

TRANSCRIPT: TAYLOR BRANCH

Interviewee: Taylor Branch
Interviewer: David Cline
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START OF INTERVIEW

David Cline: --recording audio digital and video as well.

Taylor Branch: All right. Should I look at the camera or look at you?

DC: Best to just look at me.

TB: Okay, good.

DC: Hopefully this will go--I mean it doesn't entirely go away but we can pretend that it does and just have a conversation.

TB: Good.

DC: And I do this in fairly informal style but I always like to start with people's family background and get a sense of what sort of informed them as they took on these paths later in life, so that's usually where I start and then we can move forward from there.

TB: Okay, good.

DC: But for the record I'll just say that it's April the 17th, 2010, in Raleigh, North Carolina, and I'm David Cline for the Southern Oral History Program, and I'm sitting here today with Taylor Branch. Thank you for very much--

TB: Thank you, David.

DC:--for your time today. As I just said, if we could start just [with] some facts, if you could just tell me about where and when you were born and we'll start with there and then we'll get into a conversation about the Movement and your work in recording it.

TB: Good. I'm happy to. It's kind of--. Usually I'm where you are. [Laughs]

DC: Right. [Laughs]

TB: Doing oral history.

DC: And I'd much rather be over here, [Laughs] having sometimes been over there.

TB: Well I was born January 14, '47--I'm sixty-three--in Atlanta, so I grew up in Atlanta, Dr. King's hometown, before the Movement started. I was seven years old the year of the *Brown* decision. I don't remember that. I wasn't paying any attention to it. My dad had one very small dry cleaner that I started working in when I was five, and I don't want to overemphasize it but we were a pretty struggling family then. By the time I finished college he had ten or twelve dry cleaning plants and was doing fairly well but we had six children, so my childhood my dad was working hard building businesses. We were not political, didn't care about politics. I do remember that the early Civil Rights Movement when the sit-ins started I was just starting high school and that it was scary to everybody, but I avoided it like everybody else. Later on I found out most black people avoided it too. It was a pretty scary thing.

DC: So you were in high school at that time, in 1960?

TB: 1960 I was thirteen so I was just starting. I was fourteen during the Freedom Rides. I don't think I paid them very much attention. I had a terrible motorcycle

accident when I was fourteen, almost got killed, believed, probably accurately, that this orthopedic surgeon saved my life and therefore I decided to become an orthopedic surgeon, and that's all I was thinking about. But meanwhile the Movement kept going. I mean it just kept going and it was all around me and it began to eat on my mind. I got an athletic scholarship before my motorcycle accident to go to a very prominent private school in Atlanta and play baseball for them. They won't say it's an athletic scholarship but they came and recruited me off of the playing field, so.

DC: [Laughs]

TB: So I'm there at Westminster, a wonderful school, but there weren't any other dry cleaning kids there. So I'm there at this school, and it was--.

DC: Were there any black kids?

TB: Oh, absolutely none. The only place that I knew and interacted with black people was in my dad's cleaners, because all of his employees were black, and I knew all of them well because I'd known them since I started working there, since I was a little kid. My first job was putting trouser guards on boxes of hangers by the five hundred, and they would supervise me. By the time I left I did everything: I ironed, I put things in the laundry, I waited on the front and learned how to handle customers and everything, but always under the supervision of, if not my dad, his employees, but at the school and everywhere else absolutely no black students anywhere. The public schools were segregated, the cultures were totally segregated, and yet what began to prey on me was that the very prominent people in Atlanta had their children at this school and it was important for them to say that the school was not segregated, even though it had no black students. I don't know how much you know about prep school culture but it really picks

up on hypocrisy pretty fast, so there was a constant undercurrent of humor, not progressive humor because a lot of it was just that they were hypocrites, but there wasn't any admiration for the Movement either.

Weird things started undercutting my political--apathy is not the right word. I was anti-political. To me it was kind of threatening. But believe it or not it was rock-n-roll crossover music that was one of the first things that got me to actually think about it because I sang in the Atlanta Boy Choir and I was kind of snooty about rock-n-roll music until one day somebody who was driving me to school, another student because I was too young to drive, said, "How come you say snide things about rock-n-roll music because you're singing classical music but you know the words of every rock-n-roll song that comes on the radio?" and it was true. I had to admit it. I knew the words. This was the golden era of crossover. This was Jackie Wilson and Sam Cooke and Jerry Butler and the Drifters. These were amazing--the early Shirelles. It was wonderful music, Arthur Alexander. Some of these names may not mean much to you.

DC: How were hearing this,--

TB: On the radio.

DC: --on white radio stations?

TB: Oh, yeah.

DC: Or were you listening to black radio stations?

TB: I was listening to white radio stations, I'm pretty sure. But it's also true one of the first things that struck me was that some of my friends who were hostile to black people--. I was always taught to be very polite, and never to use derogatory words, and the only black people you know are your friends and they hug you and take care of you,

and this is a dangerous subject; don't get involved in politics but be polite. Well I knew some kids that were hostile, that would use epithets about black people, but it stunned me that some of those same ones would sneak out and go down to hear Ray Charles, who was from that area and he would play at Herndon Stadium. It occurred to me that the involvement with this music was pretty deep. People wouldn't court their girlfriends to any music but this, and there was a very powerful emotional bond to this music. The way I later described it was that because we were always full of self-deprecating humor that we white kids there at Westminster were destined to grow up and run the world and wear neckties and use big words and everything but we believed that black people--we're all stiff and formal but they have the keys to the human heart and if you really want your girlfriend, where you're going to make an emotional connection, you've got to go through black music. Johnny Mathis was about as white as you could get. He was a romantic black singer then. About that time our high school had Bo Diddley come play at Westminster, and Bo Diddley came and played his music and it got back to one of the parents and it caused a big storm because it was considered to be too sexual. He was one of the early rock-n-roll icons. Another one was Hank Ballard, of Hank Ballard and the Midnighters. We would sneak out and go hear Hank Ballard.

DC: But Bo Diddley's race wasn't the concern, it was the lyrics?

TB: Well, no.

DC: Or it was both?

TB: They were conjoined in the mind. There was a huge panic in the administration of this prep school that because Bo Diddley had sung about what they saw as flamboyantly sexual lyrics that they would henceforth ban black groups. [Laughs]

DC: Oh, wow. All right. [Laughs]

TB: But it wasn't because of race; it was just to guarantee that this sort of sexual thing wouldn't come. So anyway--.

DC: But implicit in that is that--

TB: Oh, it was just--.

DC: --you can't separate this sex from--

TB: Right.

DC: --black folks.

TB: So I kept thinking about it. Meanwhile the Movement keeps going, and here I am in a world where I hug and know Annie Pearl, Ivory, and Willie B. Harris and my dad's cleaner, Peter Mitchell. I know all these people but I've never been in their homes. It's kind of intimate and separate. Then there's this music. We're in an all-white school but we're devoted to this music and I don't really know where that comes from, and meanwhile all this stuff is bubbling up. It's all around us but everybody is nervous if you talk about it at all honestly, that it really started eating away at me. How can I be growing up in this culture with all this stuff going on and I don't know anything about it.

