

Interview with **Senator Ralph Yarborough**

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Washington, D.C.

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Camera Rolls: 602-603

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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 602]

[sound roll 1548]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND ROLLING.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ONE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK.

INTERVIEWER: ALL RIGHT, FIRST OF ALL I'D LIKE TO JUST ASK WHAT YOUR POSITION WAS ON CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE EARLY '60s? YOU WERE A SENATOR FROM TEXAS, A SOUTHERN STATE, WHAT WAS YOUR POSITION WITH RESPECT TO CIVIL RIGHTS?

Yarborough: Well, when I, I had been a candidate for governor of Texas prior to coming to the Senate. Was defeated and ran and was elected to the Senate. When I arrived in the Senate in the last week in April of 1957, I began to hear a lot about civil rights. I wasn't talking much in Texas. We had other issues down there for taxation and many of these issues hadn't been talked much there as a state issue. And I found that—got to Washington it's almost all

consuming. My position was I was going to vote for it from the start, 'cause I ran on the platform in Texas, three times for governor, of fair treatment for all people. And they called me a nigger-lover for that. And I knew how I was going to vote. I was going to vote. I believed in everybody having the right to vote. Fifteenth Amendment provides for it and says that Congress shall have power to pass laws to enforce it.

00:01:11:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, BUT YET IN THE EARLY '60s YOU DID NOT REALLY GO OUT ON THE RECORD TOO MUCH OR SPEAK OUT IN FAVOR OR SUPPORT OF CIVIL RIGHTS. WHY, WHY NOT?

Yarborough: Well, I was very strong for it, but I found out, campaigning a lot, that people—a lot of people didn't like my votes. But as long as you don't, to use an old expression in the South, cram it down their throats, if you don't come in and tell 'em, try to tell 'em, you know it all, I'm smarter than you are and I vote this way. That's what most of those speeches were for, more for home consumption. I didn't care to try to tell the people that I knew more than they knew. I just voted and they would tolerate that.

00:01:48:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS YOUR OPINION OF PRESIDENT JOHNSON AS A CIVIL RIGHTS PRESIDENT?

Yarborough: Well, as you are jumping ahead now from my days in Congress—

INTERVIEWER: I'M JUMPING A LITTLE BIT AHEAD, SURE. WELL—BUT YOU'RE FROM TEXAS AND HE WAS FROM TEXAS, I GUESS—

Yarborough: Well, when he first—well there's quite an evolution there. When he first came to the Senate, the first year, he filibustered against an anti-lynching bill. And he told—friends knew he wanted to run for the Presidency. Says, what on earth are you doing? He said, that's the only way I can get elected in Texas. And he'd campaigned in Texas a lot and knew the, the score down there. And that lasted up until 1957. When I got elected with no money in '57 and he had vast resources back of him. He knew if I could get elected in proclaiming I was for fair treatment for all people, it'd be duck soup for him. So he changed around and took over leadership of that Civil Rights Act of '57. In June of '57, first time I found where he was out actively speaking for civil rights was June of 1957. So his course as he got—became a national officer, Vice President, and then President, he went further and further. Further than any other President, I think, and became a very strong advocate of all civil rights.

00:03:09:00

INTERVIEWER: I'D LIKE TO BROADEN THAT A LITTLE BIT NOW. TALKING ABOUT JOHNSON AS A SENATOR. YOU, OF COURSE, WERE A SENATOR. WHAT

WAS THE MOOD IN THE SENATE IN THE EARLY '60s WITH RESPECT TO CIVIL RIGHTS?

Yarborough: What was the—

INTERVIEWER: WELL, WHAT WAS THE MOOD IN THE SENATE OR WHAT WAS THE TALK IN THE SENATE?

