

Interview with **Maynard Jackson**

Date: October 24, 1988

Interviewer: Jacqueline Shearer

Camera Rolls: 4023-4028

Sound Rolls: 408

Team: D

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 Maynard Jackson, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 24, 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 #4023]

[sound roll #408]

00:00:15:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Camera roll 4023, 1123 time code. Sound 408.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jackie.

00:00:28:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, thinking about that question I put to you, do you feel that you were destined to run for public office?

00:00:36:00

Maynard Jackson:

Well, if I was, it, it was a, a realization that came late. I am descended from three generations of Baptist ministers, and if anything, I felt I may have been destined to go in the ministry. In fact, I think I had almost decided to do that before my father died when I was fifteen. I, I had gone to Morehouse when I was fourteen as a freshman on an early admissions program for the Ford Foundation Scholarship. And he died when I was fifteen and luckily I was surrounded by the value system that my father and mother felt was important. I decided not to go in the ministry. And I began to think about what I could do to apply what I felt were certain talents in another direction that might have a similar benefit. And I decided to become a lawyer, because I could use, then, the skills as a lawyer to change the law, to make things better that way. And did so as an attorney for the poor for many years. People, friends of mine in Cleveland, where I waited tables in the late '50s, and sold encyclopedias door-to-door, tell me that they remember my saying then that I intended to run for mayor of Atlanta. I have no recollection of that. [laughs] But what I will tell you is that whatever may have been my, my feelings early on, I, I've always known that I was destined for some sort of public service. Whether it meant elected office, or in the ministry, or at the bar as an attorney, some way trying to use the skills that I had, and the value system that I was taught by my family, to change things for the better for those who were the most oppressed. And lo and behold, Bobby Kennedy—I mean King was shot and killed, John—Martin Luther King, Jr., was shot and killed, and was buried the day after my first child was born, Brooke, my daughter Brooke. She was born April the 8th of 1968, so she was two days old when I went from the hospital to the grave. And I spent three days thinking about what I was gonna do with my life. And decided that politics, although not perfect, was the best available non-violent means of changing how we live. And that's when I know I decided to get into politics. But I thought, even then, I would take a long time to phase into it—two, three, four years. I wanted to build a law firm, and lo and behold, less than two months later after declining to run for the state house, and telling a group of neighbors that I would not do that, they left, I sat down to watch the Democratic returns from the California primary, and saw Bobby Kennedy shot to death. When that went off, finally, early in the morning hours, the news, the late news had been delayed and came on, announced that Herman Talmadge, then the US Senator from Georgia, was going to run. The next day—that day, really, was the last day to qualify, June the 5th of 1968, for the US Senate, and apparently nobody was going to oppose him. So, I went to work that morning and I resigned my job, spent all day borrowing three thousand dollars for the qualifying fee and ran for the US Senate. That was ten years ago, I was thirty years old. I'm—twenty years ago and I'm forty years old of course today. [laughs] But I can, I know that I can chart my decision back to when King was shot and killed.

00:04:26:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's cut.

[cut]

00:04:29:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Rolling and speed.

[slate]

00:04:35:00

Interviewer:

Janice Sikes laughs over *Gone with the Wind*, "Gone is the South that never was." What was the Atlanta that did used to be? Could you describe relations between Whites and Blacks when you were coming up in this town?

00:04:51:00

Maynard Jackson:

When I was growing up as a boy in Atlanta from the age of seven—we moved here from Dallas, Texas, where I was born, but Atlanta's my mother's native home—it was hardcore segregation, all the way. But we never bowed to it, it was against the family policy. We never walked in anybody's back door, ever. And I even dated a young lady one time who wanted to go to a movie at the Fox Theatre, which at that time had a buzzard's roost, as we, as we called it. So, Black people were expected to go around the side of this theatre, walk up all these steps. This magnificent theatre which we've preserved, and which it fell in my lap, by the way, to save as mayor of Atlanta because I refused to issue, to issue the demolition permit when there was great pressure on us by the new owners of that property to tear it down. They wanted to build another building there. So, we saved the Fox Theatre. But meanwhile, a flashback. So, back in the '50s, she wanted to go and see this movie, I asked where was it playing, and she said—asked her where it was playing, she said it was playing in the Fox Theatre. I said, I'm sorry, but we don't go to the Fox Theatre. So, we talked about it, she, Well, this is the only movie I really wanna see tonight. I said, But do you understand my policy? She said, Yes. I said, Well, I, I wanna try to accommodate you, but I can't go. She said, Well, I don't really understand that. I said, Fine, let's go. So, I took her to the theatre. I bought one ticket, gave it to her, told her I'd come back and pick her up when the movie was over. So, she got a little upset, but she went on and saw the movie, came out, I was there waiting. I took her home and never called her again. I've walked into shoe stores with my father and my grandfather to be fitted for shoes. We would sit down and then they would ask us to move to the back of the shoe store. And we'd explain, We're gonna spend our money, we'd sit anywhere we wanted to. They said, Well, you gotta go to the back. Said, I'm sorry, no, we don't have to go to the back. Our choice, to go to the back or leave, and we're leaving. The White power structure of Atlanta, like cities all over this country, but especially in the South in those days, '40s, '50s, and '60s, with an iron hand ran things. Atlanta was better than

