



Interview with **Cyrus Vance**

Date: December 8, 1988

Interviewer: Sheila C. Bernard

Camera Rolls: 2078-2080

Sound Rolls: 236B

Team: B

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 #2078]

[sound roll #236B]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:00:16:00

Interviewer:

Can you start by telling me why President Johnson sent you to Detroit and when you arrived there what kind of briefing you received at the airport from people?

Cyrus Vance:

I believe it was Sun-Monday morning, the 27th of July, when I got a call from Bob McNamara. I had just resigned from the government and I was at my home, and Bob said he was at the White House with the president and that the [clears throat]—

Interviewer:

Excuse me, I need to stop. It's actually Mon—yeah, go.

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

Interviewer:

Monday—

Cyrus Vance:

I'm sure you hear that, that—

Interviewer:

—the twenty—

[cut]

[slate]

00:00:57:00

Cyrus Vance:

On Monday morning I got a call from Bob McNamara. I was at home because I had just recently left the Department of Defense. And I believe it was about eleven o'clock in the morning Bob called me and asked if I could come down to the White House immediately to meet with him and the president. He said that there had been a very bad riot that had taken place in Detroit last night, that the city was still burning and looting was taking place and that the president had been asked by Governor Romney and Mayor Cavanagh to send federal troops into the area. And they wanted me to come down and talk with them, and with the mayor, and with the governor to see whether or not we should send troops, and if so they wanted me to be able to go out to Detroit as the president's representative in connection with this matter. I said I would, so I got in the car and drove over to the Pentagon and to the White House and met with them in the Cabinet Room. They brought me up to date as to the details of what had taken place. We then talked to the governor on the telephone and the president indicated to him that I would be coming out with the federal forces and would be in charge of the federal forces throughout the duration of the riot. The president had not yet made a determination whether or not the federal forces should be committed, but he accepted the request of the governor to put the troops on the ground out there so they could be rapidly deployed if it became clear that the, the local forces, the National Guard plus the State Police and local police couldn't contain the matter.

00:02:51:00

Interviewer:

So, when you arrived at the airport, what was the situation you were facing?

00:02:55:00

Cyrus Vance:

The situation I was facing was; A, to get all the troops down onto the ground, to get transportation for them in case we wanted to move them in town, and then to make sure that I got in town as quickly as possible to talk with the governor and the mayor to see what the situation was, to assess it, and then make a determination whether or not we should commit the federal forces and federalize the National Guard.

00:03:23:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me about touring the city later that afternoon and the, what was decided at that point regarding federal troops?

Cyrus Vance:

Sure. I went around the city with the governor and the mayor and saw what was happening on the ground and asked questions as we were going around as to what the situation was, what the predictions were for the night and the future, and as a result of that got a pretty good feel from a quick trip as to what the seriousness of the situation was. I then came back into town and I met with the federal officials, the US attorney, the FBI and others to get their assessment of how serious the matter was and whether it could be contained by the local police and military forces, or whether or not, in their judgment, we ought to commit federal forces. After that I met with the community leaders.

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, I just wanted to ask you to be a little more specific. When you were touring, what did it look like? What we have is stock footage, but from your—

00:04:33:00

Cyrus Vance:

Well, in places the fires were still burning, looting had been taking place. It was obviously from the bro-broken windows and all of that, that the looting had been extensive. On the other hand, it was in the afternoon in daylight so that it looked a lot calmer than it certainly had the night before.

00:04:53:00

Interviewer:

So, what did you decide with regards to federal troops at that time?

00:04:57:00

Cyrus Vance:

At that time, after listening to the federal officials and after having a conference with the community officials and hearing a split view among the community leaders, on the one hand Charlie Diggs, one of the congressmen from Detroit, was very much in favor of committing troops, on the other hand John Conyers was very much against it and said if we committed the federal troops it would merely exacerbate the situation. So, after hearing that and then caucusing with General Throckmorton who was commanding the federal troops, he and I decided that there was insufficient indications at that point for committing the, to, to lead us to commit the federal troops or to so recommend to the president. So we concluded at that time that we would continue to monitor the situation and would not commit the federal troops.

00:05:51:00

Interviewer:

And what specifically led to the decision to change that?

