and that it could very well be that, that, you know, the media decided not to play that up. But, but, I think, Mont—the demonstrations in Montgomery were very, very victorious. You know, that, that—and it, you know, again showed to—kind of like further brutality, but, you know, it led to a lot of changes.

INTERVIEWER: WHERE WERE—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ALL RIGHT, CUT.

[cut]

00:25:28:00

[change to sound roll 1540]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: FLAGS.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND JIM WE'LL SETTLE IN. HANG ON.

Forman: Right.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: GET SQUARED AWAY. OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Forman: Well, the, the basic disagreement that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was over the question of leadership. And *we felt that there should be a projection and an organization of indigenous leadership, I mean, leadership from the community. Whereas the Southern Christian Leadership Conference took the position that Martin was a charismatic leader who was mainly responsible for, for raising money and they raised most of the money off of his leadership. But this differences in leadership then led to differences in style or work.* In

Albany, Georgia, for instances, we went in with the express purpose of developing a people's movement, an indigenous people's movement, and we did that. And that at the time of the ride from Atlanta to Albany, that everything was in place for this type of projection including press. Press from all over the United States was already in place in, in, in Albany, Georgia. And that, as a result of the demonstrations, then Dr. King, who heard about them, felt that he should come in as the charismatic leader and that there were some, even, tensions, but I mean people wanted that to happen and so, you know, we agreed to it. But at the same time—oh well, this, this difference in the leadership carried over into Birmingham and it also carried over into Selma.

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME HOW IT CARRIED OVER INTO SELMA.

Forman: Well, because we, you know, we went into Selma in 1963 and the way that it carried over into Selma was that Dr. King was asked or it was my understanding, you know, that, that to, to, to participate, to try to strengthen the '64 Civil Rights Act. But the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals was already, had already decided as a, to hand down a lot of injunctions, you know, which would strengthen the '65—'64 Civil Rights Act. And the key thing that I'm talking about is the literacy requirements. The United States Justice Department wanted a provision that would have some degree of literacy requirements and in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee we objected to that. We felt that all of these literacy requirements were unconstitutional, unnecessary and that people should just present themselves and once they present themselves, they should be able to vote. Now, the conditions for that, I mean, of course, were certainly heightened by a result of the Selma march. But, but mind you that the differences occurred, I mean, like the Monday before Bloody Tuesday, [sic] when we met with Dr. King in Montgomery and discussed the proposal of Judge Johnson that an injunction would be handed down if we called off the march. I mean we voted against that. We voted that the march should continue and then when we got to Selma, of course, Dr. King said to the people that the march would continue. Well, I mean we—you know, even though we knew that he had agreed to this injunction. So we felt that the thing to do then was to have a meeting with him and to try to get him to be consistent, to keep the march going. I mean the march on Turnaround Tuesday, you know, and not to say to people that, that the march wouldn't continue.

00:28:43:00

INTERVIEWER: IT—GO BACK TO WHEN—SELMA WHEN YOU'RE THERE AND SCLC COMES IN AND GIVE ME, IN SELMA, GENERICALLY, HOW THE DIFFERENCES IN LEADERSHIP CAUSED CONFLICT OR, OR JUST, JUST DESCRIBE FOR ME WHAT THE DIFFERENCES IN LEADERSHIP WERE. TRYING TO GET AT THE BEGINNING OF THE SELMA—THE—

Forman: Well, we had—I, I recall, definitely, a meeting with Dr. King. A lot of us had meetings and we kept explaining to him the necessity to try to develop this indigenous leadership and we also tried to explain to him the danger, OK, the real danger in trying to project a charismatic leader as the leader of the movement, because of a possible assassination. I mean that, I mean, this is still a very—that in 1965 conditions were very

difficult and that the people were being, still being killed. You know, and if you didn't have broad based movement, the assassination of a leader could lead to a decapitation or a reduction of the movement and we didn't want that. I mean we had, you know, *we wanted, you know, a movement that would survive the loss of our lives.* And then, *therefore then, the, the necessity to build a broad-based movement, and not just a charismatic leader.*

INTERVIEWER: OK. CAN WE STOP DOWN AND TELL ME HOW—

[cut]

00:29:59:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 592]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: FLAGS.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND MARK.