most southern cities because we had an understanding White leadership in politics that helped to bring along the, the White business leadership. The business leaders of Atlanta always have loved Atlanta. It's a great asset. It's the most responsive and responsible business community in the country. But they were products of their day and they hadn't really had broadening experiences. But Ivan Allen, Jr., was there. Hartsfield himself, when he first became mayor of Atlanta back in the '40s was a member of the Ku Klux Klan, the man after whom our airport is named. But then he grew, he happened to grow more aware and broader. He grew broader and more open-minded on the race issue—incidentally, as Black voters began to register more. He was a vote counter. So, in those days, you had a trade-off. And I'll explain this political arrangement because it may give a real insight into Atlanta. The arrangement was that the White power structure would make its decisions politically and then send for the Black leadership. That pretty much was in the Atlanta Negro Voters' League, which was a forerunner to the Georgia Voters' League, which was founded by my grandfather John Wesley Dobbs, my mother's father, but on my father's recommendation. My father had been, was a minister but was also a politician and businessman. The Atlanta Negro Voters' League was headed by two people, Republican John Wesley Dobbs, my grandfather, and Democrat Austin T. Walden. They were so respected and so revered and so trusted, that being the key point, that when the Atlanta Negro Voters' League made a decision, and issued, issued its ticket at 12:01 a.m. on election day, ninety-nine percent of the Black voters voted as the Atlanta Negro Voters' League recommended. That organization no longer exists. They would go in response to the call downtown to meet with the White leadership. And here is the way it would go, as explained to me, my, by my grandfather. I was not there, of course. They'd walk in, they'd be seated and so forth, and exchange pleasantries, and the White leadership would say, We have decided to back Joe Blow for mayor and we want you all to help us out and support our candidate. The Black leadership then, with the spokespersons being Dobbs and, and Walden, would say, We hear you and we'll certainly be happy to give that consideration, but first, we need a high school. We need so-and-so streets paved. We need sewers on the west side of Atlanta. We need better schools, in the old fourth ward, or south side, or south Atlanta. They'd have to bargain for the things for which they already were paying taxes. But that's how we got Washington High School, Booker T. Washington High School, the first Black high school in the city of Atlanta in 1924. That's how we got most of the improvements in the community across time. So, we're talking about a southern city that had a special edge, in my opinion. So, that when many other southern cities put dogs and cattle prods, fire-hoses in the streets, Atlanta in the '60s went to the bargaining table. It's called the Atlanta style. The Black colleges here and the fact that we are an educational center, Black and White, are factors that have contributed to that. And the fact the we are a crossroads—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Maynard Jackson:

—with the second, very often the busiest, airport in the world.

00:11:24:00

Interviewer:

Excuse me, we ran out of film but we got, we got the Atlanta style.

Camera Crew Member #1:

That's a rollout on camera roll 4023.

Interviewer:

Ken?

[cut]

[camera roll #4024]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Camera roll 4024. Time code 1424.

00:11:37:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:11:43:00

Interviewer:

OK. Atlanta went through the '60s with a national reputation for dialogue between the races. When you became mayor, you sounded a theme of new partnerships for the city. What were you looking to change?

Maynard Jackson:

I, I wanted to move it from talk to action.

Interviewer:

Excuse me, could you begin that with, "I wanted to..."?

00:12:05:00

Maynard Jackson:

OK. When I became mayor, what I wanted to do was to move us from an era where we were doing more acting than just talking. You see, Atlanta is, in my opinion, truly ahead of every other major city in the country in race relations. But the problem with that is what James Baldwin warned us about, you know, havens are high-priced, and the price that a haven-dweller has exacted of him is to delude himself into believing that he's found a haven. So, we were kind of believing all of our headlines and our PR too much. We're the best but we weren't good enough, that's my point. So, we had to kind of begin to own up to our, our future. And if we're gonna lead the nation, fine, we had to match our rhetoric with our action. And as mayor, what I wanted to do was to lead us, not just Black people, but all people, Black and White, into an era where we truly could begin to point at progress, not just for a few people but systemic progress. Some may benefit more than others at first, but after a while, when the system begins to work, large numbers of people are benefited. And that was what I wanted to do. And we did so. But I have the scars, [laughs] I have the scars to prove that it was not easy.

00:13:45:00

Interviewer:

OK. When you became mayor, this was something new for Atlanta. How did you see yourself and what were the expectations on you from both Blacks and Whites that you faced when you took office?

00:14:06:00

Maynard Jackson:

***Being the first Black mayor is what you wish on your enemy, OK? And I say that with tongue in cheek. A great pride to be mayor of Atlanta, and every Black mayor who's been the first Black mayor of America, I'm sure has felt the same thing. But it truly is, is part hell. You first of all start with exaggerated Black expectations, that overnight, Valhalla will be found, heaven will come on earth, and it's all because the Black mayor's been elected. And things just don't work that way. The obligation that I felt was to try, with everything in my power, in every legal and ethical way that I could, to move things as quickly as possible in that direction.*** But meanwhile, having to explain to somebody who called me from Ludowici, Georgia, that no, I really was not their mayor. I'd be very pleased to help if they didn't mind my waiting a little while because we're getting four hundred and fifty phone calls a day. Right? Even from out of state. ***All of a sudden, I became the mayor of not just of Atlanta, but of, for Black people in Georgia and even some neighboring states.*** That was an extraordinary burden. But in the city of Atlanta alone, we had to deal with that tremendous expectation in the Black community. ***Now, equally important and equally***

