Interview with **Floyd McKissick**
Date: Oct. 21, 1988
Interviewer: Jim DeVinney
Camera Rolls: 1022-1025
Sound Rolls: 114
Team: A

Interview gathered as part of ***Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s***. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

Preferred Citation
Interview with Floyd McKissick, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on Oct. 21, 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 #1001]
[sound roll #114]

[slate]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it please.

[slate]

00:00:18:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jim.

00:00:20:00

Interviewer:

Mr. McKissick, in 1966, you became the national director of CORE, succeeding James Farmer, and I wonder if—first of all, did that change of leadership suggest any deeper philosophic changes going on in CORE at that time?

00:00:32:00

Floyd McKissick:

Not necessarily so. Farmer and I had been associated and in the movement together, and during the times that he was—part of the time, when he was the National Director, I was serving as Chairman of the Board. I had been elected as Chairman of the Board in '63, so we were both working hand in hand and together the whole time. I think that the times had made some changes necessary to occur. Just events had occurred, and we were both aware the organization was in a state of change, a normal state of change, as, as events occurred.

00:01:18:00

Interviewer:

What were some of those changes?

00:01:20:00

Floyd McKissick:

I think that we had been previously, CORE, had previously been, had been with a great church background. We had been in the northern area and not so much in the South, and it had been with interracial teams working together. In the South, you didn't have a whole lot of White people that wanted to join with you and work with you, so quite often CORE chapters had very few White people in the South as compared to the North. Except in, except in towns where you had universities, say like in Durham, where I was situated, we had a number of Whites because we had the University of North Carolina and we had Duke University, so, therefore, where those two CORE chapters were, you had a pretty good group of—the group was fairly well mixed.

00:02:18:00

Interviewer:

Wasn't there a sort of a philosophic change happening within CORE at that time, that maybe Whites weren't quite as appropriate to be doing some of the organizing work, and wasn't there a little bit of a change happening there? I'm asking because it's gonna come up again in, a little bit later.

00:02:31:00

Floyd McKissick:

No, I think that you might be referring to some isolated incidents, but certainly not a matter of policy, because certainly that we went to—we were in Mississippi in the confederated organizations, which was then called COFO in Mississippi, and we had as many White students with CORE as Black students.

00:02:55:00

Interviewer:

OK let's just stop down and make sure all the systems are working—

00:02:57:00

Camera crew member #1:

Keep going. It's fine.

00:02:58:00

Interviewer:

Everything's fine? OK. Describe for me how you heard about the shooting of James Meredith and what did you do then?

00:03:05:00

Floyd McKissick:

I was called from Memphis, Tennessee by a friend, an associate, of James Meredith, and was told that he had been shot. We were in our office then, I think, at 38 Park Row. I returned the call to find out how Meredith was, he was in the hospital. Meredith and I had had a relationship, we knew each other from the NAACP of many years in the past. I had, we had both been, had been the first to go to the university. I was first to go to University of North Carolina, he was the first to go to Mississippi, except his situation was far more publicized than, than mine. So through, from the NAACP days, we had known each other, and after he came to New York, we were associated with each other.

00:04:03:00

Interviewer:

OK, let me move you forward though, what did you do when you heard he had been shot? I'm—want to get you down into Mississippi.

00:04:10:00

Floyd McKissick:

Well I agreed to come to Mississippi immediately, he requested that I come to Mississippi. I went to Mississippi and, of course, upon arrival, we immediately went to the hospital, it was the Congress of Racial Equality that issued the first call, that we should go down there and join Meredith and continue to march.

00:04:30:00

Interviewer:

Why was that necessary? Continue to march?

00:04:34:00

Floyd McKissick:

Our feeling was that what Meredith had done, exemplified the kind of, of, of thing that would be happening in the future. The right to walk on the streets, by yourself, whether you were an individualist, a solo man, or whatever, you had a right to walk free and unmolested on the streets of Mississippi, carrying a banner or sign, not only in Mississippi, Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina. We felt that it was certainly an infringement upon his rights. One, there was another feeling, and that second feeling was that the time was here and now to—for Black people to quit being afraid. I was determined, as an individual, that there should not be dual standards of behavior, one standard for Whites and one standard for Blacks. If it meant, and we had known before, that in nonviolent situations, we are the victims of violence. Right now, we must go down to Mississippi and we must let people know that they cannot back up now. We now have the Congress on the hill studying the Civil Rights Act, they can't back up. They must continue to demand, and even at the risk of being hurt, they would certainly have to keep on moving, and that was the, the thrust that we had, as far as CORE was concerned.