My dad's cleaner, Peter Mitchell, they both had these extraordinary senses of humor. He's the guy that put the dry cleaning fluid into the wheel and spotted things. Dad worked alongside--. He was the boss and the owner but they worked together, because it was the most--it's getting the clothes dirty. They had very, very compatible senses of humor. They both knew how to tell jokes. There are not too many people in the world who know how to--. They remembered every joke they every heard. My dad's dealing with the public and somehow he would make connections with his customers and

the people at the bank. He knew all the joke circulators and he would circulate and Peter would circulate jokes that he knew, he was like that from the black community, so they would circulate all these jokes. Then we would go to the baseball games together, the three of us, several times. Our team was the Atlanta Crackers, believe it or not, in the Southern Association, this is the mid '50s, and we would go to the games together and they would be joking all the way down there, telling jokes, and then when we'd get to the ballpark it would kind of die out because we had to separate. Peter had to go sit in the colored section. The only racial comment I can ever remember other than, be polite, from my dad was a couple of times he would say he didn't like this, going to the games. I was seven or eight years old, and I didn't take it as a political comment, that he wanted to do something about it or anything because I really knew that he considered segregation like the weather. We're not going to do anything about it. That's idle and foolish and dangerous. But I just took it to mean that he wished that he could go on down to the game and keep joking with Peter and that he didn't like it, but I also knew that the subject was so radioactive that I wasn't supposed to make any further comment or say, "Why?" or "What does that mean?" When he just said, "I don't like this," it was a really pregnant thing. It was like a really intimate [revelation]. It was like a father-son talk.

So these things started preying on me a lot, that here was this subject that was so fraught and yet so full of hypocrisy and fear and yet it went very deep. It went deep in music and emotion and black people were saying that it was a betrayal of democracy and we're supposed to take democracy seriously, and they're singing church songs and I'm singing the same church songs but we're totally separate, so it started preying on me and by the time--. I was a junior in high school when the Birmingham riots, Birmingham

demonstrations broke out, and they had a big effect on me. I've often said that I think they were--. Most of the black students that I later interviewed, I mean the civil rights leaders, called the Emmett Till murder--because they're older than I am and Emmett Till was murdered in '55 when I was--I don't remember that--but that was a galvanizing moment for the entire civil rights generation, that somebody their age--on and on, all these people. For me it was the Birmingham demonstrations in '63, eight years later. High school had just started, I'm growing up, I'm starting to think about all these things, I'm not political but I'm bugged; it's under my skin. Then I see all these--. And in fact I'd kind of just decided that when I got really old and secure as an orthopedic surgeon, like maybe thirty years old or something, that maybe I would stick my toe in the water on this race--. That this race thing really was--it seemed important and I didn't know what to do, but I was scared about it.

DC: That was a conscious--. You remember having that thought.

TB: I remember having that consciousness and then being ambushed by these photographs of the dogs and the fire hoses on these kids in Birmingham, and they were younger than I was. They were half my age. Some of them were really small and they were mostly girls, and they weren't waiting until they were thirty and they were doing things that just seemed--. They were marching and keeping going, and I don't know whether it was the cruelty of it, how can this be happening, or the courage, where does this come from, but I was just stunned by that. I asked my mom and dad where it came from and how it could be happening and they didn't have any answers and nobody did, and it really started bugging me and of course it just continued. I finished high school the next year, right before Freedom Summer, with the Civil Rights Bill being filibustered, I

finished high school and by the time I got off to college I started losing interest in my pre-med courses, [Laughs] and soon dropped them and started really--. But I knew I was--. I didn't grow up with any kind of political sophistication, I didn't debate it, I didn't read about it, so when I got to college I started taking political philosophy courses and history courses and politics courses and everything to try to catch up.

DC: Where was college?

TB: College was the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I went there on an academic scholarship. I thought I was going to have to play football but I had terrible shoulders and I had my hip all messed up from the automobile accident, but at that time we had more children than dry cleaning plants and my family needed me to get a scholarship and at the last minute I got an academic scholarship, a Morehead Scholarship, to Chapel Hill. They asked me if I needed to think it over, because I was about to sign a football scholarship, "Do you want to give up your athletic career?" and I said, "I don't need to think it over more than ten seconds. If I don't have to play football I'd love to go to Chapel Hill sight unseen." [Laughs]

So I came here and got involved in--. But of course, you know, that was the end of--. Selma was my freshman year, but Vietnam was also starting, so I was starting college right at the height of all the upheaval and civil rights and the Vietnam War were all intermingled. I think my first original political thought, such as it was, that I can remember telling people a few years later, was that the anti-war movement that I was seeing--I was going to meetings and debates and even demonstrations on the war as a college student--was a largely campus based, largely white, movement that seemed to me to be copying the black Civil Rights Movement. As little as I knew about it, it seemed to

me that we were taking our distant impression of it, first of all that young people could be significant actors; second of all that you could study things and demonstrate; and I thought that we had a very superficial notion of the Civil Rights Movement, even though I didn't know how complex it was. I thought we were--and again I used a musical image--I thought we were covering the Civil Rights Movement the same way Ricky Nelson used to cover Little Richard songs, that we were almost aping it, that we can be important too, and these are big matters, and so on and so forth, but the Civil Rights Movement was just getting carried away with turn the other cheek and boycotting; Vietnam is international affairs and really complicated for white people who wear neckties and that we should work on that. I told people that I thought that there was something wrong about that. I knew that the Civil Rights Movement had changed my life's interests against my will. I hadn't been looking for it to happen. I hadn't even been weighing it as an option, it just forced itself in, and it was because of a tremendous emotional power that I didn't understand but I knew had to be based on something a lot deeper than just this superficial notion that those black kids ran out there and demonstrated and raised hell if they didn't get a satisfactory answer.

DC: Right.

TB: So anyway, by the time I finished college in '68--. That was the great--Dr. King was killed in the spring of my senior year in college. I was political by then. The only big thing I did at Carolina was I was chairman of the Carolina Symposium, which they held every two years, and when I was named chairman as a sophomore at the end of '66 the public explanation for the Vietnam War was that it was to contain China because China was supporting it. We decided that we didn't know anything about China and to

have a symposium on China and the West in the spring of '68, so that's what we were doing, and Jesse Helms, who had a TV show, attacked it. He said, "We already know everything we need to know about China; it's communist." He attacked me personally a whole bunch, right when it happened. We brought in all these China scholars. It started on Sunday night the 31st--I'd been working on it for two years--the 31st of March.

DC: 1968.

