Interview with **Roger Wilkins**
Date: October 17, 1988
Interviewer: Sheila C. Bernard
Camera Rolls: 2013-2017
Sound Rolls: 207-209
Team: B and 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.

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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 #2013]
[sound roll #207]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

Rolling.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:00:18:00

Interviewer:

OK. I wanted to ask you about Chicago in '66. You at, at the seminar told a wonderful story about arriving at King's apartment very late at night. Starting from when you walked into the building with John Doar, could you tell me that story again in terms of both what was happening inside Dr. King's apartment and on the streets in Chicago?

00:00:36:00

Roger Wilkins:

We got to King's apartment, which all kinds of cynics in Washington had said was probably the only gold plated ghetto apartment in Chicago. The Chicago—the Illinois National guard was in the streets, and there were kids on the streets throwing rocks and, and bottles at tanks and armored personnel carriers. But the streets were quieter that night than they had been the two previous nights. King, as I recall, had an apartment on the top floor of a four or five floor walkup. And it was a very hot night. It was in July. Doar and I walked up and knocked on the door. King knew we were coming. We had talked to him. And Andy Young answered the door, and the room was just full of people. It was a living room, and it was hard to get in. You had to push your way in because there were people in every conceivable nook and cranny. On the floors, on all the furniture, standing around the walls. And all the people were young men. Young Black men. They were gang men, and King was sitting on the couch, and he was talking to them in a conversational tone. He acknowledged our presence and then continued to talk to them. As we listened, it became clear that in this conversational tone, he was preaching in the simplest ways possible his, his doctrine of nonviolence. And these were young gang members whose desire was to go out and throw stones at tanks and national guardsman. And in essence came with saving their lives. A lot of these young fellows sounded as if they hadn't had much schooling. They sounded like they were probably illiterate. They sounded like they were tough and regarded themselves as tough people. King would talk. They would ask questions. King would answer patiently. He would talk more. He would answer. And it didn't matter how much he was asked to repeat, he would repeat. It was very hot and uncomfortable in that room. I remember Andy Young had chino pants on, and tennis socks, and, and tennis shoes. The stunning thing about it was that it went on for three and a half or four hours with the two emissaries, two presidential appointees, two emissaries from the president of the United States, standing there waiting as King spoke to these young men, saving their lives. That was one stunning thing. The other stunning thing was that there were no cameras there. There were no reporters there. The view of a lot of people was that King was a glory hound, a publicity hound—

Interviewer:

Excuse me—

Roger Wilkins:

—that he did it for money.

00:03:50:00

Interviewer:

—sorry, I’m gonna stop you. Can we stop for a second?

[cut]

00:03:52:00

Camera crew member #1:

Rolling.

[slate]

00:03:58:00

Roger Wilkins:

When we got there [sighs], the streets were quieter than they had been the couple nights before, but we did see some armored personnel carriers, and we did see a couple of tanks and guardsman patrolling. And every once in a while a kid throwing a rock and running away. We walked up the four or five flights to King's apartment, and Andy Young opened the door. And it was hard to get in. The place was full of people, and it was hot. A lot of people were sweating. They were all young men. They were on every conceivable piece of furniture, and standing jammed against the walls, and sitting, crammed up in the middle of the floor. Andy was sitting on the floor. He had chinos on and, and tennis shoes. And King was preaching nonviolence to these young men. They were tough kids. They wanted to go out and throw rocks and Molotov cocktails. And King was preaching nonviolence and telling them that they would get killed. He was patient. He would answer questions over and over again. Some of them didn't understand. Some of them just were, were, you could just see they were aching to get out, impatient with this man. And King was patient with them. And over and over for hours, he did it as Doar and I, emissaries from the president of the United States, just stood there in the corner while King did his work. No cameras. No journalists. No nothing. Finally one by one, all of these kids got it in their heads that they would be, either that they would be killed or the nonviolent message. And whichever it was, all of them finally said, OK. We, we won't go out and face the guard with rocks and bottles. Then King, only then when King's work with them was over did he turn to us and then he—they left, and they got Mrs. King up and got her to make coffee in the back of this railroad flat. And then we talked.

00:06:02:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me the story of moving to Detroit? And you've gotten a call. You've been woken up. I'm sorry. Stop again please. These are the wrong questions.

[cut]

00:06:11:00

Camera crew member #1:

Rolling.

Camera crew member #2:

Speed.

