

Interview with **Maurice Ferre**

Date: March 21, 1989

Interviewer: Jim DeVinney

Camera Rolls: 1063-1064

Sound Rolls: 126

Team: A

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.

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #1063]

[sound roll #126]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:00:17:00

Interviewer:

OK. And tell me about the consequences.

00:00:20:00

Maurice Ferre:

The, the McDuffie trial was one of the critical points in the history of Miami. And the reason, of course, is that *for weeks on end the newspapers and especially the television stations in the evening would report what was going on in the trial, so that the people of Miami and especially the Black community were patently aware of every gruesome detail of how that poor man had died. That they held his head, that the—what kind of a, of a flashlight with how many batteries, where the blood was splattering.* It was just horrible. There was no

question but that, but that this was a, a terrible thing that had occurred, it was tragic. I don't think anybody had any, any questions but that there was guilt. These police officers had no right to kill that man the way he was killed. He, at that point was not resisting and yet they, they battered his, his head in. And then all of a sudden "not guilty." It was shocking, it was a shock. All the things that had built up to that, all of the many problems that Miami had in the Black community, in poverty, the underclass, racism, all these things, you know, were coming together. The Mariel refugees coming in or, or the advent of economic competition between the, the, the Cubans and the Blacks, or the perception of it because a lot of times it wasn't real. But just the perception of it. The lack of opportunity, the lack of jobs, the lack of upward mobility, unemployment, underemployment, single family homes, pregnant teenagers, drugs. All of Pandora's boxes of problems that were coming together. All of a sudden this is the cinder box that somebody strikes a, a light and, and, and all of a sudden there's an explosion. And that's exactly what occurred. There's no, there's no question but that McDuffie was a major turning point in our, in our history. And as it occurred, those of us that had positions of responsibility were painfully aware of the, of the potential, but frankly, I've got to tell you it never occurred to me, it really just never occurred to me that McDuffie was, that the police officers, those four officers on trial in Tampa, would, would be found not guilty, totally not guilty. I thought something, somehow, they'd be, they'd end up doing some time in jail or they would have some, there would be some consequences of this, but nothing. So that was a shock to me as well as to the rest of the community.

00:03:14:00

Interviewer:

OK. I want to stop down just a moment to make sure everything is working right.

[cut]

[slate]

00:03:22:00

Interviewer:

OK. Once the riot began, tell me what steps were taken to try to stop the rioting?

00:03:31:00

Maurice Ferre:

I think, the Miami Police Department and the Metro Police Department, these are the two major police departments in, in our community were not prepared. And by that, I mean, that they really didn't know what to do in a circumstance like this. They didn't have the training, they didn't have the equipment. Obviously, when something like this occurs and property is being damaged, burned, looting begins and then the loss of life begins, I think there's a,

there—the police department, of course, has to secure the community, it has to bring safety back to the streets and control the streets of Miami. That was their main target. They were unable to do it. I think today the police de—

00:04:35:00

Interviewer:

OK, I'm going to stop you because we won't go into today, I mean—

00:04:37:00

Maurice Ferre:

OK.

00:04:38:00

Interviewer:

—but what I would like to do is follow up and say when a riot is happening in the city or in Miami, how does Miami's particular form of government either function or fail to function

00:04:47:00

Maurice Ferre:

Yeah.

00:04:48:00

Interviewer:

—in that environment?

00:04:49:00

Maurice Ferre:

Well I think you have to understand, in, in analyzing what occurred here in 1980 and since, that, that we have a, a government a Rube Goldberg type of a government here. It is not the traditional American government wherein you have a chief executive who's elected and he's, he's the mayor, a chief executive. The ch—the mayor here is not chief executive, he's the chairman of the board of, of a board of commissioners. And therefore, it's a part-time job. In both the City of Miami and Metro everybody's elected at large so there's no specific area representation. Those are two major differences. The third is that the chief executive who, in

this case, is a county manager or a city manager appointed, has no veto power. So therefore he's a weak executive. As a consequence of, of all of this, we have a situation that is not good for crisis confrontation. Now, [clears throat] the other thing that's, that's important in understanding in this community is that there has not been any consolidation. Now in, in most major American cities, whether it's New York City which, the consolidation happened at the turn of the century, or Chicago, or a major American city, consolidation has occurred. Here the reverse has occurred. In other words, the City of Miami has given up its departments. It gave up the seaport, the airport, the water and sewer system, etc. The hospitals. Those are all city functions that were given up to Metropolitan Dade County with the idea of the creation of a regional government which was created 33 years ago called Metro. Now, [clears throat] the problem is that that regional government, Metro serves both as a city government for half of this community, in other words, almost a million people. And then it serves as a regional government for 2 mil—, almost 2 million people. And there's a conflict between those two, two services that are being rendered. And then there are 26 municipalities here, of which the City of Miami is the largest, which in effect, in the municipal area conflicts with Metro because there's a rivalry.

