

Interview with **William O'Neal**

Date: April 13, 1989

Interviewers: Terry Rockefeller and Louis Massiah

Camera Rolls: 3088-3093

Sound Rolls: 341-342

Team: C

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

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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 #3088]

[sound roll #341]

00:00:13:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

Camera crew member #2:

Camera roll three thousand, eight-eight, sound roll three hundred forty-one.

[slate]

00:00:18:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Bill, can you describe to me the circumstances under which you began working for the FBI? How old you were and so on.

00:00:28:00

William O'Neal:

Yeah. It was in probably 1967. I was with a guy one night, a friend of mine, and we were drinking beer, and we decided to go joy riding. And we jumped in a car and stole it. And we were driving around the city of Chicago for, well, 45 minutes and decided to leave the state to go visit a relative in another state. And we had an accident out of state. And prior to the accident, we'd walked in a pool hall and was shooting pool. And at this, at the door, you had to register your phone number and address, and we wrote down our names and phone numbers then went in and shot a game of pool, and then came out and had an accident. And we fled the accident on, on foot, messed around in the city a while and then caught a bus back to Chicago. And, oh, about three, four months later, I got a call from this FBI agent by the name of Roy Mitchell, and he told me that he knew what I had done. And we talked. We went around a, a couple of times, and he said something like, Well, you know, ain't no, there's no need in you trying to bullshit me. I know you did it, but it's no big thing. He said, I'm sure we can work it out. And I think a few, few months passed before I heard from him again. And one day I got a call, and he told me that it was payback time. He said that, I want you to go and see if you can join the Black Panther Party. And if you can, give me a call.

00:02:11:00

Interviewer #1:

Can I just interrupt?

William O'Neal:

Yeah.

00:02:13:00

Interviewer #1:

And have you start that part about joining the Panther Party, but tell me again how old you were and the [unintelligible] the FBI agent.

00:02:21:00

William O'Neal:

Mm-hmm. I think I was about nineteen. Eighteen, nineteen years old. And the FBI agent's name was Roy Mitchell. And he called me up on the phone, and, and, and recanted the crime pretty much. I tried to deny it, but he had the evidence. And he said basically it was no problem and that we could work it out, that I wasn't in any serious problems that he couldn't deal with. And a few months, three months, three months maybe passed before he asked me to join the Black Panther Party.

00:03:00:00

Interviewer #1:

Now, what did Mitchell ask you to do?

William O'Neal:

Well, he didn't give me any s—specific instructions at that point. He just said—

Interviewer #1:

Can you, instead of he—

00:03:12:00

William O'Neal:

Roy said basically, Just go and see if you can join the Black Panther Party. I understand they're, they're recruiting Panther members. So, why don't you go down to the office and see if you can join. And if you get in, give me a call back. So, the next day [clears throat] I got on the bus and went down to the office of the Black Panther Party. It was located on Western and Madison. And walked in the office, about three or four Panthers in the office. And I think I was about the fifth member in the Chicago chapter to join. They had this big office building on this—and up on the second floor, they had about five or six offices and very little personnel to run things, so positions were, it was easy to get a position. So, they appointed me as, as the security captain. That was the first time I met Fred Hampton, and he was the chairman, the spokesman for the party. And Bobby Rush was the minister of defense. He was Huey P. Newton's deputy, which was the top man in, in the state of Illinois at that time.

00:04:25:00

Interviewer #1:

What'd you think about the Panthers at that time? What, what, what framework did you understand them in? What had you thought about the civil rights movement? And how did they fit into your understanding of politics and, and—

00:04:38:00

William O'Neal:

I [laughs] I grew up in a middle-class neighborhood, and I had very little idea of, of—I was apolitical. The Panthers I had heard of only from a recent article, I think, that had occurred in the paper. Huey P. Newton had just been in a shootout with the, with the Oakland Police Department, and one of them had died. And there was a lot of press about that. But prior to the articles I had read about Huey P. Newton, I knew nothing of the Black Panther Party. In fact the day I joined, I was pretty sure it was just another gang unlike, not unlike the, the

Blackstone Rangers, or, or the Cobras, or something. I had no idea of anything about their politics.

00:05:25:00

Interviewer #1:

What did you begin to learn as you, as you did join, and, and what kind of information were you, were you able to give back to Mitchell?

00:05:35:00

William O'Neal:

Well, almost immediately after I joined the Panthers, probably within ten days, I began to realize that the Black Panther Party was a little bit more sophisticated than a gang. The orientation process, the attention they gave to, to the political climate around the country, had me going, there for a while. And at one point—

00:06:12:00

Interviewer #1:

Can you give me specifics?

William O'Neal:

Well—

Interviewer #1:

And also if you can, if you can look at me.

00:06:17:00

William O'Neal:

Yeah, OK. They had—I think the first set of reference books I saw inside the Black Panther Party was *The Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, which I had began to associate with communism. And it wasn't too long thereafter that I started seeing books like the manifesto, *The Communist Manifesto* of Karl Marx, and then the Selected Works, *Collected Works of Lenin*. And every night after the office would close, the Panthers would sit down, and, and they would study these books. We'd go through political orientation. We would read certain paragraphs, and then Fred Hampton and Rush would explain to us, the new membership, basically what it meant and what was happening. And they drew parallels to what was going on in the past revolutions in the various countries like for instance China or Russia. And they

was drawing parallels to what was going on in the current political scene within the United States. So, they were drawing associations between the revolution in, in, in the communist countries as I understood it as to what was happening in the United States. And, and so I understood them to be a little bit more sophisticated than a gang. I expected that there would be weapons, and we would be out there doing turf battles with the, the local gang members. But they, they weren't about that at all. They were into the political scene, the, the war in Vietnam, Richard Nixon, and specifically freeing Huey. You know, that was a thing.