*difficult was what we found in the White community—exaggerated anxiety. That anxiety was, Oh, my God, what are we gonna do? We got a Black mayor. What does this mean? Is this the end of Atlanta? We had just come through a runoff election, where my opponent ran a campaign that said Atlanta's too young to die.* They had TV shots that made Atlanta look like an abandoned Western mining town with tumbleweed blowing through the streets, literally spots on TV, Atlanta's too young to die. Now, he was castigated and condemned by everyone. Even the editorialists said, Wait a minute, you've gone too far. And so, you know, he began to back off. I think that today he regrets that, I think he received bad advice. But he actually had been elected mayor. He was my predecessor, Sam Massell, had been elected mayor with only sixteen percent of the White vote. He was White, he was the first Jewish mayor of Atlanta, and he's a good man. He did a lot of good things but he kinda got off on the side on that. But my point is, that, that that exacerbated the situation. So, that when I became mayor after that runoff campaign, there was great anxiety. Now, where it was reflected most? Strangely, in our newspapers. I've seen bad press. But for the first two years that I was mayor, the press was almost hysterical. And not until the then-editor of the Atlanta Constitution, Reg Murphy, left town two years into my first term as mayor did things begin to settle down. And a more objective, more dispassionate look by the newspapers occurred, as they, you know, reviewed our, our actions in the administration. We didn't expect anybody to say, Hey, we're on your side. We just wanted, we wanted fairness, even-handedness. And things began to, to sift out a little bit there. But it was an atmosphere also that caused me to make a serious misjudgment. [clears throat] *I looked at how the power structure members dealt with each other. If they disagreed, they'd say, you know, To hell with you and, you know, you're a so-and-so, and all this, but they would not walk away from the relationship. I said, That's fair enough. I can deal with that.* Because I wanted strongly, fervently wanted the business community to work hand-in-glove with me as we went through this transition. I didn't want to do it, in, in, in a confrontational way, that was not my wish. But my job was to do it, one way or the other. So, *my preference was to do it as a team. If we stumble, let's stumble together. If I made a mistake, fine, say I'm a, I'm a dummy. But don't walk away from the relationship. I was dead wrong. When times got hot, even some of the closest friends I had in the business community, in, in—I'm talking the White power structure now—said, Maynard, that was the dumbest thing I've ever seen, and goodbye.* [laughs] *So, I miscalculated.* But there were several key people. J. Paul Austin of Coca-Cola stuck with me and did not always agree with everything I did because we were making big changes. Changes that some people, honest-to-goodness leaders, I mean, in the, in the business community just did not understand.

00:19:39:00

Interviewer:

Excuse me, let me, I want to be able to focus you in on some of this, can we cut?

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK. Cut.

Interviewer:

And—

[cut]

00:19:45:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:19:51:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, can you give me a specific example of the hysteria that you mentioned?

00:19:56:00

Maynard Jackson:

Complete distrust of any motive that came out of City Hall. If we were pushing for affirmative action, it had to be because I wanted to get a crony a job. The reality is that we bent over backwards to put things the other way to establish credibility. I went from negotiated contracts, ninety percent, to about ninety percent bid contracts that took it out of our hands and almost guaranteed for the public scrutiny a more balanced approach to contracts. And another quick example is that even though I was for control of handguns, not rifles but handguns, and have been for a long time, when a secretary was shot in this city by an escaped mental patient from New Jersey who went in, in Atlanta and bought a handgun on the spot, bought ammunition on the spot, and walked up behind a former governor's secretary at high noon on a Friday in downtown Atlanta, blew her brains out, I was accused of being responsible for that because they were so concerned about the, the crime situation. Well, the fact is that our crime figures came down, we were number one in homicides in, in the nation before I became mayor. And of course, that dropped significantly. So, that's a quick example of, of how serious it really became, the hysteria. The last example, I think, was the straw that broke the camel's back. All of a sudden, they looked up at themselves, they, they were shocked. They said, Wait a minute, let's, let's settle down. You know, City Hall, City Hall is being run better than before, it's better managed. Let's take another look at this thing. And that's when things began to settle in to a more reasonable range of discussion.

00:21:42:00

Interviewer:



OK. Yeah.

Camera Crew Member #1:

[coughs]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Rollout.

00:21:47:00

Interviewer:

Just in time.

[cut]

[camera roll #4025]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Camera roll 4025. Time code 1425.

00:21:53:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:21:58:00

Interviewer:

Okey-doke. So, let's go into this notion of your being a transition mayor.

00:22:04:00

Maynard Jackson:

Well the obvious, of course, was I was the first Black mayor of Atlanta. In some ways, my predecessor, Sam Massell may have been a transition in that he was not of the normal mold for Atlanta's mayors. Except that I think pretty much of all Atlanta's mayors in modern

history, Hartsfield, Allen, Massell, myself, and Andy Young, all have had Atlanta's best interests at heart. But the interpretations are different now. It fell in my lot to be the first Black mayor and to kind of get really serious about building an even playing field, as the expression goes. *When I became mayor, zero-point-five percent of all the contracts in the city of Atlanta went to Afro-Americans. In a city which, at that time, was, fifty-fifty* and today is about seventy percent Black. There were no women department heads. This was not only a question of race, it was a question also of sexual discrimination and, you know, all the typical -isms. If there's one, normally there is a whole bunch of them and they were all there. We had to change dramatically how the appointments to jobs went, normal hiring practices in city government went, the contracting process. Not to reduce the quality, by the way, ever. We never, ever, ever set up a lower standard. And those who say, Well, affirmative action means you've got to lower the standard, that's a real insult, in my opinion, to African-Americans and other minority Americans. We never did it, didn't have to do it. We built the Atlanta Airport, biggest terminal building complex in the world, ahead of schedule and within budget, and simultaneously rewrote the books on affirmative action. Atlanta Airport alone accounted for eighty nine percent of all of the affirmative action in America, in all of America's airports, and the FAA told us that. We didn't know it. So, you don't have to sacrifice and we didn't. So, our transition, therefore, was not just a question of race and sex and equal opportunity for women and equal opportunity for minorities. It was also a question of proving the point that we could manage well, and we did. We put new management systems in, top to bottom, that we could have equal rights and equal opportunity and not sacrifice quality. That we could begin to live up to our advance billing as a city more than we did. I'm proud of Atlanta. And I'm proud of the fact that we are, I think, the best in the nation among the major cities in race relations. But the time had come for us to begin to put our money and our jobs where our mouths were. To the, to the credit of this city, as time went on in my service as mayor, a number of people really began, who were opposed to our, our policies, in affirmative action, for example, who felt that it was unfair, that it was being too pushy and so forth, who forgot all about the fact that I took eighteen months to negotiate with the banks and never held a press conference.

00:25:39:00

Interviewer:

Now, let me interrupt you on this because I'd like to break down all this.

Maynard Jackson:

OK.

Interviewer:

Get specific bits on it, OK? We're still rolling?

00:25:50:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yeah.

00:25:51:00

Interviewer:

So, let me begin by asking you to tell me about some specific reactions to your executive order on affirmative action.

00:26:02:00

Maynard Jackson:

I don't think you have enough film to go into that. Well, the, the reaction was immediate. It was not all White, it was Black and White. The surprise for me was the number of Black friends, well-meaning, who were frightened by the aggressiveness of this program and who cautioned me to slow down. That they were concerned there might be a reaction against the Black community. Well, our, our studies indicated to us there was, the Black community was in a position that for the majority of Black people things could not get any worse. In some ways, things were excellent, in other ways—or very good or getting better—different categories, but, and better than almost any other city in the country, I keep saying that because it was true. Atlanta was clearly head and shoulders above the rest of the na—above the rest of the nation. But not as good as we could be and not as good as we had to be. I had people to say, when I talked about affirmative action, and they were contracting with the city, professional firms or whatever, maybe a law firm, maybe a major corporation, I've got a whole file of, of reactions. You know, one of which was, Well, Maynard, *this was a, a major manager of a major White corporation who got very upset with me about the policy on affirmative action. And said, I don't see this to be necessary, we're gonna do what's right, you know, you can trust us and so forth. And I said, I have every confidence, but you know, I want to trust you, but I also want you to sign on the dotted line. Said, Well, look. I'm just not gonna go out and hire the first Negro I see. I said, I think that's a pretty sound personnel policy. I said, I wouldn't either.* [laughs] And I said, We're not talking about that. We're talking about a policy, an affirmative action plan. And I said, I want to work with you. You know, Well, I can't get it done in a month. I said, I've never given you a timetable. Well, who do you want us to hire? I said, You know my policy, I never, ever recommend the person. And my reason for that is because I never wanted them to be able to say, Well, Maynard's doing this to kind of get his buddies and his cronies into a job. So, I would never recommend anybody for a particular position. But when the first of the downtown banks responded to our initiatives after a while and came in and said, We want to, we want to adopt an affirmative action plan and we've spotted somebody in the bank we want to promote. It's gonna take us about four or five months. I said, That's fine, I've never said how long you have to do it. All I want is your word. They kept their word, this was First Georgia Bank. And they said, But what about for the board, you know, who do you recommend? I said, I don't do, I don't do that. Well, would you respond if we brought you three or four names? I

said, Sure, I'd be happy to. And sure enough they did and that's how Tom Corty was recommended to his first board. They asked me, What about these? I said, All excellent people. What about Tom Corty, Excellent man. Will do an excellent job. And, Who do you think is the best of these three? I said, Well I think that Tom Corty, a former banker and a businessman could probably do the best job for the bank and that's what we're talking about. We don't want to just get a Black person on who can't help you and therefore discourage you and your colleagues in the banking community from inviting other Black people to be on the board. So, we always were balancing, constantly the balancing act. And there were thousands of other examples, but it was never dull. [laughs]

00:30:04:00

Interviewer:

Yeah. Good, now what I'd like to do is give you a chance to [unintelligible] soda.

Maynard Jackson:

Thank you.

[cut]

[sound roll #409]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sound roll 409.

00:30:15:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:30:21:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, could you describe the war with the banks?