TB: '68. I didn't know this, but it was the day Dr. King gave his last sermon at the Washington Cathedral before going back to Memphis. We opened the symposium with Edgar Snow, a renowned China scholar, who'd been driven out of the United States during the McCarthy era. We brought him back from Geneva; it's the first time he'd been back. He gave this lecture in the afternoon and then we took him to the Carolina Inn. My mother came up from Atlanta to be here for the week of the symposium so my mother and I took Edgar Snow into his hotel room and watched Lyndon Johnson give his speech that night, because he gave a speech right after Edgar Snow's speech, and it was the one when he shocked everybody, saying he wasn't going to run again because of Vietnam, so everything was kind of supercharged. We had the symposium Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. It finished Thursday and my mom was going to fly out Friday morning and I took her to dinner on Franklin Street in Chapel Hill, and in the middle of dinner this hush went through the restaurant and people came in saying Martin Luther King had been shot in Memphis.

So my formative years are marked by all these things, and over that summer I was very involved in anti-war protests. I worked in some of the presidential--. I would get sent in to primary states where Humphrey, who came in to run in Johnson's stead, where

Gene McCarthy was contesting him, and I worked in a bunch of these things. Bobby Kennedy was killed--.

DC: So you got very involved despite the feeling that you described before, about the sort of aping characteristic of the anti-war--.

TB: Oh, I just thought this was a danger. I didn't know what to do about it. I thought it was important to stop the war, but I thought it was a danger and I still think that it was a danger, that the white movement kind of ran amok, and in part it was because it didn't appreciate the discipline and the depth of thought that kept the early Civil Rights Movement going. But nevertheless, no, I--. But of course I was working for, as a volunteer, in a presidential campaign, as a twenty-one-year-old. When I came down to Georgia, my home state of Georgia, there was a movement to challenge Lester Maddox, who was our governor and a notorious segregationist, and in those days the governor appointed all the delegates and he appointed virtually all white delegates, and in fact I think it was virtually all white men, so it was vulnerable to challenge on a lot of grounds and a lot of people, labor unions and other people, so I got involved with a challenge that was modeled--as a twenty-one-year-old--modeled on the Mississippi Freedom Democrats of '64, right down to the notion that if we do this challenge this year maybe it will bear fruit four years from now. You don't really expect to get seated the first time, so we were going to do this, but what you had to do was to have a more open democratic process, choose a delegation, and go and contest it at the convention. So there were all these people doing it, a lot of people running around, and I was assigned the task of going to black churches to recruit people to come to a convention to choose a challenge delegation, and that was an eye-opening experience. I went down and did all that just to

recruit them, and we had this convention in Macon and the other thing they asked me to do--these are labor leaders and people running the presidential campaign, by then George McGovern's campaign was in on it, McCarthy's and others, and we'd meet downtown and I'm just graduated from college--they didn't have a public spokesperson and they wanted somebody to go--. Did anybody know Julian Bond, because he had gotten a lot of publicity from getting excluded by the Georgia legislature, and since we were challenging that same Georgia political structure he would have been a perfect spokesperson. So I went and pitched Julian Bond to become the chair. I'm twenty-one and he's, what, twenty-eight, or something, that summer.

DC: Did you know him, or did you--

TB: No, I'd never known him.

DC: --just cold call?

TB: It was a cold call, and he met with me and talked it over and was reluctant to do it, weighing whether it was going to succeed or fail, whether it was going to be good or bad, whether it was going to be racially progressive, whether it was a vehicle just for somebody's presidential ambitions. Our delegation ultimately had people who supported all the different [presidential candidates], because basically if you were for McCarthy or McGovern or whoever you were for, any kind of delegation that you put together was going to get more votes for your candidate than Maddox's delegation, so it made sense from everybody's point of view.

But anyway, that's when I met John Lewis and a bunch of other people and then believe it or not that summer I went up as a go-fer, literally go-fer. I ironed Julian's shirts. I always tease him.

DC: [Laughs]

TB: We've been friends ever since. We discovered that summer that we had the same birthday and we've celebrated it ever since, but then we didn't know that; we were just in this chaotic 1968 adventure. We went to Chicago together and we didn't think we were going to get seated for the credentials hearing. Only just a few of us, a couple of lawyers and Julian as the chair and me as the go-fer, we went up there and ran around and then lo and behold they seat us, so now we've got to bring the whole delegation up to a city where every hotel room has been taken for six months. Most of the delegates were poor and we didn't have any money, had no airfare, so Julian says to me, "Bring the delegation up." So anyway, that was a big adventure.

DC: You're already there--

TB: I'm already there.

DC: --so you have to go back.

TB: Well yeah, I had to go back, but first we had to raise the money.

DC: Right.

TB: Julian wound up going to see Elijah Muhammad and I went around--. I got the hotel room through one of Elijah Muhammad's people. So there were a lot of adventures in an ultimately tragic politically year; lost the election to Nixon and both King and Bobby Kennedy were killed. Lots of things happened.

DC: Did you actually go back and get delegates and--

TB: Yeah, we brought them up.

DC: --brought them up?

TB: Brought them up.

DC: Drove them up, or--?

TB: No, no, they flew up, and then of course we were in the hall most of the time but that was the convention where there was tear gas. A lot of our guys got hurt. But we were in the hall most of the time, we didn't get hurt like the people who were out on the street demonstrating, but it was a chaotic, violent convention.

I went to graduate school and the next summer I worked for the voter education project, this time explicitly--. I was a graduate student at Princeton and they wanted me to work for the World Bank or some policy relevant thing, very high tone. I wanted to work for VEP, because that '68 experience and the convention convinced me, alongside knowing already, that I was consumed with all this political stuff because of the Civil Rights Movement; then I'd had these experiences. I missed being part of the--either too young or too behind, politically immature, to be part of the Civil Rights Movement and it was disintegrating at that time, by the summer of '69, and I wanted to do something, have some experience, even if it was a solo experience. Vernon Jordan hired me to--. They had twenty counties in Georgia where they didn't even have anybody on rolodex as a possible voter registration worker, which was a revelation to me. I thought they were everywhere. There were a lot of counties where they had never been, they didn't know anybody, and they asked me basically to parachute into these tiny counties in a car by myself and scout for people that might be willing and able to administer a voter registration grant, all these tiny counties that had no black registered voters to speak of, Seminole County--. Not the ones where the Movement had been because they already had people there, but--.

DC: What part of Georgia?

TB: Southwest Georgia.

DC: In southwest Georgia.

TB: In southwest Georgia, all the way from--. I think Donalsonville in Seminole County was the very tip one there, along the Florida border, and up as far as Randolph County, where Cuthbert is?

DC: Mm hmm.

TB: And over Lee County and Schley County, but really tiny ones, where you drive in and there's the courthouse town and the Confederate statue and an automobile dealer and a couple of churches and that's it.

DC: Right. Did you run into what had been the Albany Movement and the Southwest Georgia Movement [at that point]?

TB: Well I did in the sense that they told me to go see C.B. King. [Laughs]

DC: Okay, right.