00:08:02:00

Interviewer #1:

Now, you would, I assume, report this information back to Mitchell. Did he have a, a response? Did he react to this?

00:08:09:00

William O'Neal:

Well, initially Agent Mitchell requested very little information from me. It was a one-way street for probably about six months. I think he was, in every meeting that I had with him, he listened more than he asked questions. He would, a typically meeting would be, OK, what's it, what are they doing today? And then I would just tell him what was going on around the office and general conversations. He said, OK, and what are you doing? And then I'd tell him what I was doing, and then he'd make mental notes. Sometimes he took shorthand notes. And, and then we'd depart. He said, OK, just keep me informed. And so we had a very loose relationship at that point because the Panthers weren't too active [pause] militarily. OK? They were political organizing at that point. They were recruiting, at that point. The Panthers were trying to, well, they, they had speaking engagements at the, at the different colleges and so forth. So we were, we were in the organizing process. And it was very little criminal activity as I could determine that was going on. Very little to report to the FBI in my mind. You know? Because I felt like since the FBI was a, a, a, an investigative body investigating federal crimes that crimes were what they were looking at. And so—

00:09:39:00

Interviewer #1:

Tell me a little bit about how you felt about working for the FBI. What motivated you, and what you thought you, what end you thought you were serving.

00:09:45:00

William O'Neal:

Well, in my community, the policemen were, I mean, it was the quickest way to gain respect. I mean, I think I grew up wanting to be a policeman, admiring and respecting policeman. Although I always thought it was outside of my reach. My neighborhood was not unlike most people that grew up in Chicago. Most young people. We were very mischievous and did a lot of juvenile type petty criminal type things. But stealing a car and all of a sudden having the FBI, having a case with the FBI, the thought of be—having, really going to jail got my attention. And so when he asked me to join the Black Panther Party, and he used terms, he never used the word informant. He always said, You're working for me. And I associated him as the FBI. So, all of a sudden I was working for the FBI, which in my mind at that point I associated with being an FBI agent, so I felt good about it. I felt like I was working undercover for the FBI doing something good for the finest police organization in America. And so I was [pause] pretty proud.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

00:11:04:00

Camera crew member #1:

Change mags?

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, great.

Camera crew member #2:

Changing mags. Thirty eighty-nine.

[cut]

[camera roll #3089]

00:11:08:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it, please.

Camera crew member #2:

Camera roll number three thousand eight-nine.

[slate]

00:11:15:00

Interviewer #1:

Did you ever think or did Mitchell ever try to convince you that the Black Panthers were a threat to national security? How do you understand what, what the FBI's interest was in them, in, in watching them?

00:11:28:00

William O'Neal:

Well, the, I think Mitchell, the relationship between I and Mitchell concentrated on the local activities. We talked very, very little about what was going on nationally early on in the game. Later on when Bobby Seale and the guys would come to town, it took on a national scope. But right then and there, we were concentrated on the local chapter. And later on, I understood that his thinking in that regard, he wanted me to build up some credibility within the Black Panther Party, so he gave me a lot of room, a lot of leash at that point. He let me become a Panther before I became an FBI informant. I mean, I just didn't go right in, rifling drawers. He, he directed me into the Panthers. And then when I got there, he backed off. And he let them work on me a while. And slowly it worked. I became a Black Panther in a way. I forgot the, the, the scope of me being there. In fact, I didn't really know why I was there. I just knew I was to report. But I really didn't have anything to report early on in the game, so I concentrated mainly on Panther duties. I lived the life of a Panther. I li—

00:12:52:00

Interviewer #1:

Tell me about that. How, how did you, how, how did you, what, what was the work that you did, and how did you rise up through the, the ranks of the party?

00:13:01:00

William O'Neal:

Well, mainly from, from day one, we had very little personnel and a lot of spots to fill. There were a lot of activity, a lot of things to do. And so naming positions at that point and filling those positions were really the leaderships' responsibility at that point. And because of my knowledge of electronics and, you know, I was just a handyman, basically, around the office. And we had this office building that they feel, felt like wasn't too secure. I started working right away to secure the building. And in that regard, I fell right into the security position. And it got more sophisticated as donations started, started to flow. As the membership increased as a result of speaking engagements on the school campuses and so forth, my

responsibilities doubled. And so I, I was given a staff of security people. And then I just advanced from that point on.

00:14:06:00

Interviewer #1:

What, what were the major developments during that, that year of the Panther Party that you saw? Was it the programs? Was it the alliances that the party was building? What were, what was the Panther agenda as you came to understand it?

00:14:23:00

William O'Neal:

To free Huey basically was the agenda of the Black Panther Party all along. Let it be no mistake. Huey P. Newton was locked down. The Black Panther Party was Huey P. Newton, and Huey P. Newton was the Black Panther Party. And no matter how powerful or strong our membership got in, in the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party, no matter how many speaking engagements Hampton had, or how many donations we had, or how many papers, there was always a national office out there to remind us that we were subservient to the national office. That we were just a chapter, and we weren't the Illinois Black Panther Party. We was the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party. And their goals at that point was to free their leader, who was locked down in Alameda County Jail facing the death penalty for killing a, a police officer. The party recognized that, at that point that they need liaisons. They needed alliances with various groups in order to survive basically in the climate in Chicago. So, they embraced the various political issues that was of the day. They got involved in all types of causes, mainly to fortify their position and to free their leader, Huey P. Newton. And he was effectively running the Black Panther Party from inside of the jails. Most of our political direction was mandated, it came out through his lawyers and was passed on nationally through the chapters. It was "Huey Speaks".

00:16:06:00

Interviewer #1:

Can we stop for just a sec?

Camera crew member #1:

Yes.