Yarborough: Well, the, the Senate when I went there was very closely divided. Had I been defeated in the primaries and the, and the election in Texas this would affect the general election, the vacancy there. Had a Republican candidate won, and the Republicans were making a strong effort. There were twenty-seven candidates: twenty-six of us Democrats and one Republican. The high man took over. I was fortunate enough to be high man and no run off. And the Republicans were hoping strongly because of the twenty-six candidates on the Democratic side including Martin Dies and a number of very well known people, there was the commissioner of agriculture and it was touch and go. So, when I came to the Senate, I got a great welcome, because had I been defeated and the Republican elected the lead—the, the personnel of the Senate would have changed. That would have been a tie and the Vice President Nixon could have broken the tie and they'd take away all the committee chairmanships. They would have taken away all those—so the first few days I was there I got the grandest welcome I'd ever had anywhere. That meant—

INTERVIEWER: OK, I'D LIKE TO JUST STOP DOWN FOR A MOMENT—

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[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: —BECAUSE I THINK WE'RE GONNA HAVE TROUBLE WITH THAT.

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[cut]

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: TWO.

INTERVIEWER: OK, I WOULD LIKE TO PROGRESS UP TO 1965 WHEN A GROUP OF CIVIL RIGHTS DEMONSTRATORS TRIED TO MARCH ACROSS THE PETTUS BRIDGE AND THEY WERE GREETED THERE IN A VERY UNFRIENDLY WAY BY THE, THE STATE TROOPERS OF ALABAMA AND BEATEN AND TEAR GASSED AND EVERYTHING. BEFORE I ASK YOU ABOUT YOUR COMMENT ON IT, HOW

DID YOU FIRST HEAR ABOUT THAT? WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST INDICATION THAT SOMETHING HAD HAPPENED IN SELMA THAT DAY?

Yarborough: We were in the Senate. I cannot say whether it was radio or some other senator told me and we went and listened to the news, I do not recall. It just became the all pervasive ta—topic in the Senate because a filibuster was going on. The civil rights bill being strongly filibustered and there was talk in the cloak room, senators gathered back in the cloak room, you know. Nobody else went—lot of them had bills they wanted to pass they couldn't pass 'em with that filibuster on and they were saying back in the cloak room we'll never break that filibuster. The mood of those senators is strong enough and enough people sympathized with them, rather than break the filibuster, they'll just be absent or sick that day. The means—the, the sentiment is not here, we can break it. It'll be close, but they can postpone this and ask us to give them a certain number of days and weeks and then let's lay that bill aside and pass our bills. That was the sentiment at that time. After Selma, there were no doubters then. Those that were kind of on the fence waiting, willing to be absent or something, they were so outraged by what happened, they shown [sic] on television, you know. You could see them dogging those people and putting the troopers on horseback and, and riding down and, and putting the water hose to 'em. There's such a sense of outrage at the, the outrage was being committed by the people in uniform on the others. And the sentiment swung with that and that passed the bill. The general belief in the Senate, back in the cloak rooms, was that bill wasn't going to pass that year. The Selma—treatment of the Selma marchers swung the Senate around, in my opinion, and caused the passage.

00:06:42:00

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME ABOUT WHAT MADE YOU MAKE THE STATEMENT THAT YOU DID, A VERY FAMOUS STATEMENT.

Yarborough: I don't recall. I don't recall the—what, what I thought was such an outrage for a governor to send people down there to do that, chief executive officer of the state, and he'd been stomping about what he'd do you know. A lot on the Governor Wallace on television, radio and everything, but when the chips were down, what he did was send troopers with dogs and horses and water hose after defenseless people.

INTERVIEWER: I'M JUST CURIOUS, WHY THIS PARTICULAR INCIDENT SET YOU OFF? WHY—BECAUSE OTHER THINGS HAD HAPPENED OVER THE YEARS, BUT THIS PARTICULAR THING—

Yarborough: Well, I saw it on television. Could visualize it. See that, that dogs—memories of the Spanish conquest, where—one way they conquered the Indians of Central and South America was dogs. Great vicious mastiffs with a species of collar and arm that just tear the insides out of Indians. And they'd punish them that way sometimes not when they were fighting. They'd turn—they called dogging them and the use of dogs in combat is—and, and the use of those vicious dogs on people. I was repelled by it.