00:05:55:00

Cyrus Vance:

Well, as we got into the evening, I was monitoring, along with General Throckmorton and my staff, the incident rates of what was happening in terms of new fires, new lootings, shootings and all of those kind of things. And as we got further into the evening and approached midnight, we found that the incident rates was sharply moving up at that point. I concluded after talking to the governor, to the National Guard people and others in the city that indeed the local forces were insufficient to contain the matter, and therefore I concluded we would have to commit the federal forces. And we got a request from the governor that we do so, and on that basis I recommended to the president, about eleven o'clock that night, that he authorize me to go forward with that and that he sign the proclamation which was necessary in order to put the federalization into effect. He did that and from that moment on we moved the federal troops in and they took over and we na—and we federalized the National Guard.

00:07:06:00

Interviewer:

Why was it important that, that Romney make the request in writing and declare hims—his, his own—

Cyrus Vance:

Because under the Constitution—

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, I need to ask you to repeat in a full sentence. That written re-request was important because, or something like that.

00:07:21:00

Cyrus Vance:

Oh, well, the wri-written request from Romney to federalize the guard and to put in the federal troops was necessary because, under the Constitution, the guarding of the prerogative against putting federal troops into any state is, is one which was very zealously guarded over the years. And in light with the Constitutional provisions and the statutes which had been enact-enacted in 1792 by the Congress, it was necessary that there very—be a very clear statement by the governor that he could not contain the matter and that domestic violence was such that federal troops were needed to deal with the matter.

Interviewer:

OK, cut please.

00:08:13:00

Camera crew member #1:

Yes.

[cut]

00:08:15:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:08:18:00

Interviewer:

When we talked on the phone you described the rules of engagement that are followed in a situation like this. Can you talk from the point where you federalized the Guard and the federal forces take over? Can you talk about those rules of engagement and where the current law enforcement people stood in terms of the weaponry and the ammunition that they had?

00:08:35:00

Cyrus Vance:

Sure. The, one of the first things we did when we federalized the guard and sent the federal troops into the eastern part of the city was to make clear that the rules of engagement so-called, in other words the instructions to the troops, were very clear as to how they should comport themselves. And there were four basic principles in escalating order of severity as to how they should handle themselves. I can't remember the exact order, but basically you started off with sheathed bayonets and no ammunition in the guns and moved all the way through the four steps, up to unsheathed bayonets affixed to the rifles and ammunition in the guns. And the commanders of the various units were to proceed in accordance with the severity of the problem as they saw it, recognizing that the bottom line was to use the minimum force possible in order to bring the situation under control.

00:09:51:00

Interviewer:

OK. I was under the impression that, that General—

Camera crew member #1:

Let's—

Interviewer:

Do you wanna change?

Camera crew member #1:

It's, let's see what—

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

Camera crew member #1:

No you got enough. Fifty minu—fifty seconds.

Interviewer:

It's OK, cut for a second.

Camera crew member #1:

I mean fifty feet.

Interviewer:

I just wanted to—

Camera crew member #2:

Cut.

00:10:02:00

Interviewer:

I may not—

[cut]

[camera roll #2079]

00:10:04:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:10:07:00

Interviewer:

So, the point when the federal troops are, are put in, on the streets and the Guard is federalized, what are the levels of, around, engagement?

Cyrus Vance:

Force to be used?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

00:10:16:00

Cyrus Vance:

The levels of force to be used go through a progression starting with unloaded rifles with bayonets fixed with sheath, up through three other steps, ending up with loaded rifles and bare bayonets fixed.

00:10:33:00

Interviewer:

And at what stage were the guard when you came in? And how did you change that?

Cyrus Vance:

All over the place.

Interviewer:

Can you give me, The guard was?

00:10:42:00

Cyrus Vance:

Well, the, the guard had been operating during this very difficult night, and during the daytime they did not have bare bayonets or that kind of thing. But they had been firing a lot during the night and it was somewhat of a mess, and therefore it was necessary to put some discipline into the situation by having a clear set of rules to be applied by the commanding officer of the various units so that you would be applying no more force than was required to get the job done, with the basic objective being get the job done with a minimum force.

00:11:28:00

Interviewer:

Why was it decided to put the federal troops on the east side and—

Cyrus Vance:

Because at that point the incident ra—

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, I need a full sentence.