00:30:25:00

Maynard Jackson:

We had a situation where in Atlanta we had about six hundred million dollars of tax money being handled by the six downtown banks at that time. These are banks that from a civic point of view always show a great responsiveness and responsibility. They love Atlanta. Their leaders are the quintessential civic leaders of Atlanta. And in Atlanta, by the way, if you want to move to power, you're a newcomer, wanna move to power, you must come in and pay your civic dues. We're not talking about a, a bunch of folks who didn't care about this city. These are people who loved Atlanta. But they had no background in what to do about moving toward affirmative action and equal opportunity. You know, I'm saying that a lot now because I've got a plan for the future that's going to include working very closely as partners with the power structure to achieve more things, with an understanding now, that, that the, the common ground of discussion was not there before. We were talking from different perspectives, and the, the banks were handling all of this. There was not a single Black vice-president or above in any of the six downtown banks at that time. Now, we're talking about approximately 1975, '76 thereabout. And I was there from '74 to '82, so that was in the early part of, or mid, mid part of my first term. And of course, nobody Black on any of the boards of these downtown banks at that time. So, I went to them, I went and visited every CEO in his office and invited them to meet with me and they all did from time to time. I even made the mistake of inviting them all at one time in a meeting, I mean, this, nothing was said in that meeting. I forgot they were competitors. [laughs] And they didn't want to say very much in front of each other. But my point is for eighteen months, never held a press conference, and never attacked the banks. And zero was accomplished. I don't mean almost zero.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Maynard Jackson:

I mean, zero. For just the position of VP—

00:33:09:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, can you hold there? We just rolled out.

Maynard Jackson:

Yeah.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, that's a rollout on camera 4025.

[cut]

[camera roll #4046]

Camera Crew Member #1:

4026 camera roll. Sound roll continue 409.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:33:22:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Time code 1426.

00:33:32:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's begin right there.

00:33:34:00

Maynard Jackson:

Well, what I mean when I say zero was accomplished is that you take the VP position, vice president position in a bank. That's really not a, a high position, that's kind of middle management. There must have been maybe a hundred to a hundred twenty VPs among all the downtown banks at that time and not one person was Afro-American or so forth. So, I decided we had to do something. I had done the best I could and there was not a response there. So I gave a thirty-day notice that the banks that did not comply were gonna lose the accounts, the city accounts. Because we're talking about tax dollars, six hundred million dollars in tax money. And on day twenty-nine or thereabout, one of the downtown banks, the smallest of the downtown banks, came in and said they wanted to work things out, as I mentioned, that was First Georgia Bank. And on day thirty-one, we moved the smallest account we could find from uncooperative bank A, it was a five hundred million dollar, five hundred thousand dollar account, just a half million dollar account, moved that into First Georgia Bank and I think the message was heard. Now, I wanna make this very clear. It's never been my desire to have to do things that way. In fact, if anything, I would liked to have done them anyway other than that way. But, when you try to do things through negotiation and through paths of least resistance, when they're non-confrontational and they don't work, and you have been elected to use the power that you have, if you don't use the power, you're

violating your promises. I would be doing Atlanta a disservice to let things linger and continue as they had been. My obligation as the transition mayor was to move us from status quo into a better way and a better day. If in the process, I took a lot of heat, and I mean real heat, I have the scars to show you, you know, blood is still on the rug in the mayor's office, right? That's the job, it goes with the territory. And any mayor who's not prepared to pay that price ought not to be in that job.

Interviewer:

OK, cut. So—

[cut]

[slate]

00:36:10:00

Interviewer:

OK. I'd like a brief recap of the victory of that banking story.

00:36:17:00

Maynard Jackson:

[laughs] All right, a brief recap then of the results of the, of the banking issue. And, and I'm responding on the, on the point of trying to be specific in giving examples. This is only one of many, many examples. But the result today in Atlanta is that Atlanta probably is the only major American city where every traditional Atlanta downtown bank has integrated boards of directors, and where they all have Black vice-presidents and above to the extent, by the way, that I met a, a high-ranking senior VP, head of all commercial lending, at one of the major downtown banks for the day, and found out for the first time that he was Black. Well, that's fine. Because I don't wanna have to go around, you know, in the old days of television, you see somebody Black, you say, Hey, mama, mama, come look quick, you know, daddy look at this. And of course, now it's, it's, you know, we just kind of take it for granted. Well, that's fine. We wanna move to the day where, where being Black and being in positions of power and authority and service is not going to be a phenomenon so rare that we have to call the crowd to look, to take a look. And I'm proud that Atlanta, therefore, is in that position. But we paid a price to get there. But to the benefit of the city, the banks responded and made their changes for the better, and there are many people in those banks who helped to make that happen.

Interviewer:

OK, I'm going to interrupt you there.

Maynard Jackson:

All right.

00:37:42:00

Interviewer:

And, no, keep rolling, and I'd like us to move on to a description of what the expectations of this airport project were when you took office from the White community and what your agenda was.

00:37:54:00

Maynard Jackson:

Well, let's remember now, we're talking about building a big project. More than a half billion dollars. It would be the biggest project in the history of the city of Atlanta, biggest project in the history of the state of Georgia. The bond issue alone, I'm a bond lawyer now with Chapman and Cutler, and the bond issue alone, at that time, 305 million, was the first of several bond issues, was the biggest bond issue of any kind in the history of Georgia, and was the biggest bond issue for an airport in the history of the nation. OK? So we're talking about a huge project. And we're talking about doing it between active runways safely. This, therefore, was a challenge not only in, in affirmative action. It was a challenge to management. And we put together a seven person team, had other supporting actors and so forth, but I think it was the finest public management team ever assembled in this country. So I want to emphasize that as we moved toward affirmative action, we always saw that as an issue that had to be managed. And I think this is the key point. Affirmative action is not something that just happens when you sing songs and all of a sudden it jumps off the wall. That's not it. It is to be managed and those in charge must produce, they must have goals to meet. And they must be judged as managers by their productivity, their success. So we had to build an airport, we had to do it well, we had to do it within budget. We had to do it, within time, within the time allocation, and simultaneously, it had to be done fairly. Black people, other minorities, and women had to have an equal, not superior, but an equal opportunity to participate in the bidding, the contracting, the concessions, top to bottom of this airport. So, we had to manage that entire package and we did. The result was that when we announced how we were going to approach this from a contract compliance point of view, contract compliance meaning, oh, five, six, seven, eight different items, including, but not limited to, affirmative action. I would have thought the heavens were falling down. We were threatened with litigation, six, seven times a day. A lot of the litigation occurred. I was told that I was retarding the progress of Atlanta. Now, I'm the mayor who found an airport project that was eleven years old that nobody could do. They'd given up on it. They told me I couldn't do it. These are the, you know, the, the, the long-time bureaucrats of the city, dedicated Atlanta-loving people, but they had never sold encyclopedias as, as I had, and had never trained people how to sell, and that, had trained themselves in the positive attitude that is part of my life. I am a trained positive thinker. They told me, You can't build this in that spot. I said,



Why not? They said, Because Interstate Eighty-five runs right through where you would have the terminal be. I said, Fine, we'll move the Interstate, and they laughed at me. They said, That's fine, you know, this kind of Maynard, you know, rookie mayor and so forth, what does he know? Well, I didn't know a whole lot but I knew never to say never. And I knew that there's a way to do anything, and we did it too. Now, in the process, by the way, people pitched a fit about affirmative action. We got to the point where we were absolutely being stonewalled, almost across the board. Litigation, threats of more litigation, all kinds of political pressure, Black emissaries coming in to carry the message from, Whites who had an interest in this thing. And there were some Whites who wanted to do what was right, and I want to be sure that's understood. And there were some who simply didn't know what to make of this. You know, we have to understand, I don't agree with it, but our points of orientation were so different and they just did not understand what to do with this new way, this new administration. They didn't know how to adjust to it, most did, did not, most of the, in the White community in the White power structure. Now the White community itself is not monolithic. I had big support among the neighborhood movement in Atlanta because I, but, but—

00:42:57:00

Interviewer:

I'm, I'm gonna cut you right now because I wanna, I wanna refocus.

Maynard Jackson:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Stop down?

Interviewer:

We got, yeah, we got—

[cut]

[camera roll #4027]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Camera roll 4027, time code 1027. Continuation of sound 409.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:43:14:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:43:15:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, let's recall that specific moment, if you will, when you had to call a halt.

00:43:19:00

Maynard Jackson:

Well, there, it's really difficult for me to remember the exact thing that precipitated it. More it was an accumulation of things. we couldn't get the number of bidders we wanted on deals so that we would have a good cross-section for the benefit of the taxpayers. We were determined not to sacrifice anything in excellence, or anything else for the, the benefit of the program. I was confident we could do the program of affirmative action and manage this project well, better than ever had been done before. And we proved that. But there came a time when we saw that we weren't going to be able to proceed as we had thought we were to build that airport unless we were prepared to back up on our affirmative action commitment. Abandon it in part, as a matter of fact, and then move ahead and build the airport, and just kind of, you know, retrofit, which never has worked. So we said, OK, we won't build it until the situation is right. And I was asked in a news conference about that, is that in fact what I had decided. I said, Yes. But what about all this, you know, you're, you'll be accused of holding up progress. I mean there was a big to-do, it was front page stuff, it was hot stuff. I was attacked right and left. You know, we're the ones who got the project going after people said it couldn't happen. Eleven years of people talking about it, we made it happen, and we held it up for a year. But we were busy, I mean, I'm also part politician, right? [laughs] So, I didn't wanna come out of a year of delay with all this criticism and not have a better idea. So, we spent that year refining the project. We came out with a better idea that was seven million dollars cheaper and better designed and so forth. And then we went ahead, because by that time people had come to believe that I was truly crazy enough to do what I said, which was to let the project sit out there and weeds grow until people did what was right. Now, I don't want to be that way. What I want to be is mister nice guy. And I'm not a confrontationist by spirit. But again, where you try to work things out in a non-confrontational way and it does not work, where you move reasonably, you have fair rules and fair practices, and, and it gets you zero, then you've got to do everything that legally and ethically you can do to make the change occur, to put it behind you. Suffer the trauma and then build back from it and that's what we did. And today we're a much better city for it.

00:46:03:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now, I'd like to ask you to go back and, you had a phrase that we thought was pretty interesting, you were accused of going too far, too fast, and being too Black. Could you play that back for us, how, how that worked? What you, what they said, what you said.