Camera crew member #2:

Stopping down.

[cut]

00:16:08:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:16:11:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Can you tell me about how things changed as the, as, as—

00:16:16:00

William O'Neal:

Well, I'd say from February 1969, the activities within the party was high speed. We were in our bloom. We had about 500 members. We were selling probably about 25,000 newspapers in the city of Chicago every week. Of the Panther newspaper that is. We had various members of our party, of the Black Panther Party, going to the colleges all over the state, speaking engagements. Donations were coming in to the tune of about fifteen-hundred, two thousand dollars a day. But at the same time, the Chicago police had stepped up their activities also. A lot of our, a lot of the members were being arrested on petty charges. So, the money we were bringing in on the one hand in donations, money that came through the mail anonymously, blank checks and money orders, was going right out in bail money. So, it was, it was intense. And in that regard, the Black Panther Party was everywhere and doing everything. We had 500 members, and everybody was aggressive. And it was hard for me to report on all of the activities that were occurring. I could only concentrate on what my little group was doing. I was, as security captain, I was in what was called a defense cadre. It was technically under Bobby Rush's command because he was the Deputy Minister of Defense. And then during that year, we considered, we were in a state of war. Our leader was locked down. The police was attacking our offices all over the country. They was trying to break us financially through bail. And so the minister of defense takes over in a situation like that. Fred Hampton was in charge mainly with the speaking engagements, public relations, reaching the people, recruiting, and things of that nature. He was the chief spokesman. He was the one that the cameras saw all the time. But Bobby Rush and our group was the operations. We were activities at that point. It was our job to defend the offices against the police, to get members out of jail, to discipline the members, to kind of, you know, maintain the police control of the organization. To deal with informants and so forth.

00:18:33:00

Interviewer #1:

Now, as the party was growing though, what was, what was Mitchell starting to ask you about, or, or how was your relationship with Mitchell changing? [unintelligible]

00:18:41:00

William O'Neal:

Well, Mitchell was part of a squad in my opinion of about five or ten agents, and each one of them had their little, they had, had their little activities within the Black Panther Party. Mitchell's questions were defined mainly to my area. We ne—he never asked me how many newspapers the, that someone else was selling, or how's, who got the Kellogg's for the breakfast for children program, or who's gonna open up the medical center. He wasn't concerned with that. He was concerned with my activities in the Panthers, which at that point was exclusively security issues. We were buying weapons at that point. We weren't, we didn't have any type of working relationship with the largest street gang at that time, which was the Blackstone Rangers. They had about two thousand members and were well armed. And at some point, a meeting was arranged. We met with Jeff Fort of the Blackstone Rangers. And at that meeting, we were in a Catholic Church, I remember, that night. We were setting up, and Jeff Ford told Fred Hampton there, there is not gonna be any Black Panthers in the city of Chicago. You guys either join the Blackstone Rangers, or get out of the city. And Hampton came away from that meeting feeling like we were going to eventually have to do battle with these guys. There was no compromise. They didn't, they couldn't associate they, the Blackstone Rangers couldn't associate our purpose politically with their gang turf thing. So, we were gonna have to deal with them. So, the word went out to me to basically start buying weapons. We also knew that the state's attorney had declared war on us, and pretty soon we were gonna face a, a raid in one of our offices. And the mentality at that time was that we know it's coming. Our job is to set an example for the people. We, we, we must be ready. And so we started fortifying the offices, and buying guns, and training our soldiers, the security people.

00:20:56:00

Interviewer #1:

I want to talk now about the events—

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible] one minute.

Interviewer #1:

Oh, all right. Then let's just wrap it up.

Camera crew member #1:

Stop.

Interviewer:

Yes, stop down.

Camera crew member #2:

Stop down?

Camera crew member #1:

Yes.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

If you could—

William O'Neal:

The whole thing—

Interviewer:

—instead of the whole story about—

William O'Neal:

You wanna know—right now, you're focused on why—

Interviewer:

Just—

William O'Neal:

—I went to—the first

Interviewer #1:

First deal.

William O'Neal:

First connection, OK.

Interviewer #1:

Yeah. You had stolen the car, and he, he called you back and told you.

William O'Neal:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

He could get you off the hook if—

William O'Neal:

OK.

[cut]

00:21:21:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

William O'Neal:

Well, he didn't say that. But—

00:21:28:00

Interviewer #1:

Tell me how he recruited—one minute.

William O'Neal:

OK. Am I ready now?

Interviewer #1:

Yeah.

00:21:32:00

William O'Neal:

Well, simply I stole a car and took it across the state line. The FBI had a case on me. They could either prosecute me and put me in jail or decline to prosecute because I assisted them in one of their investigations. I think I understood that. So, the day he called and asked me to join the Black Panther Party, I understood what my role was to be, and that's what I did. Is that good enough?

00:21:58:00

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, except you didn't say Mitchell. Can you try that one more time?

William O'Neal:

Mitchell. OK.

Interviewer #1:

Brief like that.

00:22:04:00

William O'Neal:

OK, it's simple. I stole a car and went across the state line, which violated federal law. Mitchell, agent from the FBI, had a case on me. He had a choice of either prosecuting me and sending me to jail or declining to prosecute as a result of me aiding him in another case. And I decided to take the latter—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

William O'Neal:

—when he asked me to join the Black Panther Party, I did so. And I understood what my role was to be.

00:22:33:00

Interviewer #1:

We didn't quite catch that, I think. But make—

Camera crew member #1:

That's a roll.

Interviewer #1:

We can do it again.

William O'Neal:

Well, we can do it again.