00:06:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:06:16:00

Roger Wilkins:

The attorney general called a meeting at about six o'clock in the morning, and we met over there. And he said, The president wants to see us. So, we went over to the cabinet room. And he had the deputy attorney general, and the attorney general. He had Robert McNamara, who was then secretary of defense. And he had been on the phone with Governor Romney in Detroit. Governor Romney wanted troops. The president didn't want to send troops in. And the issue was in part about the '68 election. Romney did not want to go into the '68 campaign having declared that he couldn't take care of the state of Michigan. Johnson, under law, couldn't send in the troops until a declaration that the situation was out of control. And of course Johnson was insisting. ***Finally they reached a compromise, and Johnson decided that a number of us,*** the deputy attorney general, Cyrus Vance, the former deputy, had a deputy secretary of defense, John Doar and I ***would go to Detroit. And he started telling us, and occasionally he would be on the phone to Fort Bragg, to the general in charge of the 82nd Airborne. And one thing he kept saying, I don't want bullets in those guns. I don't want our troops to have bullets in those guns. And he went on and on, and he just got himself all worked up. And he said, I don't want anybody to say that my troops shot a pregnant ni—and he looked at me, and his face went red. And then he finished his sentence without finishing that word. And as—he then sent us out to go and pack and then go over to Andrews Airforce Base*** to get a plane. He called me over, and he took me into his office, and he wanted to apologize, and he didn't quite know how. And he walked me over to the French windows that led out to the rose garden, and he looked at me, and he looked down at the floor. And there he saw pock marks on the floor, and they were pock marks made by Eisenhower's golf shoes. And he said, Look what that son of a bitch did to my floor. And then he patted me on the back and said, Have a nice trip.

00:08:41:00

Interviewer:

Great. Stop the camera please.

[cut]

00:08:44:00

Camera crew member #2:

Speed.

00:08:45:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:08:48:00

Roger Wilkins:

The—Detroit was probably the scariest place I went to during my years in the government. There was a curfew. And you'd hear shooting occasionally as you went around at night. A lot of the—but it was eerily dark because a lot of the streetlights had been shot out. You were safest on the East side of town where the federal troops were. They were disciplined troops. They were not afraid. But when you got on the West side of town, which was patrolled by Detroit Police, by the National—the Michigan National Guard, and by the state police, you were in trouble. I never really felt that I was in trouble from any Black rioters or threatened. But I remember one night driving out Grand River, a major artery in Detroit, and being passed by a convoy of state troopers. The state troopers were the scariest people because they were from out of state, most of them, had had very little contact with Black people. Very little contact with Detroit. They were from little places like Grayling and Zeeland, and here all of a sudden they were in big Detroit. And there were all these Black people that they were afraid of, and frightened people with guns are terrifying. And as we were driving along, there was this convoy of several state trooper cars, and I was alone with one of the people who worked with me, who was also Black. And these state troopers called out and said, Get off the streets. Get off the streets. Well, we were federal officials, and we were permitted to be on the streets. And their convoy circled around and, and followed us, and pulled us over at the corner of Joy Road and Grand River. And they surrounded us. Well, usually you had your, your credentials, your Justice Department credentials in your pocket. But you knew that if you came out of a car surrounded by state troopers with your hand in your pocket, you're gonna be dead. So, instead of reaching for my credentials, I got out of the car with my hands up, screaming, Justice Department. Justice Department. As I looked around, there were state troopers either kneeling or standing, all of them pointing guns at my colleague and me. And they were shivering. And I was shivering. There was another car right—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

00:11:15:00

Interviewer:

We need to stop. I'm sorry.

Camera crew member #2:

[inaudible]

Interviewer:

Can you start the story again? And I would just start—I think we've covered—

[cut]

[camera roll #2014]

00:11:26:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

Camera crew member #2:

Speed.

[slate]

Roger Wilkins:

One of my jobs in Detroit was to go out—

00:11:32:00

Camera crew member #1:

I'm sorry. Just start again if you would.

00:11:33:00

Roger Wilkins:

One of my jobs in Detroit was to go out at night to try to find out what the level of violence really was, because there was no accurate reporting that we could rely on. And ***one night, a Black coworker and I were driving up Grand River, which is a major artery in Detroit.*** And it was dark because a lot of the lights had been shot out. And the streets were empty because there was a curfew, but we were permitted to be on the streets because we were federal employees. As we went up the street, a convoy of state troopers came down Grand River in the opposite direction. They screamed at us, Get off the street. Get off the streets. Snipers. Snipers. And we continued up, ***and we were about to turn left onto Joy Road when all of a sudden we realized that this convoy of state police cars had made a U-turn and were pulling us over.*** And normally when somebody did something like that, you reach into your pocket, and you pull out your Justice Department credentials. But they were screaming, Get out of the car. And I was screaming, Justice Department. And I knew if I stuck my hand in my pocket to get out my credentials, I would be a dead man. ***So, I came out of the car with my hands up, and what I see is we are surrounded by a circle of state troopers with either long guns or pistols all pointed at us.*** They were shaking. I was shaking. They had also pulled over another car that had a man, a woman, and some kids in the back. These people were all Black. And they were telling them to get out of the car. And all of a sudden, you could hear cloth tearing. People, they were, pulling them by their clothing. Meanwhile I was still screaming, Department of Justice, and somebody was smart enough to reach in, take out my credentials. And all of a sudden, they said, Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Stop. Hold it. Hold it. Hold it. And so they stopped manhandling this other person. I then explained what we were there for. The other person explained that he was an essential worker at the GM plant and that he had permission to be on the street, so they admonished us to be careful, and they drove off. I got back in the car shaking 'cause I really thought when I got out of that car—I said to myself, Thirty-five and dead at the corner of Joy Road and Grand River. I was shaking. And this old white Buick that these other people were in kind of limped off down the street, spewing smoke. And I heard them yell after the cops, Mother fucker! Then I laughed, and everything was all right. [laughs]

00:14:05:00

Interviewer:

Great. Stop camera.