TB: Go see people and they gave me some names to go see, but basically he didn't know these people either. It was just kind of as a resource thing.

DC: These are places they just hadn't been to.

TB: Right. My job, I had twenty counties to do in sixty days so I had three days per county. I was just supposed to drive in, basically, and start looking around. That summer became a real life changer for me in two respects. First of all it was profoundly humbling in the sense that I had no idea what I was doing and it taught me that pretty rapidly. All I knew to do was to drive in--. It was easy to find the black part of town, because it was unpaved, and find the Baptist church because it had a sign on it, but my idea was to go to the black Baptist church and knock on the door and hope that I was

discovering the next Martin Luther King, or something, because that was my only idea of a civil rights leader. They all threw me out and said they had everything under control even though there were no black registered voters and you could see that they were scared. All of basically the black establishment figures threw me out, and then I knew just enough from reading about the Civil Rights Movement about SNCC and the more rebellious types, but how do you find the rebellious types, who might consider the established leaders Uncle Toms, and maybe they would know somebody who would be brave enough to do a voter registration project. So the only thing I knew to do there was to go into the juke joints and think, you know, maybe some of the gangster types, and that didn't work either. None of them were interested.

DC: So did it have to be an organization that would administer this?

TB: No, these were people.

DC: It could just be people--

TB: I'm looking for people.

DC: --who are willing to start.

TB: My quest to find a Stokely Carmichael or a Malcolm X type in these tiny, rural counties didn't work very well either.

DC: [Laughs]

TB: I did get arrested in a place called Bubba [Dew]'s Big Apple, outside of Cuthbert, Georgia, when the sheriff came in to this dry county with the Miller Beer man, to get his cut, I guess. I was trying to play poker in Bubba [Dew]'s poker game, hoping that would win enough respect that they would talk about voter registration but I was losing money and they weren't interested in voter registration and then the sheriff comes

in and arrests me. It was both terrifying and humorous, I guess a lot like the Movement.

But I knew I didn't know anything, but by the end of the summer very quickly I'm getting into new counties and just walking out into the cornfields, asking people in the fields, most of whom wouldn't even talk to me--some of them would run away--if there was anybody in the county who was--. I was trying to figure out what would be a successful word for authority figure or somebody who would do this and it was really hard for me to even make connections in that conversation, but of course eventually they started--. The only ones they would suggest were women, and I didn't even think about women, so I wound up going--. I had all these adventures and I still remember a lot of them to this day, and ultimately I found three people in three counties that I recommended and they all got voter registration grants and they were all headed by women, which I never would have dreamed, and they all had the same profession, which I really never would have dreamed; they were all midwives.

DC: Yeah, right.

TB: They had this natural authority and they would intimidate people who were scared to meet me. People were scared to come to a meeting in a church to meet a graduate student, an unthreatening graduate student, about voter registration and it took the authority of these midwives even to get people to come to a meeting. This experience was so overwhelming to me that I wrote a diary of it, and not just a summary diary. I tried to write it like a novel, or not like--. I didn't think of it like a novel. I tried to write down the dialogue because the language and the humor and the description was as important to me as anything, and I wrote it down and it was four hundred pages long by the end of the summer and I turned it in. Princeton wanted a memo about my

experiences, policy relevant observations, and in part I turned it in as a protest, saying that the language of policy could not reach the experiences that I'd had that summer, so I turned in this diary and it caused kind of a stink. It was four hundred pages. [Laughs]

DC: It couldn't be contained in a memo, either, right.

TB: That's what I meant. Well anyway, one of the professors sent it off to this magazine that started publishing excerpts of it, so the first thing I ever had published--it had never occurred to me to have a career as a writer or anything. I was still in graduate school at Princeton thinking between political activist and political theorist, political philosophy. I loved philosophy. Even in high school when I was thinking of being an orthopedic surgeon I had friends who had me read a lot of philosophy.

So this magazine started publishing [the diary], and when I finished my graduate degree I still didn't know what I wanted to do but I thought that maybe journalism would be a good halfway house between political activism and scholarship. Actually what I'd seen of political activism and scholarship made me like both of them less. [Laughs] But I had no other career ambition. I went to this magazine, *The Washington Monthly*, that had published these excerpts from my journal. That was the first thing I'd ever written that wasn't assigned by a teacher. The first thing that I ever got published I didn't submit to be published so it was really an accidental entry into journalism, but I went there and worked in the magazine for several years, at the height of the Vietnam War and the Pentagon Papers. Daniel Ellsberg brought us the Pentagon Papers before he took them to the *New York Times*. We didn't know what they were and we didn't publish them, but this was a huge time of upheaval, the end of the civil rights era, the height of the Vietnam War, and all this journalism.

DC: Do you remember some of the things that you wrote about, and did you start at the bottom there?

TB: Well it was a mom and pop magazine.

DC: Okay.

TB: Charlie Peters started it and he had a temporary editor. I was the first full time editor he hired. There were only three or four of us putting out this magazine and we did everything. We set the type and we wrote a lot of the articles and edited other people's and commissioned them and we would even, on the way to work, go into drugstores and count how many *Washington Monthlies* there were, just so we could figure out whether it was selling or not, so it was a real--.

DC: Right, every single thing.

TB: It was a real mom and pop operation. It's still going. But it was exhausting, both because we were so small and overworked but also because of the tension of the political time. I had divorced my first wife in the middle of all this, lost my marriage. It was really very chaotic.

DC: When had you gotten married?

TB: I got married--. I graduated from college on Thursday, got married on Saturday. I think it was the day of Bobby Kennedy's funeral, in June of '68. Then we went to Princeton and to Washington at the end of Princeton to work at the *Washington Monthly*.

DC: She didn't go with you in your Georgia summer.

TB: No, she didn't. She taught in Atlanta and stayed home, so she didn't go on that. She regretted that, actually, and maybe it would have been good, but it was--. Her

parents probably would have shot me, because it was not considered a thing--. It was not a normal thing to do.

DC: Where did you stay when you were out there in the counties?

TB: Usually I stayed in a motel but often if I had any hopes--. With the three people that--I stayed with them. I stayed in those houses because we could get more done. But a lot of counties nobody would put me up. [Laughs]

DC: Wouldn't put you up, right.