[cut]

[camera roll #3090]

00:22:37:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:22:39:00

Interviewer #1:

Tell me about a typical meeting and tell me again that Mitchell was an FBI agent 'cause—

00:22:39:00

William O'Neal:

Well, the typical meeting between my FBI contact, Mitchell, would be downtown Chicago at eleven, twelve noon at, down in the basement of, at some bar. Some dark bar. And I would meet him at the bar. He'd already get, he would be there when I'd gotten there. And he'd have a drink, and I'd have a drink. And we'd sit there and, and talk for fifteen or twenty minutes. And it was very casual. I mean, it was like I'd come in, and he'd said, Oh, what you up to? And then, and then I'd say, Well, I'm going down to Champaign on a speaking engagement

with Fred. And I'm taking such and such with me. And, and we're carrying guns, and we're driving this car, and, like—I'd just rattle it off. Ten or fifteen minutes, I'd tell him everything I knew, and he didn't, he, he didn't have to say very much because when I joined the Black Panther Party, most of the information that I was giving him at that time was new information to him. So, as I grew inside of the pa—party and beginning, and began to learn things, he grew also. So, he knew the members better than I did. We'd talk about the, the girlfriends, and who was, you know, pregnant, and who had a venereal disease, you know. And this was just casual conversation between he and I. He wasn't always writing. What he put in his files, I still don't have the benefit of. But I know after a while, he and I became friends. And we talked in casual conversation about what I was doing in the Black Panther Party. Well, the whole nature of that relationship changed right around November, maybe November 13 when two police officers were killed by a Black Panther member named Jake Winters on the south side of Chicago. That night, as I understand, the, the gun battle, Jake Winters straddled one of the officers who were wounded in the shootout, and performed a coup de grace, a mercy killing. He straddled the officer after the officer was, after the officer was down, and, and put a shotgun to his head, and put him out of his misery. Or at least that's the way the newspaper described it. And I think the whole city, I think the Black Panthers took the rap for that one when they really didn't deserve it because Jake Winters was out there on his own. He wasn't out there on any official member, mission for the Black Panther Party. He was out there on his own, and he got into a altercation with a guy. And the guy called the police, and the police came. And the shootout broke out, and two police officers were killed, and Jake Winters were killed. Well, the Panthers took the heat because Jake Winters was a Black Panther. And past that point, I noticed maybe a couple of days after this officer were killed, Mitchell, Mitchell had this, this grim, solemn atmosphere about himself. And I could tell he was looking for specific, he wanted specific, criminal violations. He wanted something that he could move on, and I think he may have implied or even expressed that at one or two points. He, he expressed his anger over what had happened, how, I mean, the total disregard for life. And, I mean, he, it was the first time I ever saw him express his, a personal opinion about what he thought the Black Panthers were doing.

00:26:11:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, I want to get you focused now. It's November 1969. Can you describe to me the kind of information you were giving Mitchell about, about what was going on?

00:26:25:00

William O'Neal:

Well, he started, *Mitchell became more specific during that time. He wanted to know the locations of weapons caches. He wanted to know if we had explosives. He needed, he needed to know who was staying at what locations, who spent the night where. His information didn't change so much as he requested more detail. And I knew why. The, the shootout on the south side had pretty much laid the foundation within the party, within the*

Black Panthers. We knew that the police would react some type of way. We could just feel the stepped up surveillance. We could feel the pressure all the way around, and we knew something bad was going to happen. And I think we were all prepared for it. During that time, Fred was conducting quite a few speaking engagements, but even his attitude had changed somewhat within the Black Panther Party. He, he was becoming less, he was becoming more reluctant to, to speaking engagements, to making those outward appearances. He became more reserved, more protective of his self. He very seldom traveled anywhere by his self. And he began taking five and six bodyguards with him. And so I, he felt it also. Also he felt like he was going to prison. He was pretty sure that the robbery conviction was gonna take him out of the game, so he started preparing other members to take his role, pretty much.

00:28:23:00

Interviewer #1:

There's a floor plan of the apartment on Monroe Street, and there are FBI memos that I've seen. They don't have your name on it. But the implication has always been that some of the information came from you on reports about weapons being at Monroe Street or not. Did you give that information to Mitchell? And if so, did you describe to him—

00:28:42:00

William O'Neal:

Well, I routinely supplied whatever floor plans or diagrams I could to the FBI. I, that started in June, 1969. I mean, they had a floor plan and keys to the Black Panther headquarters. The specific apartment on Monroe, I supplied that floor plan. Perhaps not the one you saw, but I do remember meeting with Mitchell at, at one point and, and drawing up a, a diagram of the apartment. The one I have seen in, in, in court that was a little bit more fine tuned than the one that I, you know, drew.

00:29:24:00

Interviewer #1:

Describe to me the meeting where, where you remember giving information to, to Mitchell.

00:29:29:00

William O'Neal:

Well, it was, the, the meeting was not unlike the other meetings we'd had. It was always at the same location. It was always during the daytime. And it was routine. I, here again, in my mind, I knew that a raid was being planned. In my mind, I knew it. I knew also from the type of information that it would be probably the, a top raid from, from the, meaning the leader, on one of the leader's apartments. I also knew that the most vulnerable spot was, was

Hampton's house because it was the one that had all the weapons in it. It was the one with the, with the, with the weapons. Very few of the other apartments had the kind of weapons he had at that apartment. So, when he asked me for the diagram, it didn't surprise me. I knew the raid was gonna be planned. I felt like at, at that point what they wanted to do was catch him with weapons and seal his conviction. If he'd have been caught with the weapons out on appeal, he would have went straight to jail. And it, I don't, I can't recall it being expressed. I can't recall any specific conversations I've had with Mitchell about the raid. But we had such a unity of minds so to speak. Our efforts were basically one. I understood what was going on. He didn't have to tell me. He described to me going to the funeral of the two police officers that got killed, and I knew he was, I knew he was hurt by that. And I knew he was gonna do what he could to help the police department do something about it.