[cut]

00:14:06:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:14:10:00

Roger Wilkins:

They pulled us over. They were screaming, Get out of the car. Get out of the car. And normally I would go into my pocket and pull out my credentials, but I knew if I did that I would be a dead man. So, I came out of the car with my hands up, screaming, Department of Justice. Department of Justice. And what I saw around me was a circle of White state troopers either with long guns or pistols all aimed at me. And what I thought at that moment was, I'm thirty-five, and I'm gonna be dead right here at Joy Road and Grand River. I kept on screaming, Department of Justice. Department of Justice. And I realized that they had also stopped another car that had a woman, a man, and two kids in it. And they were screaming at them, but they were also pulling them out of the car. And you could hear their, their clothing ripping. And we kept screaming, Department of Justice. And finally somebody heard us and pulled my credentials out and looked, and they said, Oh, Department of Justice. And then everybody relaxed. They started, stopped pulling these people out. Then they let us go. The man said that he was an essential worker at the GM plant, and therefore had the right to be on the street and was coming home from work. And so he was let go. We were let go. They admonished us to be careful, and they drove off. And the guy, the worker, drove off in his old white Buick, spewing smoke, and he screamed out after the troops, Mother fuckers! And it was the first time I relaxed.

00:15:28:00

Interviewer:

OK. Stop camera. Now I'm looking for another story, which is—

[cut]

00:15:33:00

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:15:37:00

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible] a minute. OK. Pause a minute. OK.

00:15:40:00

Roger Wilkins:

One of the main things that we wanted to do while we were in Detroit was to get to the establishment, the business establishment, and get them to agree to do major social reconstructive work. Everybody told us that the person, the key person was Walker Cisler, who was the head of Con Edison. And we tried every way we could to get in touch with him. But before we got in touch with him, we did all kinds of other work in the city. But at night—and we'd work late into the night, but we'd al-always pause for dinner. There was not only a curfew in Detroit, but there was also a liquor ban. But the mayor had provided Cy Vance with a lot of liquor. So, what we'd do would be to break off at about six, go up to Vance's suite, Mrs. Vance was there, and we would all have cocktails, and then we'd go into the hotel and have dinner. And then we'd go back to work. It was kind of our routine. And that's what we did all the time. One day when John Doar and I had been out at the federal prison nearby interviewing people who had been arrested, we got back, and I was in our headquarters at the police headquarters. And all of a sudden I got a call from John. And he said, Roger, I thought you'd wanna know that we're having dinner tonight with Walker Cisler, who we've been able to get in touch with, Walker Cisler. And the dinner is gonna be at Detroit Yacht Club. I thought that you would want to know that, and we will see you later. That hit me like a thunderclap, first of all. It broke our normal thing of always having dinner together. But beyond that, I knew, and John knew, and Cy Vance knew, and everybody knew that the Detroit Yacht Club did not serve Black people. So, what Cy Vance and Warren Christopher had decided to do was to go see Walker Cisler at a place where the Black member of their group could not go. And we were not in Detroit because the sewers didn't work. We were in Detroit because Black people who felt oppressed were tearing the place up. And yet these guys decided A, to go to a segregated place for dinner, and B, to leave the Black member—everybody else went. But leave the Black member of their club, of their group sent by the president out of it. Vance never apologized to me for that. Nor did, nor did Warren Christopher. They sent John Doar, and later they sent another guy who was a law partner of Vance's. But neither of them ever had the character to do it.

00:18:41:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

[cut]

00:18:42:00

Camera crew member #1:

Speed. Marker.

[slate]

Interviewer:

So, I wanna ask you—

Camera crew member #1:

Hold for a second. Go ahead.

00:18:48:00

Interviewer:

—about your response as you watched Johnson announce the commission?

00:18:52:00

Roger Wilkins:

The night we got to Detroit, we were told by the White House that the president was gonna have a major announcement about the riots. And we were told what time, so we watched this Black and White set in the headquarters that we established at the police headquarters in Detroit. And the first thing we saw was president with J. Edgar Hoover next to him. And I was enraged. I was enraged for a variety of reasons. Hoover was a bigot. Hoover ran the FBI in a bigoted way. Hoover was an avowed enemy of Dr. King. And Hoover thought that, that the riots were a conspiracy, a communist conspiracy. And a lot of us believe that he had sold the president on that view so that when we were looking at this, and the president is saying that he is gonna do something about these riots—and then he sets up in an establishment commission. First of all, I was just annoyed. I mean, he, we knew what was wrong. These people were oppressed. These people were not getting services. They were hungry. They didn't have jobs. He didn't need a commission, even though my uncle was on the commission. Even though some good guys— John Lindsey was on the commission. Fred Harris. He didn't need a commission to tell you what was wrong. But then to have Hoover there gave credence to the suspicion that the president also thought it was a communist conspiracy rather than an expression by American citizens of, of their deprivation and their oppression. So, I was enraged.