INTERVIEWER: I'M GONNA LET YOU PICK RIGHT UP. [coughs]

Forman: Well, in Selma, Alabama the differences with, with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference did become acute. And these differences revolved around the nature of the cooperation with the Federal Government, the, the style of, of leadership as well as the, the, the forms of protest, OK. Now, we had been trying to, [burps] excuse me, to, to, to get people throughout the South not to have a lot of confidence, you know, that the Federal Government was gonna—not—that the state governments, I mean, were gonna save them. We, we were operating on two, two levels, I mean, I think that—to try to make it clear. That inside the states we felt that Federal Government should be utilized to break the power of the reactionary racist state governments, because people were living in a climate of fear on the, on the—from the state governors and sheriffs and so forth. And that we had to have some help to break this grip of fear and this torture and terror which it was inflicted throughout the South. And we felt that the Federal Government was the agency by which to do that. We were fighting for a strong central Federal Government, OK? And we were successful in that. However, we did not agree that people should collaborate and, and, and cooperate to the detriment of the long range interests of the people. And we felt that by agreeing to injunctions, you know, on the part of the Federal Government or by not fighting those as it happened in, in, in Albany, Georgia. I mean, we explained to Dr. King that, that when the, when the federal courts were handing down injunctions, that those injunctions should be fought. OK, so consequently we did not feel that, that, that there should be any types of deals worked out, you know, with the Justice Department or so forth. That you should take—find out what's the principle and fight for the principle. And so, therefore, then in Selma, Alabama when he was agreeing to various things we were rejecting that, but when he picked up the

phone at five o'clock in the morning and called the United States Justice Department and said, I have to go against the injunction. You know, we felt that that was a tremendous victory and that he should be supported, you know, and that, and that meant that we should participate actively in the demonstration, you know. And so, on the other hand then as a result of Turnaround Tuesday, you know, the—we felt that something odd—I mean, we knew for instance, I mean, we had heard all morning, you know, that, that well the, the, the march may be called off, but so—but we felt that people had to be mobilized to continue to march.

00:33:08:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW, OVERALL AS WE'RE HEADING AFTER THE FINAL MARCH, AFTER ALL THIS, AND WE'RE AT THE END OF—OR PRETTY MUCH TOWARD THE END OF THE SELMA CAMPAIGN, DID YOU HAVE A SENSE THEN THAT THINGS WOULD NEVER BE THE SAME IN THE, IN THE—WHAT WE CONSIDER THE TRADITIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT? OTHER WORDS, WOULD THERE NEVER BE SORT OF A TOTAL SPIRIT OF COOPERATION THAT EXISTED THERE BECAUSE OF THE DIFFERING IDEOLOGIES, PRIMARILY, BETWEEN SNCC AND SCLC? I DON'T WANT TO PUT TOO MUCH WEIGHT ON THAT, BUT IT'S, IT'S REAL IMPORTANT THAT WE KNOW THAT THINGS CHANGED LATER. DID YOU FEEL LIKE THIS WAS THE, THIS WAS IT THEN? SELMA?

Forman: Well, yeah, for a lot of people, but you have to understand nonviolence as a tactic is how we conceptualized nonviolence and that, in reality that was probably what Dr. King did. I mean, even though he may have said something about as a total way of life, but, I mean, you know, there are a lot indications, you know, that, that it was probably a tactic also with him. But that you can only sustain nonviolence as a tactic for such a—for a certain period of time. I mean like it's, it's, it's—you can't expect for people, you know, to continually participate in demonstrations where, you know, the state troopers are using cattle prodders on the people and where their lives are, are, are under constant harassment. I mean there gets to be a limitation as to how long anyone can do that. I mean that's just, that's just reality. Now, we felt that, that, so that people, you know, were becoming very weary of participating in these demonstrations. And Selma was a high point because of the massive amount of power, you know, that the state troopers and the government of, of, of, of Alabama attempted to, to pit against people who were trying to get the right to vote, because Selma was really a march for the right to vote. It was not a march for public accommodations demonstration. It was a march to strengthen the voting rights section of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and that the, the brutality of the state troopers, you know, was extreme, you know, in, in the, in the Selma campaign of 1965.