00:07:50:00

INTERVIEWER: DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT YOU SAID THAT DAY, DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT YOUR STATEMENT WAS?

Yarborough: No, I don't this time [sic]. I remember I started off "Shame on you, Governor Wallace," and then, of course, I felt a little badly about that when he—they tried to assassinate him and he lay in all that pain for those months and all.

INTERVIEWER: WELL, I GUESS, YOU, YOU OBVIOUSLY DID SEE THIS AS SOMETHING THAT GEORGE WALLACE WAS VERY MUCH RESPONSIBLE FOR, BECAUSE—

Yarborough: Oh, sure, it is his troopers. It is his state troopers. It wasn't just local sheriffs. It is the state highway patrol. He is directly responsible.

00:08:24:00

INTERVIEWER: IN THE TELEPHONE CONVERSATION WE HAD WITH YOU A COUPLE OF MONTHS AGO, YOU USED A LINE I WOULD DEARLY LOVE IF, IF YOU KIND OF WORKED TOWARD THAT AGAIN. I'M PRACTICALLY GONNA PUT WORDS IN YOUR MOUTH, BUT THEY'RE YOUR WORDS, SO I'M NOT GONNA FEEL BADLY ABOUT IT. YOU MADE A COMMENT THAT WHEN YOU SAW WHAT HAD HAPPENED IN SELMA IT WAS NO LONGER A QUESTION OF CIVIL RIGHTS. YOU KIND OF KNOW WHERE I'M GOING WITH THAT? YOU SAID IT WAS REALLY HUMAN RIGHTS. THAT IS WHAT—

Yarborough: That's—well, it was. I hadn't thought of that now, but that—yeah.

INTERVIEWER: IF, IF YOU COULD KINDA [sic] EXPRESS THAT SENTIMENT TO ME I'D VERY MUCH APPRECIATE IT.

Yarborough: All right. Well, when I was treating this as civil rights matters, going to vote for it, but I didn't try to offend my home people in Texas by getting up and, and arguing that the other side didn't have a right to be heard. One thing as ex-judge, I believe in both sides being heard. And the, *when this happened at Selma, and I saw it on television, to me it expanded beyond civil rights, beyond whether you vote, or where you sit in a restaurant or in a cafe or on planes, trains, or buses. It became a matter of human life—*

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[cut]

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[cut]

Yarborough: —*and* tearing the flesh, having dogs tear human flesh out.

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[cut]

Yarborough: It pa—*it became an issue that transcended any of those we're voting on. It became bigger than that.*

00:09:36:00

INTERVIEWER: DID IT UNIFY THE SENATE? DID IT UNIFY CONGRESS?

Yarborough: No. No, it didn't unify the Senate, but it, it turned enough doubt, I won't say doubters, it turned enough over for a positive vote to pass the bill and to stop the filibuster that might, for personal reasons, not have voted for it, for to end the filibustering the bill. Now that, some people from bor—border states whose constituency was fairly well divided on that and some who had obligations. They had been given positions of power on commissions through the help—there was great seniority rule in the Senate back in those days and without the help of those senior senators who filled the, the policy committees and filled the other committees that picked, you see. They, they have a committee that picks people for different committees and you don't necessarily get the committee you want. It be—it may be the committee of most interest in your states. Lot of senators there owed their positions on the committees they wanted to some of the southerners who had great seniority like, Richard Russell. The, the leader of all of them, and the most able of all of them.

INTERVIEWER: GRACE, HOW MUCH ROLL DO WE HAVE LEFT?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE'RE OUT. JUST OUT.

00:10:56:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Yarborough: So there many im—

00:10:57:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 603]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SIX-O-THREE, THREE.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: ALL SET?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YEAH.

INTERVIEWER: OK. AFTER YOU MADE YOUR STATEMENT DENOUNCING GEORGE WALLACE AND THE EVENTS THAT HAPPENED IN SELMA, WAS THERE ANY REACTION FROM ANY OF THE OTHER SENATORS? ANY OF THE SOUTHERN SENATORS IN PARTICULAR? DID ANYBODY CRITIZE YOU FOR SPEAKING OUT?