00:06:09:00

Interviewer:

OK, I know a number of leaders from different Civil Rights groups came together in the Lorraine Motel to discuss plans for the march, there seemed to be some issues that needed be resolved and some disagreement, can you describe what that was all about?

00:06:22:00

Floyd McKissick:

Well, yes. First of all, they were trying, we were trying to get up a manifesto, a purpose for the march. And growing out of the meeting, each organization had some aims and objectives

to put forth. Some wanted to narrow the focus of the march, some organizations did not want to march. Some felt that the march, marching was complete with the Selma march. Some felt that we should go on with the march, some felt that we should now broaden our scope for the march. The, these various issues, led to an agreement, which was called the manifesto, which would be used as a purpose for stating our purpose and objectives of the march, which later led to some confusion among the Civil Rights organizations.

00:07:30:00

Interviewer:

I, I, I know that a couple of organizations withdrew, I'm trying to understand what the reasons were that they withdrew. NAACP, Urban League, I know pulled out.

00:07:40:00

Floyd McKissick:

Well the NAACP, well, there were a number of groups and individuals there, the NAACP, that was Medger Evers, Medger Evers' brother, that is, Charles Evers. And individuals, Whitney Young, represented the Urban League, was there. Likewise, Stokely Carmichael of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, I think he had just recently been elected. He—

00:08:08:00

Interviewer:

Yeah, I, I know who was in the room, but I know that there was disagreement, I'm trying to get at what they disagreed about.

00:08:13:00

Floyd McKissick:

They disagreed about aims and objectives of the march. And my point, and of course, the CORE point, was that we should march, and that we should ask far, far more than was asked than the march on Washington. Now, as for one, I always felt that the March on Washington, we never asked for enough, and our demands and the threat of the movement had stopped short, and here was the time where our ideas should be broadened. I felt that one of the major problems that Black people had, even if we had a Civil Rights bill and a Civil Rights bill was then being had, and some had passed. Even then, if you didn't have the right to, if you didn't have the money to register at a Holiday Inn, what good was a right to live at a Holiday Inn, if you didn't have the money? Basically, the entire American system was an economic system, politics was totally economics and economics was totally politics. You cannot divide them. And I think the great French writer who came over here and all the others have simply said, we are an economic system, and until we could participate in the system, and that would be,

in an, from an economic standpoint, all the way. That would— then we would be accomplishing something. Second point of it, one, psychologically, Blacks had been told to be subservient, to fear, to do what White people said, and this would have to be attacked. The March on Washington did not deal with this. We were trying to reach too much common ground and not enough substantive ground that would carry us into the areas of, the areas where the masses of Black people needed to be elevated. And one of the things that the marches would do, was to unify, to bring about a broader political base, to get people to register and vote, and likewise, to demand a Freedom Bill of Rights, which was, at that time, being advocated by the A. Phillip Randolph Institute, by Bayard Rustin.

00:10:34:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's stop down there and we'll check where we are on this roll.

[camera roll #1023]
[sound roll #110]

00:10:37:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it please. Ten twenty-three, camera roll.

00:10:44:00

Interviewer:

OK, explain to me why this was the march of common people.

00:10:48:00

Floyd McKissick:

The Meredith march differed from all other marches, for following reasons. One, most of the other marches had been in ur—, in, in, in urban settings. This march was in a rural setting, this march differed because you had— it was not as organized as the other marches. It was not the logistics of the marches, was came into play on the basis of the common people. There were many who joined the march who did not believe in nonviolence, there were those that believed in, in nonviolence, but there were far more people that believed in, in, in violence than nonviolence on the march, and it became a policy statement, a policy issue, as to what kind of statement we would issue. And, of course, our statement was that we believed in nonviolence, but the people that were now joining the marches, were people of all phrase [sic] of life. Little people, big people, not just organized clergymen, not just organized racial groups, not just organized pacifist, but here people were coming in from all over the

S—, all over the area, to join the march. Therefore, it was my position that all of the people should march, all of the people had fears, and these people would have to march and let people know they would no longer be afraid. That was the central point of the march, and at the same time, that we would build up a political base by getting these people to register and vote. Now, you remember, when the march got to Batesville, when the march got to Batesville, here we had created, a number of people had created an influence among the people. We had no food. We had the organizations that had not given us the monies before, but somehow or another, we got food. When we got to the churches, food was there, people knew we were coming. It was sort of like the, sort of like Christ feeding the multitude on this march. The reality of it was that we sent word out of the direction that we were coming, and somehow or another, when we got there, we had what we needed, even though we had not the money that the other people had. It was a really rinky-dink march that was organized by the common people, and not, basically, the civil rights leaders, because most— I was the only leader who was on the march every single day, and most of the other leaders moved in and moved out. But CORE and its logistics, it was handled by Herb Callender, SCLC had other representatives there, but we were the ones who really had to move through Mississippi with the will and the heart of the people, and they came out and brought us food, clothing, and everything else that was needed to make the trip possible.