00:35:18:00

INTERVIEWER: LET ME ASK YOU A QUESTION. WHEN PRESIDENT JOHNSON USED THE TERM, "WE SHALL OVERCOME" IN CALLING FOR A VOTING RIGHTS ACT, HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT THAT?

Forman: Well, we felt, you know, you know we just felt extremely, I mean, alienated and we felt it was insincere, because when he—we were—remember when he gave that speech we were in Montgomery, Alabama surrounded by a, a posse of, of, of county troopers and, and various people from the state. The black community in Alabama had been invaded by these, these, these posses'. When we were downtown in Montgomery and we, you know, listening to the speech, you know, [laughs] in Montgomery in 1965, and that, you know, the President is saying, you know, what a great victory this was, you know. And, you know, Dr. King was there, but we were in Montgomery, OK. And when we got back to the black community began to explain to us how they had been invaded by these posses', armed posse people had, had ridden up on the porches with their horses and so forth. So that it was a mockery and it took us quite some time to, to, to get used to, to, to singing "We Shall Overcome." I think we shall, but it was, you know, it was like a cooptation of something which was very important and that the—it just wasn't real, you know. And that, and that and it, and it—even now I mean, you know, we're attempting go back through the, the black belt and all of the South, you know, to try to help people to, to, to get more rights because even now, as I said, it's, it's—there's a lot of terror throughout the Southern part of the United States.

00:36:56:00

INTERVIEWER: IN, IN YOUR BOOK YOU SAID—

Forman: Oh. "Even now" will be eliminated. I'm sorry.

INTERVIEWER: —I'M SORRY. IN YOUR BOOK YOU SAID THAT VIOLA LIUZZO DEATH AS A RESULT OF HER DEATH WAS REALLY THE FORMATION, PROMPTED THE FORMATION OF THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY. AND I'M WONDERING, WHY THAT RESPONSE TO HER DEATH?

Forman: Yes, the—we were in Montgomery, Alabama right, the night of the Selma to, to Montgomery march. It was very victorious. We were in Montgomery, we got word that Viola Liuzzo had been killed and that she was in the car with two other people and, I think, or rather, maybe, I—but she had been killed, OK. So we decided to—and she was killed in Lowndes County—

INTERVIEWER: EXCUSE ME.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: PROBABLY LIKE, JUST TAKE, TAKE THAT FROM THE BEGINNING.

INTERVIEWER: WHY DON'T YOU START THAT FROM THE BEGINNING?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YEAH.

INTERVIEWER: SHE WAS IN THE CAR WITH ONE OTHER PERSON.

Forman: She was in the car with one other person, OK. I was thinking about this other—

INTERVIEWER: YOU WANT TO JUST START FROM THE BEGINNING THEN FULLY RESPOND.

Forman: OK, all right. All right, OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Forman: OK, Viola Liuzzo was in the—was killed in Lowndes County. So we held a meeting to decide what would be our response and we decided to open up a project in Lowndes County, a voting rights project, where people had never, you know, a lot of people had, you know—well, most of the people, an overwhelming majority of the people were not permitted to, to vote. And that Stokely Carmichael would be the project director and that we would try to give the project in Lowndes County as much support as we could and this was our response to the murder of Viola Liuzzo which was consistent to our pattern. And that we felt that in these situations where somebody was killed that we should respond with more and more people to let the segregationists know that we were not gonna be frightened away. And, as a result of that project, the, the symbol of the Panther developed and that developed because we formed an independent political organization in Lowndes County called the—I forget the exact title right now. A Lowndes County Freedom Organization.

00:38:57:00

INTERVIEWER: OF COURSE, EVENTUALLY THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY BECAME SYNONOMOUS WITH BLACK POWER AND I'M WONDERING, YOU KNOW, REEB HAD BEEN KILLED, JIMMIE LEE JACKSON HAD BEEN KILLED AND I WAS JUST WONDERING WHY TO HER DEATH WAS THIS THE RESPONSE? WAS THIS LIKE THE FINAL STRAW AT THE END OF A VERY TOUGH CAMPAIGN?