00:46:19:00

Maynard Jackson:

[laughs] Well, again, remember the environment, right? We're going from a city where zero-point-five percent of the contracts went to Black people. You had, only, only one Black department head ever had been hired and that was not very much within the relative, size of the government and so forth. And we had nowhere to go but up, I mean, truly had nowhere to go but up. Our interest was in running a good government. Strong management, fiscal responsible, all of these things, right? To run a good government, it had to be done well and fairly. So, affirmative action, therefore, was not just a, a dream or kind of a nice side thing. Not throwing a, you know, throwing a, a, a plum to the Black community. It was a necessity. I've had people to tell me, Well, Maynard, you were just too Black. You went, you tried, you were too pushy. So, I would remind them that, you know, I had tried to negotiate this and I had tried to negotiate that. Not one or two days, but I mean, months and months, even a year and a half in one case, and got nowhere. And it was only then that we had to, to, to be more aggressive, to take, to do what was necessary, whatever it was. If anything I had begun to feel that I was not pushing hard enough. And then I had someone to tell me, I had a friend, a White friend who said that to me one day, he said, Maynard, you, you know, you were too Black. I said, I don't know what you mean. I said, We're a better city today because we had good policies that were sound. He said, No, he said, You know, you wouldn't even appoint anybody White. I said, That's really interesting, I said, I had four chief administrative officers. Three of them I appointed were White. He said, Oh, yeah, well, I, I kind of forgot about that, but—Well, you know, we asked you to appoint a White police chief. Which was true, by the way, I had a group come to me, and, of White leaders, and to say, We'd like you to appoint a White police chief. And I asked him, Did they have any other criteria in mind? Because I wasn't gonna appoint anybody Black just because they were Black. And I was not going to appoint anybody White, just because they were White. But back to this fellow, this friend of mine, he said, Well, you know, you wouldn't appoint a White police chief. I said, The first police chief I appointed was White. Well, no, it wasn't. I said, Yes, it was. I said, It was Clint Chafin. He said, Oh, oh, yeah, that's right. But that didn't count, because of this and that. So, what I've had to deal with is this, the transition attitude of good people, frankly not even knowing how to react to these initiatives, with my trying to stay on even keel. Trying not to get mad, because I feel like I'm being put upon, that I'm being unfairly attacked and I was. Trying to be patient with the transition, with people who are good-hearted people, that love Atlanta, but just did not understand the necessity and the desirability of the kind of

transition that I had to lead. We were change agents for the better, and we were determined integration would be a working reality and not just a word.

Interviewer:

Great. Cut. Good.

[cut]

[slate]

00:49:49:00

Interviewer:

You were a labor lawyer early in your career and you supported the sanitation workers when you were vice-mayor. Why could you not support their demands when you were mayor?

00:49:59:00

Maynard Jackson:

Well, I did support, as mayor I supported the demands of th...of sanitation workers. I didn't support their strike when it got to the point that the strike was an illegal strike and we suffered the possibility of garbage piling up in the city and the city becoming unsanitary. The quick background is I'm a pro-labor person, always have been. When I left the National Labor Relations Board, and eventually set up my private practice as vice-mayor, I actually represented a few unions. The National Alliance of Postal Federal Employees being one. AFSCME was a supporter of mine, they contributed to my campaign, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees. I support AFSCME. I still do. But they had bad local leadership. They called a rump strike with no local vote on issues that already had been settled. They'd wanted a raise, I told them we didn't have the money. We offered to pay for their accountant to find the money. We said, if you find it, you can get it. They went and looked for it, couldn't find it, and still said, It's there somewhere so we're gonna strike, and they called a strike on the spot. My obligation is to, as mayor, always must be to run the city in the very best way that I can, to be fair to everybody I possibly can be fair to. We went around the barn, we already had moved on better uniforms, and pay wage. Everything they asked for was fair, by the way. I said that publicly. What they've asked for is needed. We just didn't have the dough. And my plan was to lay it out in a multi-year thing and then bring them current for where they would be even under their program. They wouldn't go for that. Struck the city. And we offered, we urged people to come back to work, they wouldn't come back to work. We told them we had to get this thing squared away, we had to pick up the garbage, keep Atlanta clean. There's even another thing, by the way. Inability to manage is presumed to be a defect of Black elected officials. The polls indicate that most White Americans think that Black people in public office can't manage anyhow. To have a city with garbage piling up all over the place would hurt, as a matter of fact, the

movement in Black politics, not just me personally. So, after giving every kind of warning in the world, when they wouldn't return, then we had to go on and replace many of the strikers. Many were later rehired, by the way. But the bottom line was when I ran for re-election, I still carried ninety six percent of the Black vote, and my White vote went from twenty-five to thirty-one percent. People understood that I was backed into a corner by an untenable, ill-timed, ill-planned, illegal strike, that I think many of the employees even understood was one that never should have been called. But I always had to be guided by what was best for Atlanta as a whole. And I was.

00:53:00:00

Interviewer:

OK. Cut.

[wild sound]

Maynard Jackson:

Oh, vividly.

Interviewer:

Good.

Maynard Jackson:

I was only one of several. [laughs]

[cut]

[camera roll #4028]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Camera roll 4028, sound 409. Time code 1428.

00:53:10:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:53:18:00

Interviewer:

OK. A brief recap of that city council meeting, if you will.

00:53:23:00

Maynard Jackson:

Well, there were hundreds of striking City of Atlanta employees who were singing "We Shall Overcome," and signs, of course, that were castigating me and condemning me. That was a very rough time for me, that was a very sad decision that I made and had to make, but it was the right decision. I didn't like having this, having to do that. For me to fire any employee, but incidentally a thousand employees, and incidentally ninety-eight percent of them being Black was something I had to pray over and I took no joy in doing it. But I also knew what my job was as mayor. And my job was to manage the city and—

00:54:20:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, we've got that and there's also a boom up there. Can we get some noise control over there?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Stop please. Cut.