00:07:13:00

Interviewer:

And how does all this effect then when you're in the midst of a riot?

00:07:15:00

Maurice Ferre:

The, the, the rivalry, for example, can be clearly seen in seeking funds in Washington. It can also be seen in the lack of cooperation between police departments. Traditionally the City of Miami Police Department and the Metro Police Department don't function as a unit. There's a certain inherent rivalry. City of Miami is very concerned about giving up its laboratories, its, its, its crime investigating units, it's organized crime units. So we in effect have two organized crime units functioning in, in, in this community. One at Metro, one at Miami. They don't share information all the time because—

00:07:57:00

Interviewer:

I understand this all but—

00:07:56:00

Maurice Ferre:

—jurisdictional problem, but obviously these type of lack of cooperations bring problems when you have a crisis. A riot is a crisis.

00:08:07:00

Interviewer:

And what happens then?

00:08:06:00

Maurice Ferre:

You know, there's no cooperation. They don't t, they, they're not prepared to function as an integrated unit. So, in effect, what you have is two Army battalions that are going out to fight the same, the same battle, but they're not coordinated.

00:08:23:00

Interviewer:

In, in 1980 was there any feeling, the fact that one of those police departments was somewhat responsible for the events that took place?

00:08:30:00

Maurice Ferre:

No I don't think so because I, I, I think that, that the same kind of problems that oc, that oc, that have occurred and occurred then, in Metropolitan Dade County, those were Metro police officers that were accused, had also occurred in the City of Miami. I mean there's a, there's a tradition that goes back to Chief Walter Headley whose famous statement, famous in this community and the state of Florida is when the, when, when the looting starts, the shooting starts. I mean that's the tradition. This was a Southern police department of a Southern city which is what Miami was up until the advent of and the arrival of the Cubans in 1960. And this community has changed totally. But the mentality of that police department continues. I mean, it has a life, it has a history. That same mentality exists at Metro and at the City of Miami. And, and, and I think it's been part of the problem because, because of the process of assimilation. When you assimilate, you assimilate into that mentality. So that the so-called redneck mentality that existed here, that we inherit from our Southern traditions, you think that the Cubans that come over are going to be sympathetic to minority causes and minority positions with the Black police officers. Not so. They identify immediately with the White police officers and that's who they try to integrate with and emulate. And that's, and the assimilation process takes that in. So all of these problems that have occurred in the police department of Miami from a, from a sociological or a cultural anthropological point of view deals with that phenomenon.

00:10:14:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's, I'm going to take a quick check on how much film we have.

00:10:17:00

Camera crew member #1:

Fifty feet. Stop down?

00:10:17:00

Interviewer:

Yes.

[cut]

00:10:19:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:10:24:00

Maurice Ferre:

The meeting with President Carter took place in Liberty City. It was a bland meeting. Carter was on the defensive. It was obvious to me having known him and seen him in other situations that he was, that he was uptight. He was obviously, at that time, concerned with the Mariel problem. He was—the, the Iran situation was, and the hostages was obviously on his mind, and the election was on his mind. He made a lot of promises, it was, it was not an organized meeting. In my opinion, nothing was accomplished. If, if anything it exacerbated things 'cause it created false hope. And I think Carter made promises that, six months later he was out of office and therefore he was no—unable to keep. And Reagan was not interested in keeping any of those promises and they have not been kept.

00:11:14:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's stop right there. I think we should probably change the—

[cut]

[camera roll #1063]

00:11:18:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:11:23:00

Interviewer:

OK. Start off by telling me about President Carter's car.