00:11:34:00

Cyrus Vance:

Oh. The reason we put the federal troops into the east side of the city was because at that point the incident rate was rising very rapidly there and it looked like that was the most difficult place to, to handle, and therefore we put the federal troops, who were all paratroopers, many of whom had come out of Vietnam led by superb noncommissioned officers and they had been through battle before, they knew how to deal with these kind of situations, and their self-assurance alone was a calming factor when they came in. As a matter of fact, the federal troops only fired, I think, all told 10 rounds during the whole time that they were there, all of those were into the air. And it was quite extraordinary to see how rapidly the situation cooled when these self-assured soldiers came in and took charge.

00:12:34:00

Interviewer:

At the time, what was your sense of how the National Guard was doing?

00:12:38:00

Cyrus Vance:

The Na-National Guard had been very spotty. There had been much too much indiscriminate shooting. They had shot out the street lights which is the worst thing you can do in a situation like that because that makes it even more likely that the law enforcement people are going to be shot at. It creates a fear in the community. It creates fear, really, in the enforcement officials as well. So that it was not going well when we arrived.

00:13:05:00

Interviewer:

I want some war stories. What was the hardest part of being in Detroit for you this week? Are there any stories that stand out in your mind?

00:13:12:00

Cyrus Vance:

Well, I remember at one point, John Throckmorton, General Throckmorton and I decided that something had to be done to indicate to people that the streets could be walked on, that people shouldn't be afraid, that although there were some snipers around, that this situation was getting under hand. So, John and I decided that we would go to the most difficult part of town over on 12th Street and walk down the middle of the street, just the two of us, to indicate that we had confidence that the matter was coming under control. So, we did that. I must say we weren't quite sure what was gonna happen when we made that walk of several blocks, but fortunately nobody decided to try to take a shot at us and I think that was one of the most memorable parts of it. Another memorable aspect of it was, was really the, the complete breakdown of law and order and the loss of self-confidence by citizens and officials, to a degree. It's almost like any regiment that you see that's been through a battle situation and it comes out with a sort of a, a shell-shocked kind of reaction, and that clearly was the case and that's why we suggested to the city fathers and the business community that they should hold a meeting, which they did, to bring the city leaders together and make a public declaration that they were gonna rebuild what had been torn down during the early days of the riot, and that the city would be restored and be a vibrant metropolis again. And that was done. And—

00:15:18:00

Interviewer:

Is this—

Cyrus Vance:

—Joe Hudson, as I recall it, was put in charge of this. He ran the big department store in, in the city.

Interviewer:

Was this the meeting where, that Walker Cisler, that—

Cyrus Vance:

Yes.

Interviewer:

—was held with Walker Cisler?

00:15:30:00

Cyrus Vance:

Walker Cisler was present at that meeting. He was one of the leaders of the business community in the country and the city.

00:15:38:00

Interviewer:

And where, the meeting was held where?

Cyrus Vance:

It was held downtown in one of the auditoriums. I don't know which one it was.

Interviewer:

OK.

00:15:44:00

Cyrus Vance:

I can't remember.

00:15:44:00

Interviewer:

I have a question about a, a meeting that was held with him as well, the, at the Detroit Yacht Club. Do you remember that meeting? It was Warren Christopher and John Doar.

00:15:50:00

Cyrus Vance:

No, I don't.

00:15:51:00

Interviewer:

You don't remember it. Let me, during the week, what kind of communication did you have with President Johnson and what was your sense of—

Cyrus Vance:

I communicated with President Johnson—

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, I was talking. Can you start again?

00:16:02:00

Cyrus Vance:

I communicated with President Johnson frequently during my time in Detroit to keep him up to date on what was going on. During the early stages, when I first came and before we put the—

00:16:13:00

Interviewer:

Excuse me, cut. There's somebody standing outside the door. Do you see them?

Camera crew member #2:

I cannot see it. [coughs]

Camera crew member #3:

They're gone now.

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

Interviewer:

They're gone now.

Camera crew member #1:

OK, still rollin'.

00:16:20:00

Camera crew member #2:

Cut. You—

[cut]

00:16:21:00

Cyrus Vance:

What else do you want me to talk about now?

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:16:24:00

Interviewer:

Your communication with President Johnson during the week.

00:16:27:00

Cyrus Vance:

I kept in close touch with President Johnson from the time I landed all the way through until the troops were committed. It was important to do that because he had to know back in Washington what the position of the governor was, how difficult the situation was on the ground, were there real grounds for deploying the troops or no, because he took very seriously his responsibilities to follow the Constitution and the laws that had been enacted not to deploy until it was absolutely necessary, but he wanted to make sure that when it appeared necessary, that they were deployed immediately so as to try and stop the violence and the bloodshed.