00:20:34:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me what your, what your response was when the president—when the report was issued, and he basically didn't do much to celebrate the findings?

00:20:43:00

Roger Wilkins:

I was astonished at what a terrific job that commission did. They worked very hard. They were serious, and they issued an extraordinary report that said all the things that I would have wanted said. ***And it was a mandate, had the president chosen to take it and say, By God, we didn't know how serious the problem was. There is racism in this society. It is deep. And since I have said that I am going to be the president who finishes what Lincoln started, he could have used that as a springboard for more social action. Instead he refused even to have the commission come over and present it to him.*** And basically he ignored the report, and that was the end of Johnson and me really. I wanted to quit. Randy Clark, who was the attorney general, persuaded me not to quit on the ground that if I quit, they would probably appoint somebody who was awful in my job. And on the ground that I was his closest friend in the department, and he really needed me around. So, I stayed, but I made a speech that I made sure got into *The New York Times* attacking the president. And that did get on the first page, front page of *The New York Times*, and the president did read it. And the president never spoke to me again while he was president, and I worked for him, which was the way we both wanted it.

00:22:06:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop.

[cut]

[wild sound]

00:22:08:00

Interviewer:

So—

00:22:08:00

Roger Wilkins:

It shouldn't be told concisely. It's one of the great stories about Jay. [train whistle] But go ahead.

00:22:11:00

Interviewer:

Well, as concisely as you can. And they basically want it from when you walk into the building. OK?

00:22:17:00

Interviewer:

So, you don't want what's on the streets?

00:22:18:00

Interviewer:

I think the people—I'm not sure—

[cut]

[camera roll #2015]

00:22:20:00

Camera crew member #1:

Speed.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

Pause for a second. OK.

00:22:27:00

Interviewer:

Great.

00:22:28:00

Roger Wilkins:

When we got to King's apartment, it was after midnight. There were troops on the street. The guard was rolling up and down the street, and there were still kids who were challenging the guard, breaking windows, throwing rocks, and throwing Molotov cocktails. We went up to the top floor, knocked on the door, and Andy Young opened the door. And it was amazing 'cause the place was packed with people, and the heat from the place just hit you, and it was hot outside anyway. And the people were everywhere in the place. And they were all kids, males. And they were the kinda kids that everybody hates. They were young, Black street kids. And they wanted to go out there and throw rocks, and they were gang leaders. And King was preaching nonviolence to them. They would ask questions, and King would repeat. King would talk. They would ask questions. He would repeat. This went on for hours as the two emissaries from the president of the United States stood in the corner. The place was just suffocatingly hot. But King took time until he had reached every last mind and was sure that none of these kids was gonna go out and get himself killed. Only at that point did he let them go and then wake up his wife and give us coffee and begin his conversation with us.

00:23:53:00

Interviewer:

Great, thank you. OK, now—thanks.

[cut]

00:23:57:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark. Speed.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

Pause right there. OK.

00:24:02:00

Interviewer:

So, you're driving down Grand River.

00:24:06:00
Roger Wilkins:

A colleague of mine and I—he was also Black—were driving up Grand River one night to find out what the level of violence was in the city when a convoy of state police cars went

past the other way. And troopers yelled out at us, Get off the street. Get off the street. There's snipers. And we continued up the street, and we were gonna make a left turn onto Joy Road when all of a sudden this, this convoy had turned around and was, had pulled us over. And we were surrounded by people screaming at us, Get out of the car. Out of the car. Out of the car. And normally I would have stuck my hand in my inside pocket and pulled out my credentials to prove I was from the Department of Justice, but I knew if I did that, somebody would shoot me. So, I came out of the car with my hands up, and what I saw was I was circled by people with long guns and pistols, and they were all pointing at me. ***And they were all nervous people. And they were all White. And I'm a Black guy, and I'm a high government official, but I was a nigger. A nigger in White America. And I thought that that moment I was gonna be dead. Thirty-five years old and dead at the corner of Joy Road and Grand River.*** Fortunately somebody heard me screaming, Department of Justice. Department of Justice. And about the time they heard me screaming, they stopped pulling some other people out of a car where they were tearing their clothes. And they just stopped when they knew they had Justice Department officials around. We explained who we were. The other people explained that they, the guy was coming from work at a, at an auto plant where he was an essential worker. So, they admonished us to be careful, and they went away. My legs were shaking. And I got in the car, and this other car drove away. It was an old white Buick, and it was spewing a lot of smoke. And then I heard the guy yell after the troopers, Mother fuckers! And at that point, my legs start, stopped shaking, and I returned to normal.