00:31:25:00

Interviewer #1:

The night of December—I'm sorry. Do we need to stop for a second?

Camera crew member #1:

Yes. Stop down.

[cut]

[sound roll #342]

[slate]

00:31:35:00

Interviewer #1:

How were you paid, and how much were you paid?

00:31:35:00

William O'Neal:

Generally I was paid, paid in cash, and normal amounts would have ranged from three to five-hundred dollars depending on my needs. If I requested a specific amount, I knew that I could get it. But the payments were very infrequent. I mean, Mitchell determined, Agent Mitchell determined early on in the game that spending money was the quickest way to blow your cover. Also I was living in the Panther environment. I was living in a Panther house, which they called a crib. I was eating with them, and sleeping with them, and I was with them 24 hours a day, so I had very little need for money. So, I was always assured that my money was being held in trust and that I could draw from it, draw down on it anytime I got

ready, any time I had a legitimate need that wouldn't compromise my security. I supposed at any point if I needed a thousand dollars or two thousand dollars from the FBI, I couldn't have gotten it.

00:32:33:00

Interviewer #1:

How often did you meet with Mitchell?

00:32:35:00

William O'Neal:

Depending on my travel schedule. And later on within the Black Panther Party, I was traveling around a lot as a bodyguard to Hampton and so forth. And everywhere he went, I went. So, the meetings became infrequent as the activities picked up. Normally once a week. In the fall of 1969, it had gotten down to about once a week. And past that point, it was just telephonic contact.

00:33:04:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Can we cut?

Camera crew member #1:

Yes.

Camera crew member #2:

That's a roll out?

Interviewer #1:

Yep.

Camera crew member #1:

Yes.

[cut]

[camera roll #3091]

00:33:08:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:33:09:00

Interviewer #1:

Walk me through the events of the evening of December the 3rd. What you did, where you were.

00:33:18:00

William O'Neal:

December 3rd. It was cold that day. It was really a slow day. We were at the office. Hampton was there. Rush was there. The general staff was there. There wasn't too much activity going on streetwise because the weather was so cold. It was a melancholy kind of day. It just came and went. Got down to the evening. We all decided to walk the block from the office to Hampton's house and eat dinner. The women were cooking dinner, a big dinner, a big, I think we had chili and a big pot of spaghetti. And most of us that had labored at the office was looking forward to just going over there and eating dinner, and reading, and just being together. It was just a slow day. It was the last day we, it would be, you know, it was the last type of day where we'd think that was anything was gonna happen. It was just too quiet. Nothing was happening. Totally off guard.

00:34:23:00

Interviewer #1:

There are conflicting autopsy reports that Fred Hampton may or may not have been drugged. There are stories about whether or not you brought Fred Hampton food or drink. Do you have any information about whether he was drugged?

00:34:43:00

William O'Neal:

Fred Hampton drugged? I've never known Fred—I knew him for about sixteen months. I had been with him in a lot of different situations. We've been in hotels together. We've been out he and I, alone in the car. I've never known Fred to, to take drugs. And to take it a step

further, Fred would not tolerate anyone even smoking marijuana around him. And I don't think any of us in the hierarchy of the, of the Black Panther Party would dare get drunk or drink. So, alcohols and drugs were a no-no as far as the rumors that he was drugged that night. Unless he was on some type of medication, I think it was just rhetoric. I think it was fabricated. As far as the insinuation that myself or someone else in the house would have drugged Frank, Fred Hamp—Fred Hampton, I don't buy it. There was just no way. Fred was the type of person that you didn't have to drug anyway. Fred was always tired. He could get in a car, and we couldn't ride two blocks without him dozing off. He just, he was a high energy person that ran on very little fuel. And wherever he sat down, he was well rested. I've never, I've never believed that. I mean—

00:36:12:00

Interviewer #1:

In the days prior to December 3rd, had you given Mitchell specific information about weapons that were at the Monroe Street apartment?

00:36:19:00

William O'Neal:

Well, I can recall we had a couple of conversations, but where I told him basically what was in various apartments. And, and yeah, the apartment on Monroe was not unlike the office and so forth. He had a, a running knowledge pretty much of where the weapons were, what weapons were there, and so forth. I can recall probably around the second or third verifying that certain weapons were still as previous, where previously reported. Yeah, I, I can recall having a conversation or two about weapons.

00:36:57:00

Interviewer #1:

How did you learn about the police raid on the Monroe Street apartment?

00:37:02:00

William O'Neal:

Well, the following day, I went directly to the office, and the office was empty. Unusually empty. It was one girl sitting behind the desk, and she was on the phone. And there was just no people there. And I walked in, and I guess it was about, oh, ten o'clock in the morning. And I walked in, and I was waiting on her to get off the phone to ask, you know, what was up. And I saw the *Sun-Times*, a copy of the *Sun-Times* laying there, and it had his picture on there, and it had, Panther Leader Slain on it. And, boy, I felt bad. I felt just so, I mean—***and I remember walking out of the office, and, and looking through a little clearing over on the***

ne—the next block, which was right in front of the Monroe Street address and seeing a lot of police cars over there. And at that time, Bobby Rush came to the office. He had just come from over there or maybe the coroner's office. In any case, we walked back over there, and we both were speechless. We just walked through the house and, and saw where, what had taken place and where he died. And it was, it was shocking. That was when—

00:38:26:00

Interviewer #1:

[unintelligible] for what happened?

00:38:27:00

William O'Neal:

Well, you know, that was, I think, I think it was that morning that I began to feel that I felt really, I mean, everything that I had done flashed before me. I began to, I began to put, put it all together, pretty much. And I couldn't believe it. I mean, it was just shocking. And that, that he had died.