Forman: Well no, we feel that, I mean, you know, remember her death came, as I recall that, I mean was on the eve of the Selma to Montgomery march and that the it was—she was, she was from the Teamsters and we felt that that was very important. I mean that, that the trade union movement and that the Teamsters, you know, were participating in the demonstration and that the dramatic response was necessary and we were not pitting her against the other two murders. I mean we tried to respond, you know, to the, to the murders of the other two people, but—oh, well, you wanna cut that? I mean, Jimmie Lee Jackson came after. Wasn't his, wasn't his death after hers or that was before?

INTERVIEWER: WE CAN CUT HERE. JUST—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YEAH.

Forman: Yeah, OK.

[cut]

39:57:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU READY?

Forman: Sure.

[sync tone]

Forman: But are you, do you, do you, are you through with the Viola Liuzzo piece?

INTERVIEWER: YES.

Forman: Oh, OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

Forman: Well, I know concretely that a method by—that people attempted to use to, to stop the movement for voting rights and the ending of public accommodations segregation in the South was the, the red herring, the red baiting, labeling people as Communists and attempting to discredit people. And this was done on many situations. Prior to, to, to Selma it had been attempted in the Mississippi summer project of 1964 and it had even been attempted in, in, in Albany, Georgia. People were, people were—attempted to discredit the leadership, you know, by saying that this person is a Communist and that person is a Communist. And it attempted to divide the leadership, you know, from the base.

00:41:00:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Forman: And, I think, it had an effect, but, I think, that the insistence of our organization of open association and the right that anyone.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE NEED TO CHANGE.

INTERVIEWER: OH. JUST RAN OUT.

Forman: OK.

00:41:13:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 593]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: FLAGS.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: HANG ON ONE SECOND. LET'S SQUARE AWAY.
WE'RE SQUARED AWAY, OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK. TAKE IT FROM THE BEGINNING AND GIVE HIM—TO
PROMPT.

Forman: Well, in the civil rights movement there were certainly attempts to discredit the movement by using Communist scare, the red scare, labeling people as outside agitators. Segregators—segregationists would try every attempt to do that. They would try to isolate us internally in the, in the community by telling people that this person is a Communist and that person is a Communist. They would attempt to, to stop us from, from getting money, you know, by using these tactics. The—but our organization insisted, you know, on the right of freedom of association, you know. That we had a right to associate with whomever we wanted to associate and to try to bring people in and not to exclude people. And I think that that overcame the, the attempts to isolate us, you know, within the community and from sources of funds too.

00:42:24:00

INTERVIEWER: LET ME ASK YOU ANOTHER GENERIC QUESTION. WHAT
WOULD THE IMPACT OF THE, THE FREEDOM GAINED BY AFRICAN COUNTRIES
HAVE ON THE MOVEMENT IN ITS PERSPECTIVE AND YOUR PERSPECTIVE FOR
THAT MATTER?

Forman: Well, I don't think that it has had the impact that it should have. I mean we were very conscious of, of, of always trying to help African countries to get their liberation, but I don't think that the African countries, as of yet, you know, have taken the kind of, of stand that they should take. Although some, you know, that they certainly, you know—

INTERVIEWER: I'M TALKING ABOUT THE EARLY '60s WHEN I ASK YOU THIS
QUESTION. THE IMPACT THAT IT HAD, YOU KNOW, LOOKING ACROSS THE
WATER AND SEEING PEOPLE GAIN THEIR INDEPENDENCE AND—

Forman: Well, I think that that had an impact. I mean that the—some of the conception of the

student movement on the right to vote campaign came as a result of, of examining what many of the African leaders did, you know, in their efforts to build a mass movement, to build popular support for independent struggles in their countries, especially, the positive nonviolent action campaign of Nkrumah which was very instrumental in attempting—in helping Ghana to win its independence. So that the, the African liberations movement, you know, had, had a tremendous impact, there's no question about it. But I still maintain though that, that the, that the degree of influence which is possible for African countries to have on the world situation is not being utilized. Africa is the richest continent in the world and that the, the, the—its leadership is not fighting, you know, sufficiently hard enough for, for, for black people throughout the world and even in South Africa.

00:44:15:00

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S OUTSIDE OF OUR TIME, OUR TIME FRAME. THAT'S WHY I'M NOT DEALING WITH THAT.

Forman: All right. OK.