00:17:12:00

Interviewer:

Did you have a sense personally of how he was feeling about yet another city going up in flames?

00:17:18:00

Cyrus Vance:

Obviously, it was a matter of great concern and indeed agony to him to see what was happening to one of our cities. I think he was worrying also, if this wasn't brought under control, not only would there be devastation and damage done in this city, but that it might spread to other cities throughout the country, and therefore this was in a way a test case as to whether we could handle this kind of civil violence. And that was a matter of great moment to him.

00:18:01:00

Interviewer:

In putting together the Kerner Commission, when he signed the commission into being he handed you the pen. Can he, did he ever talk to you about thinking that there might be a conspiracy behind this? Or when he did that, did he, what, what was he saying to you at the time?

00:18:14:00

Cyrus Vance:

I don't remember what the president said to me at the time that he did the signing.

00:18:22:00

Interviewer:

Did he think there was a conspiracy, or did he, was he—

Cyrus Vance:

I don't think so.

Interviewer:

No? If you can cut for a second.

00:18:31:00

Camera crew member #1:

Yes.

[cut]

00:18:33:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:18:36:00

Interviewer:

Maybe just give me a little more insight as somebody who wasn't in Detroit in '67. What was it like being, being in charge there?

00:18:45:00

Cyrus Vance:

Well, I felt it was an awesome responsibility that the president had given me to go out there and to try and bring the riots under control and to stop the, the bloodshed and violence that was taking place. I had a small but very good team of individuals with me, with my deputy being Warren Christopher, who subsequently became my deputy when I was Secretary of State, a man in whom I had great confidence. I had great confidence in General Throckmorton, who was leading the troops, and therefore I was confident that if we had to federalize the National Guard and put in our troops, that we could control the situation. But it was a new situation basically for all of us.

Interviewer:

What was—

Cyrus Vance:

S-so that we had to improvise from time to time, and you had to try and when you got in there originally, pull all the pieces together which were disparate with lack of proper communications between the police and the State Police, between the National Guard and the state and local city officials. There was inadequate collecting of data which was necessary in order to manage it properly. There was inadequate communications with the public.

00:20:22:00

Interviewer:

Excuse me, cut.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

And then this is the last question, I'll let you know.

Cyrus Vance:

OK.

00:20:27:00

Interviewer:

Thank you.

[cut]

[camera roll #2080]

00:20:28:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:20:31:00

Interviewer:

At the time, at the end of this week in July, forty-three people had died. Why did so many people die?

Cyrus Vance:

Because at the—

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, I need a full answer.

00:20:41:00

Cyrus Vance:

OK. Start over. The death toll was high because, at the start of the riot, the National Guard wasn't prepared to handle this kind of a situation, nor were the State Police, nor were the local police. This was a new and different kind of situation. As a result of that, there was indiscriminate shooting that was taking place, and as a result of that a lot of people were wounded and, and killed in the process that wouldn't have been had there been the kind of organization in the National Guard, the kind of planning which would have provided for proper linking and liaison between the police, the State Police and the Guard to handle with minimum force the situation that they were faced with. But this was a new situation for them. We learned from what was missing and caused the large death toll there. And I prepared a report afterwards which then became sort of the bible for how to deal with riot situations and got that to the governors and to the mayors of various cities so that they would be better prepared in the future. And as a result of that in, in subsequent riots that did take place during that period of time, the death toll was less.

00:22:03:00

Interviewer:

So, when, when you came in, what is just too late to sort of have the Guard, expect the Guard to back down? Was it, I mean, did they, did they ever—

Cyrus Vance:

A, they needed more training—

Interviewer:

OK, I need to—

Cyrus Vance:

B,—

Interviewer:

Can you start at the beginning, the National Guard?

00:22:15:00

Cyrus Vance:

The National Guard needed more training, it needed more Black members of the guard than had been the case. The equipment of the guard was, in terms of communications, was not adequate nor did it link with that of the state and local officials. There were all kinds of

deficiencies that existed and had to be corrected as they were after we learned from the, the sad experience of the Detroit riots.

00:22:45:00

Interviewer:

Great, cut.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:22:49:00

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