TB: So I had to stay in a motel and blow my whole ten dollars that I was getting for that day, very cheap motels. But out of all of that experience came two things, the beginning of writing, but the reason I wrote the diary was because I just had to--. The lesson that came out of there was I wrote the diary mostly because I was learning about race things by experiences that were not intellectual, that were really primal and very human. They were confounding me. I discovered a lot of folk wisdom but it was not in the normal language and not in the normal way, which is why I wanted to write down the exact dialogue of what people were saying to me. Years later as I stayed in journalism and I started writing books, because after a while in magazines I said, I don't think I am going to make up my mind what I want to do when I grow up. Writing is going to be a career and I don't want to be writing magazine articles my whole life so I'm going to try to write books as a way of doing this. I wrote several books and always asked my publisher if I could write about the Civil Rights Movement because that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to answer the question, where did the power come from that changed my life's interest to want to do this? So in a way I was trying to answer a personal question. I wanted to answer, where had this thing come from. I wasn't part of it and after ten or

fifteen years I began to reason that that might not be a bad thing, that if I were a part of it, it would skew--. Being an outsider is an advantage for observation and discovery, and at the time--. It was 1982, I'd written several other books, I'd broke in as a ghost writer, wrote John Dean's memoir of Watergate and then Bill Russell's autobiography, the basketball player, and then I wrote a novel and then I wrote a book about an international murder case, the murder of Orlando Letelier, Chilean ambassador blown up.

So I did books and I was always asking publishers, can I do King now? Can I do the Movement now? Finally I talked someone--because I knew it was a big project. But the rule that I had--I wanted to do this and finally got a contract in 1982; by then I had a two-year-old daughter and a son on the way--was that it was going to be a story-telling, non-analytical history, and that was because of all those experiences I had that summer. The reason I really wanted to do it was because I read everything I could get my hands on about the Civil Rights Movement and everything I read was very argumentative and abstract, and it was massaging all these labels of "militant" and "radical" and this, that and the other, and I found it all very unsatisfying. The expression I use now is I thought it was all fool's gold. In the West, if you're Platonic, you're taught to believe that you make discoveries, that the abstract ideas kind of command the details and that we reason down, but my experience in that summer was that I only really learned things--cross culturally when I was nervous and fearful always--I learned things when things were human enough that I forgot all about my categories and the way you analyze things and had this experience that kind of reduced me or broke me down and then I would reconstitute my outlook on all this. In other words, I thought the human and the storytelling was the vehicle for discovery, and I knew enough about history as a history

major to say that race in particular in American history has a proven power when you're using analytical constructs to distort reality: The Civil War, Reconstruction. I'd grown up studying the Redeemers, and what the Redeemers were, were basically the terrorists that threw out the Reconstruction governments and "redeemed" white supremacy in the South, so if you're having religious terms of respect and salvation applied to white terrorism to make people feel comfortable and obliterate the true history of Reconstruction then once you start using labels around something like this across the color line you can do anything and you can distort anything. I thought that the only antidote to that, which was, conveniently for me, a sense of the path to the discovery I wanted to actually talk to people about where all this Movement came from, was storytelling, was to try to take everything down to the level of stories that were so human that it would resist the distortion by labeling, and my proposal says that: This is going to be a storytelling history and because of that it's going to require a lot of interviews, it's going to require a lot of oral histories. I believe that cultures put in libraries what they're comfortable with and that this is not in the library and therefore you've got to go out and do interviews. This was fourteen years after Dr. King died and I felt that enough time had passed to have some historical perspective, but people were saying not enough, but if you waited too long then the people you needed to talk to would be dead.

So it was a delicate thing, and I thought, fourteen years; I've already lost some people that were really important to interview, like Stanley Levison, who was already dead. I would dearly have loved to have interviewed him. But a lot of people weren't, so that's how I embarked on that, conceived as a storytelling, narrative history, kind of out of my own experience. By then I had read Shelby Foote's three-volume history of the

Civil War and it fortified my--because I hadn't been a Civil War buff. It's the first thing I'd read about the Civil War, but it was pretty captivating to me, and I don't care about military analysis and rolling up the left flank and all this, but it was engrossing as a narrative story--

DC: In the way it was written.

TB: --and so I'm saying, here's a model for how you can do it.

DC: Were you challenged at all by the notion of a project about Martin Luther King that you would tell through these other characters who are unknown? Was there any suspicion about that project or was that something that you could--?

TB: What do you mean, "suspicion?"

DC: Well I mean was that a difficult sell?

TB: To the publisher?

DC: Yeah.

TB: Oh my, gosh, yes. Oh, gosh, yes. Well, this is professional in the business and the culture. Race books don't sell, that's what they would say. History books about race don't sell, so I certainly didn't say it was going to be more than one volume. I didn't know it was going to be more than one volume. I knew it was bigger--. All my other books had taken a year. I think I did the Dean book in nine months. The Russell book was maybe a year and a half, living in his basement. This proposal was for three years, which was big, to get a publisher--. I mean I fuss about the publisher sometimes and about publishing in general but Simon & Schuster gave me a contract to spend three years, which was three times longer than anything else, and it was going to be a narrative history of the civil rights era and it was written not as a biography of Dr. King. Bob

Moses is in my--. In the proposal I knew--and Diane Nash is in there--I knew that there were these other people and that you could help tell a storytelling history, even about Dr. King, only through these other people to some degree fighting for his ear or doing their own things or not. So I knew it was going to be big but I had no idea it was going to take me twenty-four years and stretch into three books.

DC: In that original proposal did you have a number of people that you thought you would talk to?

TB: Interview?

DC: Yeah.

TB: No. I just said I'm going to have to do a heck of a lot of interviews and then I'm also going to have to do a lot of archival research because you've got the presidential libraries, you've got the FBI. The Kennedy Library, just as I turned in the proposal, released the first recording--revealed, because nobody even knew that presidents had taped any meetings and phone calls--and the very first ones they released were the civil rights recordings. So I had an inkling that was going to be a lot of work, and it was more than I thought it was going to be, because it takes forever--. To this day--now this is what, almost twenty-eight years later--most of the presidential conversations--. And after Kennedy they discovered that Johnson taped and then they discovered that Nixon taped more than all the other presidents put together and in recent years we've discovered that Eisenhower did some tapes and Truman and even Roosevelt, but almost none of that has been transcribed. Michael Beschloss did some books transcribing a small fraction of the Johnson ones. Most of them haven't even been transcribed yet. The ones that I did I transcribed myself. I had to listen to them, and that's a really hard thing to [do].

So they haven't been transcribed, let alone put through the historical process to help understand how the presidents in this case were interacting with this, which to me is just an invaluable resource, so, yeah, there was a lot of work. The proposal said I'm going to do all the archival stuff, and I hope I discover a lot in there, but there's no substitute for interviews if you're going to try to get behind the scenes and into the conflict. My theory, which was very quickly validated, was that most of the Movement was about people in inner conflict and at one another's throats to some degree over what was going on, and that in a way is--how should I put it? In a way it's obvious. It's an antidote to melodrama, which is people not in conflict, a prayerful and serene black victim and a tobacco spitting Southern sheriff, and all that, so melodrama, which is no good, but because people are in conflict there was a natural tendency to hide the inner realities of what was going on, for strategic reasons if none other. If you're only ten percent of the population and leading a black movement and you're only a tiny fraction of that ten percent that are involved in the movement, and that tiny fraction of the ten percent is divided, not only between Martin Luther King and SNCC but within SCLC and within SNCC, then if you're sane you're going to be reluctant to reveal those divisions because you already don't have the normal tools of politics. To get people to talk about what was really going on was not something they were accustomed to doing. Now I was coming along long enough afterwards that if they thought about it, which I prodded them to do, they wouldn't think that it was going to cause any harm to reveal what was really going on and what were the dynamics within SNCC or inside the Freedom Rides or inside the things that were going, but my rule was I want to keep going until I get a sense

of what's really going on, whether it's J. Edgar Hoover or a sheriff or a sharecropper or Dr. King deciding what to do next.