INTERVIEWER: I WANT TO ASK YOU SORT OF AN INTERESTING QUESTION WHICH, ACTUALLY I DIDN'T KNOW UNTIL, UNTIL THIS MORNING, AND THAT YOU WERE ABOUT TEN YEARS OLDER THAN MOST OF THE STUDENTS IN THE STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE AND DID THAT MAKE YOU FEEL LIKE YOU WERE IN THE MIDDLE OFTEN OR DID IT CHANGE YOUR PERSPECTIVE? WERE YOU OVER HERE BEING MORE MATURE THAN EVERYBODY ELSE OR [laughs] WHAT, WHAT WAS THAT LIKE? MAYBE IT HAD, HAD NO IMPACT AT ALL. I'M JUST CURIOUS.

Forman: Well, I mean I think it didn't have an impact, but I don't, I mean, you know, Miss Baker was many years my senior. She was one of the founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Dr. Zinn was an advisor. I think that the—that it probably, you know, had a, you know, it probably had, I mean, it had an effect, I mean, it had an effect which may not have necessarily been positive. I mean I may have been more conscious of that then, then, then a lot of the people who were involved, you know, were and I may have even let it interfere, you know, with my own development. I mean, not, not my own development, but my own participation because I was attempting consciously to, to try to have the projection of a student movement, but we all grow older, you know. And so, so people nowadays [laughs] may not feel—I mean no one set that against me. Although I think, you know, that, that, that, you know, some people may have used it as, as, as something. I'm, I'm, I'm not sure what I'm trying to say, but what I am trying to say is that I may have been too—more conscious of that than other people. I mean the fact that I was about ten years older than some of the more active people. But, you know, I mean it's not, it's not anything that I let interfere, you know, I hope I didn't.

00:46:03:00

INTERVIEWER: I ASKED THAT QUESTION BECAUSE WE ASKED THAT OF ANDY

YOUNG AND HE SAID HE WAS THE YOUNG PERSON, YOU KNOW, MORE LIKE THE AGES OF THE STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE AND OFTEN HE FELT IN THE MIDDLE, BECAUSE HE WAS PULLED BY THAT, YOU KNOW, THAT AGE DIFFERENCE MADE AN, MADE AN IMPACT ON HIM AND I JUST WONDERED IF IT IMPACTED YOU ON THE OTHER SIDE?

Forman: No, I was, no I was committed to the development of a southern student movement among black youth. And that I—when, when I was recruited to work with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, I was in the process of attempting to organize such a movement. And people in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee knew of my plans and asked me to join them, you know, rather than attempting to develop, you know, another student movement. They felt that they were a vehicle by which I could utilize my energy and that I should come to work with them, you know, as the, in the, as the people who would build a, a southern black student youth movement. And I agreed to do that. And that, you know, and I worked uncons—not, I mean I worked unreservedly. I think that the difference is, is that I had already given my life when I came with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, you know, to the movement. And some people may have given only up a year or two years and that that might be—one difference.

00:47:21:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: I JUST HAVE A QUESTION. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: OK, GO AHEAD.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ARE YOU ROLLING?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: YEAH, I'M ROLLING. YEAH, YEAH.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WHAT IF THERE HAD NEVER BEEN A MOVEMENT?

Forman: Well, we were gonna, we were gonna build one. I mean, we—[laughs] I mean there were—we—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: LET ME PUT IT DIFFERENTLY.

Forman: I see.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WAS, WAS IT INEVITABLE THAT THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN A MOVEMENT IN THIS COUNTRY?

Forman: Well, I don't know if, I mean, if it was inevitable that they were gonna build a movement. A lot of people were very concerned about this question of segregation and, and—in the United States of America, you know. And that people were, and I was one of those individuals, you know, extremely concerned about it and I was attempting to try to study the patterns of movements, especially the African movements, and I did that at Boston

University, you know, to see if, if there were any things that could be applied to our situation. So the—but, I think that, I think that it was, of course, it was inevitable. I mean that there would be a movement because segregation was wrong. People had to have the right to vote. A lot of people were working on it and I'm sure in one way or the other that this was gonna take place as it did. But I'm not, but don't misunderstand me. I do not feel and do—don't believe in the laws of spontaneity. I mean, I think that consciously people were gonna work on these things.

INTERVIEWER: OK, GOOD.

00:48:40:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: GOOD.

INTERVIEWER: THANK YOU VERY—

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:48:43:00

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