00:38:57:00

Interviewer #1:

What did you begin to put together?

00:38:57:00

William O'Neal:

The information. The, the, the, the information leading up to the raid. The, the attitudes and the, the whole thing. I mean, you just felt it in the wind. You knew that something bad was gonna, gonna happen. I felt like it would be a raid. I knew it would be a raid. I mean, two police officers had got killed. I knew it would be a raid, but I didn't feel like anyone would get killed. Especially not Fred. You know? So, yeah, I was shocked. I felt a little—

00:39:30

Interviewer #1:

Did you have remorse about what you had done?

00:39:32:00

William O'Neal:

I didn't feel like I had done anything. I didn't walk in there with guns. I didn't shoot him. The FBI didn't do it. I felt somewhat like I was betrayed. I felt like if anyone should have known there was going to be a raid that morning, I should have known also. I felt like I could have been caught in that raid. I was there that night, and I felt like if I would have laid down, I probably would have been a victim. So, I felt betrayed. I felt like, I felt like I was expendable. I felt like, like perhaps I was on the wrong side. Yeah. Yeah, I had my misgivings. I'm not gonna, I, no, I'm not gonna sit here now and take the responsibility for the raid. You know? I'm not gonna do that. I didn't pull the trigger. I didn't issue the warrant. I didn't put the guns in the apartment. So, I'm not gonna take the responsibility for that. But I do feel like I was betrayed. I felt like I should have known the raid was coming down. I felt like it was probably excessive. Yeah, I felt like it was a surgical strike. You know? And I was real angry for quite a few days. Quite a few days. I refused to have any contact with Roy Mitchell at that point. But I think he pretty much understood, too. We got together and had a few drinks, and he didn't take any responsibility for it either. He said basically he didn't know it was going to occur, which at that point was hard for me to believe. I just began to understand basically how serious and deadly the game we had all been playing for sixteen months. The reality of what we were doing just came to bear on us that morning. I think, I think the membership was, was automatically decreased by three hundred members that, that never showed up again when that happened. I think that all of the, all of our enemies, all of the Black Panther Party's enemies came out of the woodwork to capitalize on the situation. Bobby Rush was angry for quite a few days about all of the national leaders that showed up to lend support to the Black Panthers who wouldn't sit down and have a conference with them early in the game. All of those people that showed up at Fred Hampton's funeral and looked over his coffin didn't give him ten minutes of their time when he was alive.

00:42:37:00

Camera crew member #1:

Stop down.

[cut]

[camera roll #3092]

00:42:38:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:42:42:00

William O'Neal:

My recruitment by the FBI was very efficient, very simple really. I had stole a car and went joy riding over the state limit. And they had a potential case against me, and I was looking for an opportunity to work it off. And a couple of months later, that opportunity came when FBI Agent Roy Mitchell asked me to go down to the local office of the Black Panther Party and try to gain membership. I did so, and became a member of the Black Panther Party.

00:43:19:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Were you aware specifically through Mitchell of a program called COINTELPRO through the counterintelligence program?

00:43:28:00

William O'Neal:

At the time, no, I had no idea of any national program out to get the Panthers. I had no idea. In retrospect, I can determine, I have determined from the type of information that I probably contributed greatly to it.

00:43:47:00

Interviewer #1:

You, you told the story before, and I'd just like to have you repeat it about Mitchell telling you that they had other agents giving information and how you, how that made, you know, you know, you know how you were being checked out.

00:43:57:00

William O'Neal:

Well, I think early on in the game, he let me know that the information, most of the information that I was supplying him was information he had already or had been developed by his squad already. He kind of indicated that the information I was supplying was being cross referenced with other informants. So, I always felt like it was best to tell the truth in talking to him because he had his own methods. There was very little information that I gave him that he seemed surprised of. OK? I just assume the FBI is not the FBI for nothing. You know?

00:44:41:00

Interviewer #1:

Once again, I want to ask you about your feelings when you learned about the raid, Fred Hampton's death, or walking into the apartment with Bobby Rush.

William O'Neal:

I can't do it again. I, I just can't.

Interviewer #1:

OK.

00:44:55:00

William O'Neal:

I just, it won't, won't gel.

00:44:56:00

Interviewer #1:

Cut.

Camera crew member #1:

Let's cut.

[cut]

00:44:59:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:45:02:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, I have something for you. You went to the office that morning, and you saw the headline. And then so—it hit you. What hit you?

00:45:11:00

William O'Neal:

Well, it, it didn't really hit me then. It, it hit me after I walked into that house. It was cold, and it, there was blood everywhere. And there was holes in the wall. *And, and then I was, you know, I just began to realize that the information that I had supplied leading up to that moment had facilitated that raid. I knew that indirectly I had contributed, and I felt it. And I felt bad about it. And then I got mad. You know, I had, and then I had to conceal those feelings, which made it worse. I couldn't, I couldn't say anything. I just had to continue to play the role.* And I think it was at that point that I lost, I lost something. I lost something, I mean, everything that I thought we were doing to fight crime had a different message after that. You know, it was, it was a blow. That's the best I can do with that one.

00:46:23:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Cut.

Camera crew member #1:

Cut.

[cut]

00:46:28:00

Interviewer #2:

—talk about that.

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:46:30:00

Interviewer #2:

Did you ever think about the movement, the civil rights movement as part of what the Panthers was doing, did you ever talk about that?

00:46:41:00

William O'Neal:

Yes, I did. But it came later for me. The movement came later. The—well, you got to understand I was looking, I was inside of the Black Panther Party looking out at the movement. Is there something in my nose?

00:47:01:00

Interviewer #2:

No, no, look at me. Look right there.

William O'Neal:

Oh.

Interviewer #2:

[inaudible]

00:47:06:00

William O'Neal:

Stop the camera a, a minute please.