DC: Do you have any particular striking revelations that you came across? In just sort of thinking for a second about some of the many discoveries that I'm sure you made, are there some favorites that you have, surprises, things that really surprised you?

TB: Well--. [Pause] Well I think the one that I got into earliest that--. Ah, there are so many. For openers that his name wasn't Martin Luther King and the family was very sensitive about that. You still can't say for certain that Daddy King changed his name to Martin Luther explicitly to ape Martin Luther because he had just visited Martin Luther's gravesite, but it makes a heck of a lot more sense than any alternative explanation because he had just within the last couple of years had a meteoric rise such that in the teeth of the Depression his tiny little congregation sent him around the world. I mean this is unbelievable for a black preacher in 1934 to be sent all over on this grand tour. There were headlines in the *Atlanta Daily World*: "Reverend King reaches Egypt," you know, [Laughs] on the front page of the paper. And he comes back through Berlin and went to all these Lutheran sites and comes home and changes his name to Martin Luther instead of Michael Luther, and of course changed young Mike's name because he was Junior and that embarrassed--. Now a lot of people did tell me that that embarrassed--. Dr. King assumed that's why he did it and it embarrassed him because it was his dad's big ego, you know, this grand, I'm on par with the founder of Protestantism. [Laughs]

DC: [Laughs] Right.

TB: Vernon Johns, I loved Vernon Johns. It was a tremendous risk. In fact my publisher when I turned in the first chapter said, as I told you race books don't sell and all

we've got going for us is there is a latent public interest in Martin Luther King and you're supposed to make him the central character and you turn in a first chapter that doesn't have Martin Luther King in it and is about somebody nobody has ever heard of, this Vernon Johns, a preacher. But to me he was the answer to something that had paralyzed me which was that all the research I had done you couldn't start a book about the Movement without some things that had been foreign to me about the culture of the black church and how it worked, and deacons, and relations between deacons and preachers, and different congregations, and the congregational history, and the association with the Hebrew scriptures rather than--. Why is it that virtually all black churches have names out of the Hebrew scriptures? Where does that come from, that whole culture? And yet that may be primary but I've also got a rule that you can't write any essays so it's got to be storytelling, so I felt a need to write an essay about the black church colliding with my rule that you couldn't write any essays and you needed to have storytelling.

I didn't know how to start the whole book for months and I was really in crisis until I stumbled on this--. I had a weird thing with Ralph Abernathy. Actually it grew out of an oral history thing. I was doing research all over the [place], doing first cut research because I'd keep going back to do research when I was writing, but I was in Memphis and this citizens' group, after Dr. King was killed, put together an oral history project there. It's a very famous--well, within the Movement it's [famous]. These are teachers and ministers, whites and blacks, who hadn't known each other so it was a big deal that they would even talk to one another, but they came together and said this world shaking event has happened here; we don't understand it but let's try to collect material, and they went out and did oral histories. One of the things that they did was that they

went to the TV stations and gathered up their outtakes, their film. This is the Mississippi Valley Collection at Memphis State University, and while I was paralyzed over how to start the book I was there doing research and I stayed in the Lorraine Motel, by the way, which was a flophouse. They didn't even have keys. It's now this fabulous museum but that's a real transformation from when I was there. I felt I wanted to sleep there, but you had to knock on the door to get them to let you into your room because the hookers had stolen all the keys, and I'm staying there in the Lorraine Motel.

DC: [Laughs]

TB: But then I'd go listen--. I'd go through these oral histories and copy them, this frantic daily research thing, and one of the things I went through [were] these TV outtakes--I just thought this was great--and they had one of Abernathy in the morgue on the night Dr. King was killed and he was being interviewed by this young white reporter, and I identified with the young white reporter a lot because I had interviewed Abernathy and he had been very frustrating, like a lot of them. He gave me the, oh, I was Martin's best friend, and stuff but it was all surface stuff.

DC: Mm hmm, you couldn't get through that.

TB: I couldn't get to really what was going on behind the scenes, but even my interviews I didn't have as much trouble as this white reporter was because Abernathy was basically in shock, he's in the morgue, and this white reporter's asking him, "What did you see? Did you hear the shot? Where did you go?" and Abernathy just tuned him out; he's not saying anything. The reporter got so frustrated he finally said, "Can you at least tell me when you first met Dr. King?" and it was like Abernathy came out of a trance and he said, "I first met my bosom friend, Martin, on a cold wintry January

morning when he arrived at my parsonage in the company of our common mentor, Vernon Johns, and I called my wife and I said, 'Vernon Johns is here. Juanita, fix the prophet's dinner.'” He started telling Vernon Johns stories, how he had sold lingerie for him and everything and how funny he was, and how learned he was, and how brilliant he was, and how he had gotten run out of Dexter Avenue, and I knew that Vernon Johns, just from my scholarly research, that he had been King's predecessor, but that's basically all I knew about him. Abernathy started telling all these Vernon Johns stories that were humorous, that were profound. He clearly looked up to him and he said King did too and he gave him advice about--. And also Johns told King not to go to that Dexter Avenue church because it was a den of vipers, that all the deacons were [high minded]--

DC: [Laughs] Right.

TB: --and this, that, and the other. So this was very rich material but what really interested me was that Vernon Johns meant so much to Ralph Abernathy that it seemed to bring him out of the shock, and he told all these stories to the point that the reporter, who hadn't been able to get Abernathy to say anything, got frustrated that he couldn't get him to shut up and he kept saying, [Laughs] “But, Dr. Abernathy, there are riots in Chicago and Washington is reportedly in flames,” and Abernathy was oblivious again. He's telling Vernon Johns stories. So to me that means this guy might be important enough, important in his own right, but he also might be a way of getting Abernathy to open up, so the next time I went to Abernathy I had as much Vernon Johns stuff as I could and I started asking him about Vernon Johns, and it was like putting a key in an engine that wouldn't start. He started talking about it and so did virtually every other preacher that I interviewed, so the Vernon Johns material, none of which was in the library, I mean

none, that whole chapter is written out of folk wisdom and interviews and very, very common and to my mind historiographically convincing because there was so much reinforcement, there were so many common stories, there was so much--. It was all in the realm of oral history but it seemed really strong to me, and so I wrote the first chapter. I thought you could tell the story of Vernon Johns in a storytelling way and get across the background not only of the black church but of the very milieu in which King, and even some of the divisions between his church and Abernathy's church that would be pertinent to the Freedom Rides and stuff that was going on in Montgomery.