00:25:59:00

Interviewer:

OK, thank you. Stop.

[cut]

00:26:01:00

Camera crew member #1:

Rolling. Mark it.

[slate]

00:26:07:00

Roger Wilkins:

Near the end of our trip, we were successful in reaching Walker Cisler, whom everyone had told us was the key to getting the business community to work on problems that Blacks were having. I had come back from a day trip to a prison to interview people who had been arrested for rioting, and I was at our headquarters when I got a call from John Doar, who said

we were not going to go through our normal ritual of having drinks in Mr. Vance's suite and then going to dinner together, that instead they had made a date with Walker Cisler, and everybody else was going to have dinner with Mr. Cisler. And, that John said, I wanted you to know that the dinner is at the Detroit Yacht Club. Well, it hit me like a thunderclap because they knew and I knew that the Detroit Yacht Club was segregated and didn't serve Blacks. We were not in Detroit 'cause the, the garbage trucks didn't work, and we were not there to repair the phone system. We were there sent by the president of the United States because oppressed Black people had been rioting against the way they had been treated by people, powerful people in Detroit, and among them, Walker Cisler. And here was Cyrus Vance, Warren Christopher deciding that it was more important to have Walker Cisler be comfortable in his spirit than to be decent to a Black member of their team.

00:27:49:00

Interviewer:

Thanks. Stop. The last question I have would be whether there was any—

[cut]

00:27:55:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:27:59:00

Camera crew member #1:

Pause for a second. OK.

00:28:03:00

Roger Wilkins:

Having watched all the riots from '64 through '67, it was quite clear to me that the riots were an extension of the civil rights movement, not something different. Poor Black people in the North had watched their TV sets just like everybody else and had seen progress being made in the South. Moreover their racial feelings had been stirred just like everybody else's when they saw Bull Connor's police dogs, when they saw the rioters at the University of Mississippi trying to keep James Meredith out. Then they saw the congress pass these laws, '64, '65. And when they looked around, they saw that nothing, absolutely nothing was changing in their lives. They were still poor. They were still jobless. They still lived in

miserable housing. Their kids still went to lousy schools. What I thought I was seeing in these riots was not what Hoover saw, which was a communist plot but rather hopeful people who believed that the political system would respond to them. And it was kind of a jagged plea to the political system, Pay attention to us. We are left out. We ache. And in a sense, it was a hopeful scream because these people had been awakened from being niggers who were beneath consideration to people who believed that the country could and would pay attention to their plight. Now, that's not to say that there weren't a lot of thugs among the looters. That there weren't people who were doing it for criminal reasons. But a lot of it in my judgement then and now was people whose racial consciousness had been rais—had been raised, who knew that—

00:29:52:00

Interviewer:

Let me interrupt you. If, if that was what was happening, if it was hope, et cetera, how did you feel having seen this hope when the president was not going to act on it?

00:30:01:00

Roger Wilkins:

I was enraged. I was enraged when the president wouldn't act on it. Because I knew that although the government had been responsive, we did have a poverty program in place, great society legislation was going into place, but I knew it wasn't large enough. And I knew that the great bulk of the money that we had available to us was going into Vietnam. And it seemed to me that if you wanted to strengthen America, and you wanted to make America better for the future, you invested in your people, and you didn't invest in war.

00:30:40:00

Interviewer:

Were we two societies at the, the end of '67?

00:30:43:00

Roger Wilkins:

[laughs] Oh, we were definitely two societies, and they were heading in opposite directions. And that's what the Kerner Commission said. And that's what has come to be.

00:30:54:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop.

[cut]

00:30:57:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible].

00:31:03:00

Interviewer:

So, it's as you're going into the [inaudible]

Roger Wilkins:

[sighs]

Camera crew member #1:

Let's just wait for this truck. [truck passes]

00:31:12:00

Roger Wilkins:

By the time I went into Detroit in '60, in—by the time I went to Chicago in '66, I had already seen the riots in New York in '64, which occurred right after the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. And I had been to Watts in '65, and I understood that these riots were the result of Black people in northern cities having seen all kinds of civil rights activities and civil rights progress in the South and seeing no changes in their own lives. They still faced police brutality. They still faced lousy schools. They still faced joblessness. They still lived in lousy houses. And while the country was full of self righteous rhetoric about the South, nothing was happening in the North. And these people all of a sudden said, Well, we're Black people, and something has to happen for us. And these eruptions really were kind of a belief, a, an expression of a belief that the political system would be responsive if it were reminded of the misery in which these people lived. Now, some of them were thugs obviously. Looters, some of them lotters. And, but a lot of it was a demand that the political system respond to their

needs. The system was responding in small ways. The poverty program was in place. Some great society programs were being put in place, but they weren't large enough. And greater and greater parts of our, our national treasure was being shuttled off into Vietnam. And the longer that went on and the more resources that were shuttled off into Vietnam, the less was available for our cities and our people. And then the president's unresponsiveness at the time of the Kerner Commission report just enraged me because you had—

00:32:56:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop just for a second.