00:13:57:00

Interviewer:

I know it was an entire family affair for the McKissicks, I wonder if you can just tell me what it was like taking your entire family along that march.

00:14:03:00

Floyd McKissick:

Well after I got on the march, I called home, and I think it was my, one— my son and my daughter asked to come down, and then they talked and then a few minutes later they said they all wanted to come down, and I said, Well, come on. Of course it was not the first time that all of my family had marched with me, we had marched together in North Carolina and even my mother, my, my wife was pregnant at the time that she marched on many of the demonstrations earlier, so it was nothing new for any of us in our family. My oldest daughter, Joycelyn, had been arrested far more times than I have, in marches and demonstrations. But they all came and we had a lot of fun, marching, meeting people, singing, going into people's home, following the blues trends, and making our notes, and coming back over the blues route. We knew Route 51 firsthand, and we came all the way down, so they came all the way down up until we got to Jackson on that Sunday.

00:15:07:00

Interviewer:

Now there was some violence along the way and you didn't have the federal government there to protect you as they had been on the Selma march, for instance. Weren't you worried about your family?

00:15:14:00

Floyd McKissick:

Well, you always worry about your family, but yet, these were the days when, I think, you love your family and you know that it's possible something's going to happen, and things did happen on the march, many of which were recorded, and many of which were not recorded, but, you, you have to take a positive look on it. I didn't want my kids to ever go back and say they did not participate in something. They asked to participate and I felt it would be wrong if I were down here marching in the street to tell them that they could not march, and if my wife was coming along I thought, I certainly knew that she was well experienced and she would keep them pretty much in hand. So that did not pose too much of a question, we were, in other words, we had had that kind of experience in North Carolina.

00:16:16:00

Interviewer:

Now, of course there, you were fairly a new leader of, for CORE, and so was Stokely Carmichael. Dr. King also spoke at many of the mass rallies. Was there any sense of competition among the three of you when you spoke at the rallies, that, on those nights?

00:16:30:00

Floyd McKissick:

I think that, there wasn't any sense of competition as far as I was concerned. I think that the movement itself had previously been an adult movement. The N double C—, the NAACP had been the dominant organization, and I think that from the NAACP, out came the Congress of Racial Equality, and the Urban League had always been, as I said, an urban—had, had functioned in an urban setting. But in a rural setting, now, and as a result of the young people, since the Sixties, the young people had, had come into, into CORE, the NAACP, and I think ***it was more of a youth movement in all of the organizations, asserting themselves far more than it was competition among leaders themselves. It was a clash of ideas, no question about a clash of ideas.*** I had said earlier that Bayard Rustin had said that he would not come down on the march because our objectives were not clearly defined, and my answer to that was, How can our objectives be clearly defined, when the circumstances we live under, as minorities, do not permit us to totally, to define the problem? We must move when the least of us are affected, and we must move because those of us at the top have that sense of responsibility to move. So when we would go to public meetings and mass meetings, I think each group would probably emphasize one point more than the other. I think that there was always a thrust on the part of the Southern Christian Leadership

Conference to always emphasize that this is what Christ would do, that Christ, too, was a warrior, and was a fighter, and I think CORE would always say as, Black and White together, that was the theme that CORE carried out, and that we believed, likewise, in self-determination. And I think the SNCC people carried out the, certainly the, the continuation of what we both said, but at the same time, a form of more radicalism. Now, too, there were other organizations on the march, too, now. There were—

00:19:19:00

Interviewer:

OK, I just want to stop down here because I want to see where we are on the rolls.

00:19:23:00

Camera crew member #1:

We have enough for— we have 90 feet.

[cut]

00:19:27:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK, mark it.

[slate]

00:19:31:00

Interviewer:

Deacons for defense.

00:19:32:00

Floyd McKissick:

The Deacons for Justice and Defense came out of Louisiana. We had been in Bogalusa together and it was a group that formed to protect the marchers from attacks when the law enforcement officers would not respond. And when got on the Meredith march, The Deacons for Justice and Defense came and they were armed, and the question was, Are we going to tell the Deacons to go home? And someone said, They basically grew out of CORE organization and community organizations in Mississippi, you tell them to go home. I said, No, I refuse to tell them to go home. I think they have a right to be on the march. I think we

should tell them, as we tell everybody else, that we believe in nonviolence, but I'll not tell these people to go home, because they have a right to be here and protect themselves as other people. In other words, I don't believe in a standard for White and a standard for Black. I think that violence and nonviolence is equally distributed among all races.