00:47:09:00

Interviewer #2:

OK.

[cut]

00:47:10:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:47:12:00

William O'Neal:

Well, I always understood the movement from Martin Luther King's angle. In my view, he was the movement. The Panthers, their perspective was as Black revolutionaries, Black nationalists. They really didn't want this government. They wanted to overthrow this government. They wanted to embarrass this government. They wanted to punch holes in the system. They wanted to investigate and illustrate its shortcomings. That was their purpose. They, they were a vanguard. At one point, the, the party members embraced the, Huey P. Newton's writings. It was a theory of revolutionary suicide. They felt like their job was to get out there and basically die to set an example. They were sacrificial lambs. OK? For the people. That was their, their, their position. It was a, a phase. They were, they were not really in the mainstream civil rights movement in my opinion.

00:48:20:00

Interviewer #2:

Tell me what you thought of Fred Hampton as a human being.

00:48:25:00

William O'Neal:

I thought Fred Hampton was pretty idealistic. He was pretty dedicated to the Black struggle. I felt like he gave a lot. He gave his life. And out of the sixteen months that I knew him, I don't have anything bad to say about him. I, I'm sorry that, that he died like he did. He was in my opinion, he was murdered by the Chicago Police Department. And I feel bad about that. I felt like he was a person that died for what he believed in. Had he lived today, he probably would be a politician. A successful politician.

00:49:08:00

Interviewer #2:

You said that he thought he might die after he got out of prison.

00:49:13:00

William O'Neal:

No, I, I think he felt after he got out of prison like he was a target unfairly. I think he felt like he was getting, he was going to jail for five years, and, and nobody else was. And all he had done was basically gave speaking engagements. So, I think he felt used. I think there was always a friction, a little bit of jealousy between the price that the local chapters were paying and the splendor and the notoriety that the national leaders were getting such as Eldridge Cleaver, and Huey Newton, and those guys. We felt like we were paying, the Panthers felt

like they were paying a heavy, heavy price to be Panthers. And I think at one point, Fred felt like he was a focal point of a national agency to get him, and they were going to get him one way or the other. And he felt pretty much taken out of the game with five years. I think he was resigned, to, to going to prison. He was resigned to not being a Panther anymore. I—

00:49:13:00

Interviewer #2:

Let me ask you about the Chicago Police and the FBI. Did you distinguish between the two?

00:50:23:00

William O'Neal:

I do. I definitely do.

00:50:26:00

Interviewer #2:

Do what?

00:50:27:00

William O'Neal:

I definitely draw a distinction between the FBI and the Chicago Police. I have known quite a few FBI agents, and I have worked with them for the last five or six years. And they have never asked me to compromise my morals or my principles. Contrary to public belief, I haven't been instructed to commit crimes or provoke crimes, or conduct burglaries, or inject drugs in people, or to commit murder. I haven't been. If anything, my association with the FBI made me a better person.

00:51:08:00

Interviewer #2:

How did they treat you when you, when you were relaxing with Mitchell? Were there ever any other agents there? Did you, were you treated as a peer?

00:51:16:00

William O'Neal:

Not only was I treated, I had been to Mitchell's home. I have held his child in my hands, in my arms when he was one years old. I have been through the offices of the FBI wearing sneakers and a dirty t-shirt with Mitchell. I have rode around with him in his car during that time. Three or four months after I became a Panther. I have eaten at his table, at his dinner table. We had a very, at one point, he was a role model for me when I needed one. I mean, we had very few role models back then. We had Malcolm X. We had Martin Luther King. We had Muhammad Ali. And I had an FBI agent.

00:52:10:00

Interviewer #2:

Do you want to be a policeman?

00:52:11:00

William O'Neal:

Not anymore, no, not a policeman. No. I have never wanted to be a policeman. The FBI I think are a much more, much more efficient, much more affective organization than the policemen, yeah. Chicago Police are one thing. The FBI is another. Yeah, I see a distinction.

00:52:35:00

Interviewer #2:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

—stop and type this down—

[cut]

00:52:40:00

Interviewer #2:

Do you think there was a loss when he was killed?

William O'Neal:

Was there a loss?

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

Camera crew member #2:

Just a second. OK.

00:52:48:00

William O'Neal:

Was there a loss? Yes, I think that the slaying of Fred Hampton was definitely a loss to, to Black people in general. He would have made a fine, he was a fine leader then, and he would have made a better leader. He was only maturing. And, I mean, he was 22 years old. And *we tried to develop negative information to discredit him, just like we did everybody else. We meaning the FBI. I tried to come up with signs of him doing drugs, or, or something and never could. He was clean. He was dedicated. I've had private conversations with him. We got along pretty well.* For about seven months—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

William O'Neal:

—I was his personal bodyguard. He wouldn't go anywhere without me. And I know Fred Hampton better than anybody to tell you the truth. He was dedicated. That's, that's all I can say to it.

00:53:45:00

Camera crew member #2:

It's a rollout?

Camera crew member #1:

Yes.

Interviewer #2:

OK.

[cut]

[camera roll #3093]

00:53:47:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:53:51:00

Interviewer #2:

OK. Do you think of yourself as a hero for what you did?