[cut]

[camera roll #2016]

00:32:57:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

Pause [inaudible]

00:33:02:00

Interviewer:

So, the question is as a northerner, did you think that the nonviolent movement would have any success in Chicago?

00:33:09:00

Roger Wilkins:

I couldn't really believe that the nonviolent movement would be very successful in Chicago. Daley was a bigot. He had a bigoted machine. He ran a bigoted city. Besides the problems were too vast and too broad. You needed massive investments in education. You needed massive job training, and you had to have the understanding that it was not just a multi decade problem you're dealing with. It was a multigenerational problem. And Daley's whole thing was just to absorb King and absorb the nonviolent movement and keep on doing what

he did anyway. And of course he diffused responsibility. He'd say police, schools, real estate people. And nothing happens. And Daley would say, Well, we tried. And that's exactly what happened.

00:33:55:00

Interviewer:

Were you surprised as if you hadn't answered that first question, were you surprised when the movement didn't accomplish anything in Chicago?

Roger Wilkins:

No, I wasn't surprised. Nonviolence confrontation could attack various—

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. I need you to answer the full, in a full sentence. Were you surprised when the nonviolent movement seemed to have left Chicago without much of a victory?

00:34:17:00

Roger Wilkins:

I wasn't surprised when the nonviolent movement left Chicago without much of a victory because the nonviolent confrontation could solve sharp, crisp evils like segregation. But when you had general, cultural, social, racial bigotry which required repairing of human beings and repairing of systems like school systems, like police systems, you couldn't do that with just a brief confrontation. You're dealing with problems that weren't just multi decade problems. They were multigenerational problems. Daley was a bigot. His whole system was bigoted. The culture of the city was bigoted. A brief nonviolent campaign could not change that.

00:35:00:00

Interviewer:

Great. Stop. OK. That was—

Camera crew member #3:

Thank you. Very good—

[cut]

00:35:05:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible]

00:35:12:00

Interviewer:

So, if you could start it, By the time the Poor People's Campaign reached Washington, [unintelligible]

00:35:17:00

Roger Wilkins:

By the time the Poor People's Campaign reached Washington, it was two months after Dr. King died. He was in—he was Ralph Abernathy's best friend. He was the mentor of everybody else, and they were still devastated. He, they—Abernathy was, was trying to assume the mantle, but, but he was hurt. He was, he was, he was, he couldn't, he didn't have his friend to talk to. The others didn't have his mentor. Andy Young was like walking around in circles. The only one who was, who seemed to be functioning in a, an affective way was Jesse, who became the informal mayor of, of Resurrection City. And Jesse would figure out things to do every day, figure out activities. But the rest seemed to be in a, in a grief stricken frog.

00:36:17:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop. It's fine. I need to ask you to be more concise. Also the answer—

[cut]

00:36:22:00

Camera crew member #1:

Rolling. Marker.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible]

00:36:30:00

Interviewer:

When the Poor People's Campaign reached Washington, what was the state of the people?

00:36:33:00

Roger Wilkins:

When the Poor People's Campaign got to Washington two months after Dr. King's funeral, they were still all wandering around in a grief stricken fog. Abernathy didn't have his best friend around anymore. And while he was trying to assume the mantle of leadership, you could just tell that he was hurt, bewildered. The rest were his younger brothers, his mentees. [car horn] Andy was just walking around in circles. C.T. Vivian—they just weren't functioning very well. The only one who I recall functioning at anything near capacity was Jesse, who was leading [car horn] marches, who was figuring out that the demand ought to be centered on hunger, and who was keeping people's spirits up because of all that energy of his.

00:37:28:00

Interviewer:

OK. Can we stop please?

[cut]

00:37:35:00

[slate]

00:37:38:00

Roger Wilkins:

The Poor People's Campaign was f—the culmination of what King had learned in the North. He by then understood that you needed a systemic attack, that, that congress had to do it, and it had to be multigenerational. And—but King was dead. [car horn] And this thing was petering out. There was violence. And congress was angry. Something needed to be done, and you did not want them to leave without some kind of victory because their cause was

right. There were hungry people, and there were impoverished people in the country. And we as a decent administration wanted them to have a victory. And it got honed down to giving people who had less than a dollar a day in income free food stamps. And we had a vicious fight inside the administration with those of us who favored that fighting against people who said, Well, it'll just, they'll just use it to drink up a lot of liquor. We fought, and we fought. We got, finally we won. And the president was going forward, and he called Wilbur Mills, who was head of, who was chairman of the Ways and Means Committee in the house. And he said this is a bill he wanted to send up and what did Mills think. And Mills said, Mr. President, you know that you're gonna ask us for a tax increase to finance your war in Vietnam. If you want that tax increase you better forget [car passes] this foolish food stamp program. And that's what happened to the food stamp program. No victory for the poor people.