Yarborough: No.

INTERVIEWER: NONE?

Yarborough: None that I recall. If there was, it wasn't serious enough to make a dent. I mean really objecting, strong objection. None of 'em said a word. Of course, by then I had been in the Senate eight years [laughs] and they knew that I wasn't going to shake, I wasn't going to withdraw anything. We knew each other well enough. They knew it was futile to speak to me in hoping that I'd change that somewhat.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT ABOUT YOUR CONSTITUENCY BACK HOME? ANY RESPONSE FROM BACK HOME?

Yarborough: Some commendation and some criticism. About equal as, I recall, not very much. I was surprised. Very little. Compared to the population, I mean, on a comparative basis for population, not nearly as much as there was on some other acts.

00:12:10:00

INTERVIEWER: I'M JUST WONDERING, BECAUSE CIVIL RIGHTS HAD BEEN A VERY HEATED ISSUE FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS BY THE TIME 1965 CAME ALONG. WE'D BEEN THROUGH MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT IN THE MID '50s ALL THE WAY UP THROUGH THE LATE '50s, LITTLE ROCK, ALL THESE EVENTS HAD TAKEN PLACE AND THEN THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA INTEGRATION

AND BY THE MID '60s WERE PEOPLE JUST TIRED OF THE WHOLE ISSUE OF CIVIL RIGHTS?

Yarborough: I think they were. I think one reason I had so little correspondence about it—

INTERVIEWER: LET, LET ME JUST START YOU OVER AGAIN, BECAUSE I THINK THAT YOU OVERLAPPED ME A LITTLE BIT. WOULD YOU JUST GIVE ME A STATEMENT ON THAT? AND KIND OF TELL THE, THE—

Yarborough: Well, by 1965 there'd been so many long—such a long fight over civil rights with the Montgomery bus issue and the Selma riots and the Birmingham riots and all that, that, that, I think, the people were tired of it. Now that doesn't mean that they'd changed their opinions on it. But they were tired of the long hassle over it and, I think, that many people would like to see it settled. After all John Adams, you know, said after the American Revolution, at the time of the revolution, a third of the people were for it, a third were against it and a third didn't want to get involved. Well, it might be that way with civil rights in Texas. A number of people just didn't wanna [sic] argue that. They had something else they wanted the Congress to do that was more important to them than that issue. And the issue was not as hot in Texas as it was in the other southern states because the percentage of blacks was much lower in Texas. And there were only about four counties in Texas where the blacks were in the majority, where the issue was keenest and the people, the most bitter, was where the races were about equally divided.

00:13:57:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, I GUESS, I'D LIKE TO KIND OF COME BACK TO PRESIDENT JOHNSON A, A LITTLE BIT. AND HE WAS ELECTED TO HIS, HIS FIRST REAL TERM, HE SUCCEEDED KENNEDY, OF COURSE, AFTER THE ASSASSINATION, THEN WHEN HE WAS ELECTED, NICHOLAS KATZENBACH WAS ATTORNEY GENERAL AND HE TOLD ME IN AN INTERVIEW, SIMILAR TO THIS, THAT JOHNSON WAS DETERMINED TO BE THE GREATEST CIVIL RIGHTS PRESIDENT EVER. WAS—DID YOU SENSE THAT IN HIM?

Yarborough: Yes. Yes. He wanted to be the greatest president in everything, ever. And—

INTERVIEWER: NOT JUST CIVIL RIGHTS, BUT EVERYTHING?

Yarborough: Civil rights. He wasn't just limited to civil rights [coughs] that was just one facet of it. And he was determined to be the greatest American president. And that his heroes—he puts each president when he takes—sworn in, puts—that great storehouse of photo, of paintings and all of the different presidents, American historical scenes, they have whole basements full—he pulled out the, the paintings, the best they had of Andrew Jackson and Franklin D. Roosevelt: his two heroes. Well, you see, each of 'em got to be heroes by be—international heroes by winning wars and having a, a progressive domestic program. He set his sights on that. But he picked the wrong thing when he picked the war in Vietnam.