DC: In this kind of prophetic character.

TB: So anyway, but that was because of the storytelling rule.

DC: Right. I've got to swap out the tape.

TB: So is this about more than you wanted?

DC: This is fantastic. Do you have more time, or do you want to--? It's twenty after 5:00.

TB: I think we're okay.

DC: Okay. Let me just start this tape right here. [Pause] Okay. So this is April the 17th, 2010, with the David Cline with Taylor Branch, tape number two. So we were just talking about how you found the beginning, I guess, for that story.

TB: Yeah, for what became *Parting the Waters*. All I knew was that it was the beginning of the King story, kind of before the bus boycott, really even before King was introduced. That chapter ends with Vernon Johns asking Martin Luther King to take him to Montgomery, basically the story that Abernathy told in the morgue. So that was it. We had to cut an awful lot. I was enthralled with the material. I did do what the proposal

said, meaning do lots of archival research. I started with Winthrop Jordan's *White Over Black*, reading books, because I didn't have that much background in it. I read constantly and then was going to the presidential libraries. The King Library, by the way, also opened in 1982, the same year that my proposal was, so there was a lot of material there, although doing research there was always an adventure.

DC: Were the materials--had they been processed? Were they in any kind of order?

TB: Yeah, they had been processed, but--. I don't want to get in--. It's another whole subject, but the King family was ambivalent to put it mildly about whether they really wanted all this material open. I don't know that they knew what all was in there and there were several times I would be there doing research and some lawyer would show up and they would close the whole thing and throw people out. But there was a lot of really good material there; it just required a lot of persistence.

The FBI reading room was even worse because they had it in a windowless room in the basement and you couldn't even go to the--. They had all this ridiculous security-- not ridiculous, onerous security. You couldn't go to the bathroom when you were in there without being escorted. I think this was deliberate. You had to get escorted back outside the security perimeter and then go back through clearance, so to go to the bathroom took an hour, just to go pee. [Laughs] To me that was precious because I had to go through hundreds of thousands of pages of FBI [material] and you're just thumbing through, looking, scanning, first of all for a document with substance and second of all if the substance might become pertinent, and if it was then you had to mark it and get them to copy it, and that was onerous too. You had to write out the document so they could

identify it and put a paperclip in it. Well, this is bleary-eyed work and so if you have to stop and go to the bathroom you may have to do it other days, so I finally decided that FBI days were no coffee days, that in the morning I could not drink any coffee so that I would go through the whole day. [Laughs] These clerks there would be amazed that I would go in at 8:00 and leave at 4:00.

So the research was an adventure, reading the books was an adventure, but--.

DC: Was the extent of the wiretapping known when you began your research?

TB: Yes, but what I didn't know was which wiretap logs would be most useful. A lot of them they do these summaries and they only listen for the things that they think are pertinent. Then they have the memos that are written off the basis of the raw logs and the raw logs are very voluminous and for King they discarded a lot of them. The real mother lode, the gold mine, was that they didn't destroy the raw, as close as they have to verbatim, transcripts of the Stanley Levison files, not the Martin Luther King files. What they kept in the Martin Luther King files were the memos that they wrote to Hoover that Hoover would then distribute politically, and as a rule I came to discover that the logs, the raw logs, were pretty close, because I would take a raw log to Bayard Rustin [Laughs] of King talking to Bayard and say, "Bayard, look at this," and he'd say, "That looks pretty--. We talked that way. That was our language," and stuff like that. But the higher up it went, everybody in the FBI was basically interested in telling Hoover what he wanted to hear, so the higher up it went the more it got slanted.

So to some degree the Rustin but particularly the Stanley Levison raw files were-- they were voluminous but they were really useful. The Martin Luther King wiretap files are mostly the political memos and they're interesting but to me historically they're more

interesting about the FBI's state of mind, which was to put the most negative--. If Stanley Levison tells Martin Luther King that Negroes have no institutions of power from which to mount a movement, in the Martin Luther King file that might be a memo to Hoover saying, "Stanley Levison says Negroes may want to overthrow the government because they have no--," so it would have some sort of hostile interpretation, and a lot of times was not accurate. I mean that would be interesting if I wanted to make a point about the FBI but usually I wasn't trying to do that.

DC: Right, right.

TB: Anyway, it's a whole education just to get in there in the FBI world. The FBI was a large part, the presidential library system. The Kennedy Library was the most frustrating because they had all these restrictions in addition to classification restrictions. Classification is always a bane and a terror because I didn't really believe there was anything in there that would really affect the national security but they had a lot of national security materials blanked out, which always upsets a historian, but they also had material blanked out that said "Restricted on Guidance of Donor's Representative," which was a euphemistic kind of liberal's way of saying we think it might embarrass the Kennedy family so we're not going to let you see this. The Eisenhower Library was pretty good. The Johnson Library is great. It's a researcher's dream. Come dig in my bones. Yes, Lyndon was a wild character and nothing you find about Lyndon's going to embarrass us. They were really nice people. I wish the King Library was more like that.

DC: I was down in southwest Georgia this summer for sort of a mini reunion of some folks who had worked down there and many of them talked about--. There were many sort of local people that they remembered and reconnected with that weekend but

this one woman's name kept coming up, this one Mama Dolly that would put up many civil rights workers.

TB: In Terrell County?

DC: Yeah.

TB: In Dawson?

DC: Yeah.

TB: Yeah.

DC: And I was just curious if there were characters like this that you ran across in other places that were clearly not famous civil rights figures but were sort of local Movement characters that you got interested in, that seemed to begin to play a bigger role in these kind of stories for you, as someone who is very story driven?

TB: Well I got fascinated by a lot of people. Some of them didn't survive, like Vernon Dahmer. Clyde Kennard, the first guy that tried to go to Mississippi and they put him in prison. He had a big impact. The reason those stories became important is because they were mentors, like Medgar Evers, for some of the people who became big activists in the Movement. Lawrence Guyot, the Ladners, when they were telling the stories of the people that motivated them, that had been their mentors, they would tell me the stories about people like Dahmer and Kennard that I'd never really heard of. Then you've got to try to figure out, can you incorporate that into a narrative, is that going to work as a narrative.

The same thing happened in a whole different arena in the second volume when I'm doing a lot of work on Malcolm X because then I've got to go try to find people from within his world. That world is a very, very hidden recondite world that's been turned

inside out many times. It was conspiratorial. Some of the people stayed with Farrakhan and kind of stayed in a separate reality. Other people came out with Wallace Muhammad and there were grudge matches, and I don't know. It's kind of like *The Godfather* and the Old Testament rolled into one, so that was a real challenge. There were a lot of legendary characters in there, Benjamin Kareem, Captain Joseph, who was like the head of the soldiers in Mosque Number Seven. Getting to talk to Captain Joseph about what was really going on--. By the end of this I really came to the belief that the last year and a half of Malcolm's life is pretty much a blank. I did what I could to it but the drama of him when he's leaving, he's fleeing the country, he's gone a lot, he's in conflict with Elijah Muhammad, he's trying to make an alliance with Elijah's son, Wallace, who died not long ago and who I think is one of the most impressive people that I interviewed in the whole thing. Basically Wallace and Malcolm agreed on everything except Wallace said that Malcolm was impatient. [Laughs] But they agreed on everything else.