[cut]

00:54:27:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:54:35:00

Interviewer:

OK, Bankhead Courts?

00:54:38:00

Maynard Jackson:

I wanted to move into public housing personally to set an example to those who ran the Atlanta Housing Authority who were on that board. And I said I, I would not appoint anybody to the board unless they did the same thing. Urged those already on the board to do the same thing, and one said yes, and the others, You must be crazy. I spent three days, and I thought I knew public housing, I had grown up around public housing, so, was not in it, but around it. Brand new experience. Never heard rats crawling in walls like that before in my life. And that's when I made up my mind we're gonna do something about it. We haven't done enough yet, but we're going to.

Interviewer:

OK. Cut. Great.

[cut]

[slate]

00:55:25:00

Interviewer:

OK. A few words on Emma Darnell in terms of why you were advised not to hire her.

00:55:32:00

Maynard Jackson:

Well, this was an interesting thing. I, I have had, and have great respect for Emma Darnell. But not a single adviser, male or female, agreed that I should hire her for that particular position. I went ahead anyhow, and as it turns out in retrospect, they may have been more right than I was. And when time came for us to part ways, I asked her would she resign, and she declined to do so. I gave her more time to reconsider that, and she still said, No, and she wanted to appeal it, and fight the case under our rules at that time before the Atlanta City Council, like a trial. So, that's what we did. She lost, we won. She left the administration. But to her credit, there were several things that happened because of her, but, to the positive, but the reality is that I think that I would have done myself and her and the administration a better service if I had asked her to serve in a different position from the very beginning. And, but that's, that's twenty-twenty hindsight. She's doing an excellent job for the city of Atlanta, in EOA today and I wish her well and I'm very much in her corner.

00:56:49:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's cut.

[cut]

[sound roll #410]

Camera Crew Member #1:

[unintelligible]

00:56:52:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK. Mark it.

[slate]

00:56:59:00

Interviewer:

OK. How do you understand the challenge that faces Black elected officials?

00:57:05:00

Maynard Jackson:

This is, an America where the most perfect revolutionary act in this democracy is voting. Black elected officials have all of the challenges that White elected officials have, with a major overlay in addition. That overlay is to prove, we shouldn't have to do this, it's not fair that we're asked to do this, it's not fair that we're expected to do this, but the reality is that we've got to prove ourselves more than others. Not just to White, the White community, but to the Black community as well. There, there is a, an undercurrent in, in Black America that fears that back elected officials will embarrass the Black community. One of the things that I've sworn I would never do is to do anything that would embarrass my city. Anybody, Black or White, but especially the Black community. And do you know that I hear that more than almost any single thing. When I talk to the church ladies, and the deacons and so forth around, they, they appreciate that. So, the challenge therefore is to manage well, to be a good public manager. But more than that, a leader who has a vision for the future and who has the guts to make that happen, but also the skill to try to build a consensus and to bring that group along. And there is no excuse that we ought to use just because we're Black. We shouldn't hide behind that, shouldn't use that as a rationalization, should not try to say, Well, look, you know, you got to make special allowances for me because I'm Black, and all of this. I'm sorry, but Black taxpayers want the same things that White taxpayers want and you'd better be able to deliver. And you've got to be able to stand and deliver. And when we talk about



eyes on the prize, we've got to be sure that we are electing people to office who first of all know what prize they're after. What is the prize? The prize is equal opportunity. It is good management. It is a better way and a better day. It is a change from the status quo. And the prize also is to serve well and to serve fairly, to serve honestly, but to make a difference. And if the only thing one is doing is, is holding office, say, Hi, look at me, I'm a Black elected official, and then not taking care of business. If they're not using the power they have to change things for the better, they are a waste. The prize is a better way and a better day for all people, especially those who are oppressed.

Interviewer:

OK. That's a cut.

[cut]

[slate]

01:00:19:00

Interviewer:

OK.

01:00:22:00

Maynard Jackson:

Well, in the one-year delay, the approximately one-year delay, while we were being stonewalled, we finally developed a better plan, less expensive, better designed. People began to rally to it, and that's when I knew the project was going to work. Not only in terms of affirmative action. People were beginning to say, We'll, we'll go along with it, we don't like it, but yes, OK, we can work wi—live with that. But also that we were going to have a great airport, well-designed, built ahead of schedule, within budget, and simultaneously, we were going to do what was necessary to do to be a fair government. That's what I knew.

01:00:59:00

Interviewer:

OK. And now I'd like to ask you if you feel that winning an election, winning the election of mayor, wasn't that the prize?

01:01:11:00

Maynard Jackson:

It's interesting. I got the nationally prestigious award with a significant monetary award in 1974 for the greatest contribution by an American under thirty-five years of age, and that was being elected. OK? But, I beat out the Watergate reporters by one vote, I'm told. But the reality is no. Politics is not an end, it's a means to an end. It is a means of changing public policy and public policy controls almost every aspect of our lives. And we are the change agents. It is through us the people speak, We want this, we want that, this kind of life, this kind of quality of life. And we must deliver. Honestly, fairly to all people, but we must deliver.

01:02:08:00

Interviewer:

OK. Thank you.

Maynard Jackson:

Thank you.

Interviewer:

I have the camera about to roll out. Wanna cut?

[cut]

[end of interview]

01:02:15:00

Copyright 2021 Washington University Libraries