INTERVIEWER: BUT HE DIDN'T PICK THE WRONG THING WITH CIVIL RIGHTS.

Yarborough: Pardon?

INTERVIEWER: HE DIDN'T PICK THE WRONG THING WITH CIVIL RIGHTS?

Yarborough: No. We picked the right thing there for the future, I think. I think, that the time was only—I think there he was looking into the future. It was just a question of when it'd come.

00:15:37:00

INTERVIEWER: DID HE EVER TALK TO YOU ABOUT ANY OF THESE ISSUES LIKE CIVIL RIGHTS? SINCE YOU WERE FROM TEXAS DID HE LOOK TO YOU FOR SOME SORT OF SUPPORT?

Yarborough: No. I don't recall him ever mentioning it to me, but I knew that I came up there on a platform of, of fair treatment for all people. That was my campaign plan. Treat—fairness to everybody. And he had been somewhat anti—not anti, anti to civil—anti-lynching bill, he hadn't shown any particular interest in civil rights till I got elected. When I got elected with practically no financial support in Texas and he was elected with all the financial support anybody could want, he knew then that it'd be duck soup for him to be for—in Texas, for him to be for civil rights and get elected, with all of his means and all the press for him and the press was all against me.

00:16:27:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, I'D JUST LIKE TO THROW ONE FINAL QUESTION TO YOU AND THIS IS A LITTLE BIT BROADER. YOU STAYED IN THE TIME FRAME FOR ME VERY NICE. NOW, I'M GONNA ASK YOU THAT AFTER ABOUT TEN YEARS OF VERY BITTER STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS AND WENT THROUGH ABOUT FOUR DIFFERENT CIVIL RIGHTS BILLS, '57, '60, '64 AND '65, WHAT DO YOU THINK FINALLY CAME OUT OF IT ALL? WHAT, WHAT WAS—WAS THERE A MARKED CHANGE IN THE COUNTRY AT THAT TIME AS A RESULT OF TEN YEARS OF REAL INTENSE STRUGGLE?

Yarborough: Yes, but back in the portion of Texas as I grew up in, the old confederate part, they call it, the deep south part, that's the east third, I've had people tell me back there, say Ralph, football has done more to integrate these schools than all the federal judges and marshals in the United States. There's—they go to school together and they get the star players back on winning team—games for their home town and get a district championship and they, they look the other way on this color line.

00:17:26:00

INTERVIEWER: SO, THEY DIDN'T NEED CIVIL RIGHTS CAMPAIGNS THEY JUST NEEDED MORE FOOTBALL?

Yarborough: Well, if—with that football—without the civil rights laws, those things wouldn't have been granted. They wouldn't have been granted automatically. Texas, for example, one of the last five states in the union to abolish the poll tax. That kept the blacks, most of them, from voting anyway, having to pay that poll tax. And they—Georgia had repealed it. Most states in the South had voluntarily repealed the poll tax requirement as a part of their own programs for advancing the rights of the black without the intervention of the Federal Government. And we passed the constitutional amendment there, you know, to abolish the use of the poll tax and—but before that was in federal elections only. And then a judge appointed by Lyndon Johnson, his close personal friend, my personal friend, former mayor of Austin, Homer Thornberry was circuit judge. He wrote an opinion in Austin as presiding over a circuit court group that the poll tax was unconstitutional and that knocked it out in Texas and four other states. There were only five that held on to that last vestige of denial of equal rights to the poor. That got the poor whites as well as the poor blacks. That was just keeping the poor people from voting.

INTERVIEWER: OK. I THINK THAT I HAVE PROBABLY ASKED ALL THE QUESTIONS THAT I HAVE HERE AND I APPRECIATE YOU TAKING THE TIME.

Yarborough: I'm worried—

INTERVIEWER: DO YOU HAVE ANY LAST COMMENT OR ANYTHING—

Yarborough: I'm worried about whether—how long I made those answers or whether they were—

00:19:00:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Yarborough: —whether they were cogent and on the point or—

[cut]

[end of interview]

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