But, you know, you get into different fields. I had to learn stuff about Judaism to do Abraham Heschel and Heschel's relationship with King, and I didn't know very much about that at all. Everything tends to hurtle backwards. Trying to do Malcolm X, after a while people start saying, "Have you ever read the Koran? What do you know about the history of Islam?" and you realize that if these people are really struggling overtly and consciously, they say, to implant Islam solidly on American soil and to have African Americans become like the welcoming board or the acculturators of Islam to immigrants coming from all over the world, that you can't expect to go in there and say I don't know anything about Islam. You have to read the Koran at least enough to be able to say, my, gosh, I was really surprised by how many stories in there were familiar. [Laughs] That

they have Noah and they have all these things, they have Jesus, but then they have all this other language. “Well, what translation did you read? What are you [interested in]?”

DC: I assume you had to do the same for understanding the Old Testament prophet influence on these preachers.

TB: Yeah, right, and then to find out [that] everybody I talked to around King carried around Heschel’s *The Prophet*, which is a wonderful book. Particularly--it’s now in paperback--the first volume of Heschel’s two-volume *The Prophet* is just a fabulous, fabulous book. Then you have to interview those people, so.

DC: [Laughs] Right.

TB: It’s like a big house with a lot of surprise rooms, [with a] varying mix of rich intellectual or historical underpinnings and these characters.

DC: So by way of wrapping up and since we are at the SNCC fiftieth anniversary conference, I’m wondering if there is a particular unwritten story about SNCC that you can think of or something that--I don’t know if it’s something that struck you this weekend or that you’ve been thinking of that hasn’t been told about the SNCC story or that you think is missing?

TB: Well there’s a lot missing. I think to me the shocking gap--and I said this to some degree in my presentation. Of course I was trying to talk about the historiography of this. I think our national politics still suffers from a shocking gap between the actual reality of what the SNCC people and the larger Civil Rights Movement actually put into motion, which was so good and so broad. We wouldn’t be debating gay marriage in the United States if SNCC hadn’t shoved into motion such a profound discussion about what equal rights means and equal citizenship means, and the same thing with women and the

disabled and the elderly and all those other things that came out of there, but that's not part of the consciousness of most people. In other words, that women students go to West Point--which was a joke. Anybody would have laughed at you if you'd said girls are going to go to West Point at the time of the Movement, but now we don't think anything about it. We certainly don't associate that with the legacy of this Movement, and white Southerners don't associate the Sun Belt, and the prosperity, and the major league football and baseball teams, that were impossible during segregation, these blessings as--or the two-party political structure which was unfeasible under white supremacy. You had an atrophied one-party Democratic South so that you could enforce white supremacy and not allow the black vote to become a swing vote. Now, for better or worse, we have two-party competition. The Republicans by and large have replaced the old presumptive party of white people and the Democrats are new. They're trying out and not doing so well, but that's new. [It's a new thing.] But regardless of whether you're a Democrat or a Republican I think most people who think at all about civics would say it's better off to be a two-party competitive system, however it works. And the economy is certainly better. We're not the Hookworm Belt anymore, we're the Sun Belt.

All these are consequences of the Movement and the Movement doesn't get credit for it, but there are two layers of it beyond that. Beyond the empirical point it's our attitude toward politics. If they did get credit, or if we had a more integrated and historically accurate attitude toward politics, for all the upheaval of the 1960s it should have engendered political optimism and more people wanting to go into public service and more people saying we accomplished miracles, attacking really intractable problems that had paralyzed the country for a long time, and therefore this is really great, and the

people that sparked this or were the catalysts for this were people who studied democratic theory very deeply, took religion very seriously, violence very seriously, were perpetually trying to think about things, and took citizenship and democracy as a very profound challenge that belonged to them, and that we should be doing that too and that we could tackle our problems today. Instead, I think because we don't appreciate the legacy that these people [left], we've allowed our culture to say instead that politics is inherently malevolent or dangerous. The dominant idea is that politics is bad, that government is most likely a threat rather than an arbiter for political advancement, so our politics is crippled.

The people in the Movement I think to some degree are understandably hungry for credit, which is why you see here a lot of talk about who is the most unsung hero, just calling out names, and all that sort of thing, and I've complained this weekend openly to them saying, you need to get more historical perspective on this, in part to lay claim to the things that you did. They're maybe reluctant to lay claim to the benefits say to women, or--. I think they could lay claim to Nelson Mandela and the fall of the Berlin Wall, that nonviolence really has gone around the world, or even Tiananmen Square. This is a wonderful thing that they could lay claim to but in some respects they're reluctant to lay claim to it I think because it is so broad and it benefits non-black people that it would dilute the remaining struggle for black people, or dilute the racial character of it. Certainly it started out racial, but my argument is even if you want to draw attention to the racial achievements--or to the racial non-achievements, the things that are still there--it's in your interest to point out to people, this was a very powerful thing that

brought blessings to the world and should have gotten people to take politics more seriously, the way they took it.

But my interpretation as to the reason that they don't is that because one of the very first things that the country did to digest this revolution that came from people who had been invisible and that weren't really up close and personal, and they weren't friends of Walter Cronkite and all, you know, it was a foreign thing, was that they were never recognized for--. It was utterly foreign for people to treat them [as] what they really were. My word for them is modern founders. They were doing just what the founding fathers did. They were the political leaders of that period in the sense that they were confronting hierarchy and subjugation and figuring out ways to set in motion people's citizenship. That's just what Washington and Jefferson and Madison and all of them did. Nobody that I know of, [from colleges,] treats these black folks as modern founding fathers, but if we did, and we could bring ourselves to give them that kind of credit and to essentially humble the majority culture to treat them as a model, it would give them their due but more importantly it would become easier then to take seriously the kind of--. They were right at the bottom of democratic theory and religious theory and where they come together, and nonviolence, and all these things that we don't debate now, and we don't debate at our peril. That's been my--. This week at the fiftieth anniversary I've been trying to tell these people, it may be hard for you to get more historical perspective in order to lay claim to the broad benefits that you let loose, you may lose a little of your racial agenda, but not only would it be good for you and your racial agenda but it would be good for the country. If the country understood the benefits we wouldn't be so cynical

about politics. Part of our cynicism is because the country has been too fearful or too resentful to appreciate the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement.

DC: I think we can end there.

TB: Okay.

DC: Thank you very much for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcriber: Deborah Mitchum

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