00:19:35:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's stop here and change rolls.

[cut]

[camera roll #1024]

00:19:36:00

Camera crew member #1:

1024, Mark it.

[slate]

00:20:42:00

Interviewer:

OK, after Sterkely— Stokely, used the term Black Power in the speech at Greenwood, there was a lot of discussion about it. How did you feel about Black Power, what did it mean to you?

00:20:50:00

Floyd McKissick:

Well, I liked the expression, and this, that was not the first time it's been used, wasn't the first time that Stokely had used it. I had used the expression and I think many, many people had used it. I think Du Bois, Richard Wright certainly had used it. The expression of Black people getting their power, I think it was really, it, ***it scared people because they did not understand, they could not subtract pow—, violence from power. They could only see power as a violent instrument, accompanying it.*** But when Stokely's at Greenwood, I think, and, and every night, just about, the expression was used. In the last analysis, it was a question of how Black Power would be defined, and it was never really defined. We talked in CORE about constructive militancy as Black Power, and we defined Black Power as having six salient points, and one of those points that we emphasized, and we even emphasized on the march, are as we would march, we, we would give the African cry for freedom, and many

people were disturbed because they said, This is becoming too, too much non-American, we, talking more, we're going back to our roots too much, and these kinds of thoughts were being— and SNCC was talking about nationalism at that time. These were some of the, some of the fuzzy parts of the march, of which some of the other national organi—, organizations objected to. And some of the minor organization, like Ron Karenga from California coming in, and this was also the emergence out of this march, emerged the Black Panthers, the leadership, that was coming in were using so many new expressions, and, of course, Black Power was the one that got the fancy of the press.

00:22:54:00

Interviewer:

And tell me about how you were injured in Canton?

00:22:57:00

Floyd McKissick:

On Canton, Mississippi that night, we went on to— there had been a debate about which school ground to use, and we finally said, we were going to the Black school ground. And we went to the Black school ground and we had no knowledge that we would be denied the use of the segregated school ground and when we got there, we found all of the Mississippi State Troopers armed and lined up. I was on the top of a, of a six-wheeler— 18-wheeler, I should say— and the leaders were speaking from that platform that night, and as we started speaking, the, the tear gas canisters started flying around us and one hit me on my knee and I fell from the top to the ground, and that's when I heard a crack, and my, and my, my disk had gone out of place. In spite of that, we went on to the march and went on through to Jackson and, on the following Sunday. But Canton was a scene where, I think, Stokely was gassed, was gassed severely, but the two of us, I think, suffered more than anyone else, except the populace, from the gas that was put out there.

00:24:09:00

Interviewer:

When you finally got to Jackson, what, what were your feelings? By that time there had been a lot of discussion, a lot of debate and, and discontent in some cases, along the way? Did you feel there was any future for unity in the civil rights movement or any sense of accomplishment there? What did you feel?

00:24:24:00

Floyd McKissick:

Well, as, as, at, I felt more like a parrot, or a middleman. When we got to, to, when we got to Jackson, my mind was firmly made up. I've always lived in the South, never wanted to really be an urbanized northern man. I knew that the roots to any movement was in the South. Secondly, I knew that a change would have to come from the South and move northward. Thirdly, I knew that what we had been doing, we could no longer do. Our growth had grown and the populace that we were serving were now making more demands out of us rather than having ceremonial candlelight marches, that the march at Selma had served this purpose and we had received casualties. But somehow or another, in the future, we were gonna have to deal with the economics of the Black man. And when I made my speech in, in Canton, I mean in Jackson, I spoke to those various issues, although my speech was not recorded, I think that when, by the time I got to the mic, the press wanted to hear what Dr. King had to say, and unfortunately, because they really wanted to hear what one man had to say, they miss so much of the total philosophy that was being carried on that would have educated White America that we spent decades trying to eradicate that and trying to resolve the meaning, the true meaning, of Black Power and the directions that the movement would go.

00:26:21:00

Interviewer:

I want to backtrack just a little bit, because there, one of the big issues in the march was the role of White people, whether White people should even be involved in march, can you talk to that?