00:39:15:00

Interviewer:

OK, can you stop for a second? Now, I wanna ask you the second part of that question, which is—

[cut]

00:39:21:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

Roger Wilkins:

After the president—

00:39:29:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. Can you start again? So you're not scratching.

Roger Wilkins:

[scratches chin]

Interviewer:

[laughs]

00:39:34:00

Roger Wilkins:

After the president decided not to provide free food stamps for people who made less than thirty dollars a month, I figured that our political system had had it. At least for that cycle. I surely had had it. I spent all of my energy and all of my emotion, but I thought it's time to get out of this government [bus passes] because if changes are gonna be made, they have to be made from energy generated from outside the government. This government no longer had the energy to respond to people's needs. And I was exhausted. I was depleted. And I was profoundly depressed because we had started the '60s with high hopes. I had identified with all the yearnings of the poor, the women, the Black, the Hispanic, the left out. And sitting there inside the government, I knew to a moral, moral certainty at that point that the government had no more answers, at least at that time, to these problems. It was, it had no imagination for them. It had no energy for them. It just wanted to get on with the war.

00:40:45:00

Interviewer:

OK, stop.

[cut]

00:40:46:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:40:49:00

Interviewer:

So, if you could just give me a sense of what it was like in Resurrection City [unintelligible].

00:40:53:00

Roger Wilkins:

The night before the Resurrection City was to be dismantled, and the leaders were to lead the people out, we had to make an agreement inside as to what was gonna happen. Inside

Resurrection City. By that time, tension was very, very high. The police who were around there, mainly the park police, and people in Resurrection City had clashed on a number of occasions. And it was very, very uncomfortable. Very tense. SCLC was not letting strangers in. You had to have a pass to get in. So—and the hostility towards authorities was such that if an assistant attorney general of the United States was caught in there, you had a sense that that person might be in a lot of trouble. So, I was given a pass by SCLC to be able to come in and attend the meeting that they were having in there that night. And I put on clothes that looked like protest worker's clothes and went, met my man who was near the gate, a fellow named Ron Gault who is an investment banker now. And he walked me halfway to the gate and then said, Good bye, my brother. Good luck. And I went to the gate and identified myself as somebody else and went in. And it was eerie there. There were very few people allowed, and it was very dark. And there was just a tension in the air. And I went in hoping against hope that I would not be recognized. And finally I met one of the SCLC officials and was taken into a place where the SCLC leaders and I sat down and mapped out a strategy for emptying out Resurrection City without anybody getting killed. And that's what we were afraid of, that somebody would get killed.

00:42:48:00

Interviewer:

What were you wearing? What did you look like?

Roger Wilkins:

Oh, I had blue jeans and a t-shirt, I think.

Interviewer:

Oh, OK. I, I heard you were wearing a wig and a dashiki—

Roger Wilkins:

No! [laughs] No. No. No.

Interviewer:

OK, sorry. [laughs]

00:42:58:00

Roger Wilkins:

I might have had a dashiki but no wig. I, I mean, I wore my, I wore my hair long in those days, so—

Interviewer:

Uh-huh.

[cut]

00:43:04:00

Camera crew member :

Mark it.

[slate]

00:43:06:00

Interviewer:

So, if you could start [unintelligible] at 14th Street and describe what was happening.

00:43:14:00

Roger Wilkins:

Right after Resurrection City was emptied out, I was told to go out to 14th and U by the attorney general because there was an incipient riot. When I got there, the intersection was all filled with volatile young people who clearly wanted to start a riot. And I looked around, and up on the back of a flatbed truck, there was young Jesse Jackson, who was about twenty-six years old at the time. And he was preaching. And he was saying, If, you know, I am somebody, if you're somebody, you don't riot. Say it after me. "I am somebody." And this is the first time—and if you are somebody, you go out, and you build strong Black people. Say after me. I am somebody. What Jesse was doing was preaching the riot out of those people. And he was taking a horrific—

[rollout on camera roll]

[rollout on sound roll]

[cut]

[camera roll #2017]

[sound roll #209]

00:44:07:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

Camera crew member #2:

Two.

[slate]

00:44:12:00

Interviewer:

You were on 14th Street. And I want a little more personal reaction. What are you seeing? You're watching Jesse Jackson. What's happening?

00:44:19:00

Roger Wilkins:

The, the youngsters at the corner of 14th and U were volatile, angry. It was a time when, the Black power mood was around this time when Stokely Carmichael was saying, If you burn one of our churches, we'll burn one of yours. And it looked like these kids at any moment would just go up and down the street tearing out storefronts, throwing firebombs. And in the middle of it, there's Jackson up on a, up on a flatbed truck preaching. And he is preaching, he is preaching pride. If somebody, if you are somebody, you build up. You don't tear down. Say after me. "I am somebody." And so on and so forth. And he kept on preaching. He kept on preaching. He was taking quite a risk. Because to preach nonviolence and to preach no rioting to a group of kids who wanted to tear the place down was taking a risk that you'd be called an Uncle Tom. Jackson took the risk. He preached the people down. They became calm. They went home. There was no riot. It was quite a remarkable performance for a twenty-six year old kid.