00:11:27:00

Maurice Ferre:

Well it was a—there was a very unfortunate incident that occurred and that is when the President was in his limousine, some, some of the residents of Liberty City started to stone the President's car. Well, you know, obviously, it's a shocking thing to see a President treated that way, but in the minds of those teenagers that were doing that, I don't think they distinguish, they, they would distinguish between the President and the, and the mayor or anybody else. I, you know, it was a statement that was being made and, and the statement was, this is unfair, something, something's not right. And it was, it's a form of protest. Thank God the President was not hurt, but he, he got the message. And the message was very clear.

00:12:15:00

Interviewer:

OK. Here's your chance to tell me what you'd like to say about the underclass and the riot.

00:12:19:00

Maurice Ferre:

I think, I think what has to be understood in the co, in the context of Miami and the McDuffie riots in 1980—

00:12:27:00

Camera crew member #1:

Just a moment. We're getting a little bit of—

00:12:28:00

Camera crew member #1:

Yes, I hear some sound outside.

00:12:29:00

Interviewer:

You want to stop?

00:12:29:00

Camera crew member #2:

You want to cut? Cut.

[cut]

[slate]

00:12:37:00

Maurice Ferre:

The McDuffie riots in Miami in 1980 have to be taken in context of, of Black, brown, poor, urban America and all the things that plague poor brown, Black, urban America. Poverty, racism. I think there's an overlapping between the, the problem of racism and the underclass. But right here in Miami I think one of the serious problems that, that, that affects us is the inability for a major segment of this community, it represents seventeen percent of the total, of course not all Blacks are poor, but of the seventeen percent Black population in Miami there's a ten or twelve or thirteen percent that does live in poverty, is, is the inability for these people to participate in the promise of what America is all about. And therefore, it's really a national problem and we, we, we must, we must understand and put, again putting it in the context, that, that we, as a society, as a free-enterprise, capitalistic society have not yet shown that we can solve the problem of that 20% that, that is the so-called underclass of our society. Indeed I think it's incomprehensible that in this great nation of ours there is an underclass. I mean that's the part that I, as an American, have a very difficult time dealing with. And I

think there are a lot of us that feel that way. Perhaps our time is not now since, since Kennedy and the Johnson years are behind us and we're waiting for that to, to, to reoccur. But we in Miami, and we in America, must deal with that issue. And the, it, it, we faced it head on. I mean, eyeball to eyeball in 1980 during the McDuffie riots.

00:14:39:00

Interviewer:

You mentioned racism, I just want to ask you, did you ever feel at that point that Miami was a racist city?

00:14:45:00

Maurice Ferre:

Oh, I don't have any questions that Miami's a racist city. It always has been. America is a racist country. Florida is a racist state, I mean there's no question about that. There're just different kinds of racism, some of it is more blatant, some of it is more subtle. But western society is, is racist. I think, you know, we're living, we inherit those things. Thank God it's not a genetic thing, but, but it's, it's the next thing to it, and that is, it goes from father to son. And I think these things permeate in our subconscious world and it comes out. And we do have this subconscious feeling of superiority and who's better and there's a pecking order. There's a, there's a hierarchical order of not only of values, but of, of how we see people in society. And there's no question that it is alive here in Miami today, very much alive. Very much alive in Boston. I, I've seen v—, I've seen very few cities as racist as Boston, I mean, that's deeply ingrained. But Miami's not, it's not much different. And unfortunately, people that come in here from another society and another culture very quickly fall into those bad habits. They assimilate into the good and the bad and that's the bad.

00:15:59:00

Interviewer:

And when you're a government official, do you identify racism as something that needs to be—

00:16:02:00

Maurice Ferre:

Absolutely. I—

00:16:03:00

Interviewer:

What steps do you take?

00:16:05:00

Maurice Ferre:

Well, you know, in the City of Miami we took some very dramatic steps to overcome that. For example, I don't have any, any qualms about talking about quotas. I know that, that, that there are many segments of American society they get very, very uptight and they talk about affirmative action. Not quotas, well no, not me, I didn't mind talking about quotas. Our city attorneys would have fits on that, but, but I think, you know, we're, we're going to have to do some extraordinary things to overcome these problems that plague society including the City of Miami. And we did. And as a matter of fact, I'm very proud of the fact that during my tenure as mayor I completely changed the percentage of minorities, including Blacks and women, in, in the government at all levels. I mean up at the top and down in the middle and down in the bottom, so that we have a, a, a community including the police department that is reflective of the community it serves.

00:17:09:00

Interviewer:

All right, thank you very much. I think that will, we're all done here.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:17:15:00

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