00:26:30:00

Floyd McKissick:

The Congress of Racial Equality has always felt that White persons should have been involved in the movement. America is made up of Black and Whites. And one of the things that we've always felt, in the Congress of Racial Equality, the Congress of Racial Equality was having strong demands being made, of course, for, for, for, for the, for more power in the hands of Black, even within the organizations, and many of the Whites in the organizations felt threatened, but many, and many left because of that. On the other hand, many stayed, and it's our feeling that Whites and Blacks should always be together in all things, that's still our position.

00:27:13:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's stop down. What I want to do is just—

[cut]

00:27:17:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:27:18:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK Jim.

00:27:20:00

Interviewer:

OK, Mr. McKissick, if you would make your comment about self-defense and violence.

00:27:26:00

Floyd McKissick:

I think the Meredith march, as I said, was, was made up of all kinds of people. This was the first time, I think, on any march that I've been on, where you had people, pacifists, you had, you had all religions represented, we, we were at all churches. You had people who believed in, in self-defense, you had people who believed in nonviolence, and you had people who were, who philosophically believed in nonviolence, but believed in violence. And I think the entire mode, or mood that the march wanted to carry to the public, was that, and the organizations wanted to carry out, was that the march itself was a nonviolent march, but we in reality knew what was on the march. It's just the same as if I were, I, I've been in the Army, and I was in the Army four years, and I carried weapons. On this march, I carried no weapons and I did not— and I believed in nonviolence, but I knew what was on that march.

00:28:38:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's stop down there.

[cut]

00:28:41:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:28:46:00

Interviewer:

OK, give us your impression.

00:28:48:00

Floyd McKissick:

It was, it was quite odd that when we— each town that we went in, we would tell the people that we were there to help them, that we didn't have any money, and the march was not funded, not like the other marches, and we would tell them where we would go, to the next night, like, we're going to be in Itta Bena, Mississippi, and that when we got there, we heard that two blues singers were down there, and we wanted to see them, and everybody could eat fried chicken and beans, and somehow or another, when we got there, Itta Bena, everything was organized without our having to put out any money. And one of the strangest things about this, which made it a common denominator march, was the fact that we had little children marching with us, children who left school, who saw the importance of the march. Children who were inspired by the march, who sought souvenirs, to meet persons on the march, and children who were told what voting meant. The Freedom Schools in Mississippi had paid off, and as we marched through Mississippi, no one was— it would be surprising how many would meet us in the middle of the day with foods. It was easy to find a drink of lemonade along the route, and yet we had never asked for the lemonade, we had never asked for these things. And whenever we got to a church, the night before was 24 hours' notice, yet we were marching through the most poverty-stricken regions of the nation.

[cut]

00:30:30:00

Interviewer:

Alright, thank you very much, very nice. OK, we'll put in a fresh roll so I can do the Brownsville question then. 'cause I'm done with the Meredith march.

[cut]

[camera roll #1025]

00:30:41:00

Camera crew member #2:

1025, One-one-one sound.

00:30:43:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:30:46:00

Interviewer:

OK, you were saying, one of the problems of the Meredith march, take it from there—

00:30:49:00

Floyd McKissick:

Yeah. The irony of the Meredith march is that we had to play charades. In other words, we were forced to carry a posture of nonviolence, yet when we went in the community, and at every public meeting, we had as many people who believed in violence and who would say, I'll give you my money, and I'll give you my food, but I can't agree with the posture of nonviolence. That was the reality that we faced. I felt at the time was, that a movement is made up of all people, and our community is based upon sane people, insane people, people light-colored, Black-colored, purple, you know. And we could no longer demand the philosophy of a man who had a common aspiration to share in the Constitution of the United States, and particular, when he would be called upon to go to a war in Vietnam, to give his life, and be required, and be taught a violent posture.

00:32:06:00

Interviewer:

I'm going to change the subject completely and go over to this Ocean Hill–Brownsville situation and ask you for CORE's position on community-controlled schools.

00:32:16:00

Floyd McKissick:

CORE's position on community-controlled schools was, first, any school in a community should have parents, of the teachers [sic], and the community leaders, involved in the

program and the curriculum so that children could be taught and be the products to live and be educated to compete in the society that they were about to compete in, upon graduation, to compete in. We believe that the boards, which many times had been exclusively White in certain communities, should now open up. We believe that the curriculum should change. We believe that all students should be exposed to Black history, for example. We believe that, that trades and what was taught at— there were certain courses being taught at predominantly Black schools, Black kids were being created to go into the workforce without, without getting liberal arts education. We believe that these communities, once they had control of the schools, that the quality of education would be improved, and the products of the schools would be able to compete in American society.

00:33:49:00

Interviewer:

Very good, thank you very much.

[cut]

[end of interview]