00:53:51:00

William O'Neal:

Oh, absolutely not. I'm not a hero, no. I don't think of myself as a hero for what I've done. But at the same time, I don't feel ashamed. It was, it was my role during that time. There were a lot of different roles, a lot of different positions. There were actually a lot of Blacks fighting in Vietnam that felt like they should have been there. Was proud to be there to fight for the country. I felt like there was a war here in the streets, and I was recruited early. And I joined sides early, and I didn't straddle the fence. I gave it all, all I could as long as I could. And then when I felt like I couldn't give anymore, I left. I excused myself. Do I feel like I betrayed someone? Absolutely not. I had no allegiance to the Panthers. I didn't even know what they were about when I joined. I joined at the instigation of the FBI, who I had a scant knowledge of. So, no, I don't feel like I betrayed anybody. I don't feel like I'm a hero. Am I proud? I'm proud of some of the things that I, that we, that I had done. There were certain things that we'd done that prevented a lot of violence. There could have been more shootouts between the gang members. Every now and then, a suspected informant inside the Black Panther Party would be unearthed or detected, and we passed on information to get that informant out of the game. And so we avoided some violence there. I—

00:55:45:00

Interviewer #2:

How do you think members of the Black community at that period would have perceived what you were doing?

00:55:53:00

William O'Neal:

Well, those members of the Black Panther Party, those members of the community that, that weren't informants, I'm sure that they wouldn't understand. But there was quite a few informants back then. Quite a few. [pause] I mean, what am I supposed to do, feel guilty right now about it? I didn't feel guilty then. I was hurt because Fred Hampton died. I was hurt because a lot of other people died [pause] in the Panthers. There were a lot of Panthers that died in Chicago that got killed needlessly and senselessly. ***At this point, I question the whole purpose of the Black Panther Party.*** It got a lot of people hurt. And did, did very little else. I mean, if you associate the Black Panther Party with the civil rights movement, that's, that's a mistake. In my, ***in my thinking, they were necessary. It was a shock treatment for White America to see Black men running around with guns just like Black men had saw White men running around with guns. Yeah, that was a shock treatment. It was good in that extent. But it got a lot of Black people hurt.***

00:57:10:00

Interviewer #2:

Do you regret the personal costs? Was there personal costs for you in that period in terms of relationships with a woman or friends?

00:57:20:00

William O'Neal:

No, because the party was, the, the Black Panthers were communistic. Basically everything we had was within the party. When I joined the Black Panther Party, I developed friendships. I developed new friends within the party. I was closely aligned with what they were doing. It was only certain individuals that were of any interest to the FBI. The FBI never asked me about the breakfast for children program. They never asked me about the free medical program. They never said anything other than ridicule the Black Panther newspaper. They never questioned their right to have firearms. They were only interested in Panthers that were doing other things. Panthers aligned to SDS and the Weathermen back then. Panthers that were smuggling guns into the city. Every now and then, I'd pick up a locker full of composition C4, and the FBI was interested in tracking that, that, that, that type of weapon, you know, to find out where it was destined to. You know, they were only interested in basically the communications we had with other militant divisions, planning groups outside of the, outside of the city. They never asked me about free clothes for children and stuff like that, no.

00:58:49:00

Interviewer #2:

Did you ever develop any hard evidence the Panthers were involved in a coalition with SDS and the Weathermen?

00:58:55:00

William O'Neal:

Well, the Panthers had a public coalition with SDS, but the, under, under the, the Weather Underground was a different ballgame. But then I knew Bernardine Dohrn and those people before they became Weathermen, when they was just SDS-ers. And I knew the relationships we had then, and the relationships were pretty tight. There was always—no, there was no hard proof, but who needed proof. I didn't need it. The FBI didn't need it.

00:59:35:00

Interviewer #2:

What would you tell your son about what you did?

00:59:38:00

William O'Neal:

I think I'll let your documentary put a cap on that story. I don't know. I don't know what I'd tell him other than [pause] I was part of the struggle. That's the bottom line. [pause] I wasn't one of those armchair revolutionaries, one of those people that want to sit back now and judge the actions or inactions of people when they sit back on the sideline and did nothing. At least I had a point of view. I was dedicated. And then I had the courage to get out there and put it on the line. And I did. I think I'll let hi—let history speak for me.

01:00:26:00

Interviewer #2:

OK.

Camera crew member #2:

Stopping down.

[cut]

[wild sound]

01:00:31:00

William O'Neal:

Oh, yeah.

01:00:33:00

Interviewer #2:

It was only when you walked back into it—

[picture resumes]

William O’Neal:

Yeah.

Interviewer #2:

Were the, were the Chicago police—

[slate]

01:00:39:00

Interviewer #2:

—gonna, gonna raid you?

01:00:41:00

William O’Neal:

No. No. No, we wasn’t worried about the Chicago Police raiding us. And like I said, we had guns. They knew we had guns. We’d had guns ever since we were there in the office, and nobody expected Chicago Police just to blatantly come up in there. And sure, if we were to shoot out the window or something, or somebody run up in there, and they’re in hard pursuit. Yeah. But we didn’t expect the police department to come at four o’clock in the morning and raid the apartment. I mean, they knew guns were there. Hampton was out on appeal. I think they were suspecting that he would probably try to flee the state or something, so they had cars on him constantly. I mean, he was tailed constantly. But like I said, it was a game. It was a game we were playing. The leather jackets, the beret, the, the military format, the, the guns. It was all to impress the people really. We never intended to take on the police department to overthrow the government. The Black Panthers weren’t all about that. It was rhetoric. It was, like I said, it was shock treatment for White America.

01:01:55:00

Interviewer #2:

When did you know it was getting serious?

01:01:56:00

William O'Neal:

Well, I knew that it was kinda serious, well, the game turned into reality when I saw him, when I saw Fred Hampton's body. Yeah. When I walked through that house and saw those bullet holes and that blood, laying on his mattress. Yeah, it was, it, it hit home then. I knew we were, we were in the real world and that there were people out there that was going to kill us. That was the bottom line. It was real. But before that time, it was, you know, we used to walk around packed. I mean, I, I carried two guns every day for seven, eight months. We used to walk in the University of Illinois circle campus, man, on a speaking engagement at two o'clock—

[rollout on sound roll]

[cut]

[end of interview]

01:03:37:00

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