00:45:34:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me the same story and just much shorter? And the expression before was he preached the riot right out of them. And you can [Inaudible]

00:45:43:00

Roger Wilkins:

I thought we said that we can only get, every, these people only get one shot.

00:45:47:00

Interviewer:

OK.

Roger Wilkins:

I don't have a lot of time now.

Interviewer:

I know, I know.

Roger Wilkins:

Or patience.

Interviewer:

OK.

Roger Wilkins:

I got there and—

Camera crew member #1:

Well, I had cut.

00:45:53:00

Interviewer:

OK, I’m sorry.

[cut]

00:45:56:00

Camera crew member #1:

Rolling.

[slate]

00:45:59:00

Camera crew member #1:

And hold it. OK.

00:46:02:00

Roger Wilkins:

I got there, and, there at the for—corner of 14th and U, and there are a bunch of kids who looked like they wanted to riot. They were angry. They were volatile. And up on the back of a flatbed truck, there was Jesse Jackson preaching to them about, "I am somebody." Preaching pride to them. And what he did was he preached the riot right out of them, despite the fact that to do so was to take a great personal and political risk. But he did it.

00:46:27:00

Interviewer:

Malcolm X, what did, what was your view of his impact on people during this period?

Camera crew member #1:

Could you lean this way, sir? Just—

00:46:34:00

Roger Wilkins:

In the early '60s, Malcolm said things that were just stunning to, for Black people to hear. He said that you are, You are victims, but you are great. Do not believe the lies that society tells you about how humble you are, that you're descended from savages, that slavery was your shame. It's their shame. You have greatness within you. Stand up and face down these people who are your enemies and who are trying to take your souls and your spirits from you. It was electrifying. And he spoke in the cadences of northern urban streets rather than southern churches so that when people like me, who were from the northern streets rather than the South, heard him, we heard something that was familiar to us. And he was, he was just electric. He was—and even very bourgeois Black people would watch Malcolm on the television and say, He's telling 'em off good. He's telling them off. I wish I could tell them off like that. So, he was giving a voice to the rage that powerless people felt. And he had a lot of fans in Black America.

00:47:45:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me about your version of how healthy that anger was, that White America had been saying, You should be grateful. You should be polite. And Malcolm was saying, You should—

Roger Wilkins:

[sighs]

Interviewer:

—be angry. And that was a good thing.

00:47:55:00

Roger Wilkins:

Well, Malcolm was a brilliant man, and what he understood was that for years White America had turned Black people's hatred in on themselves and that it had turned pathological. Both in terms of self destructive behavior, individual self destructive behavior, and collective self destructive behavior. What Malcolm did was he liberated the anger, and he let it turn outwards where it belonged so that—and it liberated a lot of people to do a lot of constructive things. Now, it made a lot of people go around and call people honkies. But that's better. To call somebody a honkie is better than, than shooting heroin into your veins. So, Malcolm was a great liberator of, of Black thought and Black spirit.

00:48:43:00

Interviewer:

When Stokely Carmichael started yelling for Black power, you talked about it as a cork erupting. Can you tell me that, the sense that this was just gonna blow up?

Roger Wilkins:

I remember watching it on television, and it was on a—

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, I remember watching what?

00:48:57:00

Roger Wilkins:

I remember watching Stokely Carmichael at a, at a rally in Mississippi on the Meredith March shout, "What do we want? Black power. What do we want? Black power." And I said to my wife, I said, This is it. White people all across this country are gonna be scared to death. But all kinds of Black people who have been bottled up for years are gonna feel, By God, we got to go out and do something. We've got it in our hands, and we can't be passive anymore. We've got to be active shapers of our own destiny. I'm sure I didn't say it as eloquently as that, but that's what I felt, that it was the unleashing of energy and the unleashing of rage. And that's what it became.

00:49:40:00

Interviewer:

OK. Can you stop the camera for one second? What you said was just wonderful. You turned to your wife and said it—

[cut]

00:49:47:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:49:51:00

Roger Wilkins:

In the cabinet room before we were sent to Detroit when the president had decided to send US troops in, he wanted to make sure that the US troops didn't kill anybody. And he said it in colorful language. He said it to us who were going out there to direct the operation. He said it to the general who was in charge of the 82nd Airborne. I don't want any bullets in those guns. I don't—do you understand me? I don't want any bullets in those guns. He got worked up. And I don't want it said that one of my soldiers shot a pregnant ni—. And he looked at me, and his face got red. And I understood. I understood that Joh-Johnson was a coarse guy. He was a southerner. He said nigger. But he was embarrassed, and he was ashamed of himself. And he later apologized.

00:46:27:00

Interviewer:

All right, thank you—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

—thanks very much.

Roger Wilkins:

That's it?

Interviewer:

Yes.

Roger Wilkins:

OK.

00:50:42:00

Interviewer:

And I’m sorry I've kept you waiting.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:50:45:00