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Interview

with

C. VANN WOODWARD

January 12, 1991

By John Egerton

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Project funded by the
Kathleen Price and Joseph M. Bryan Family Foundation

The Southern Oral History Program
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Original transcript on deposit at
The Southern Historical Collection
Louis Round Wilson Library

New Haven, Conn.

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A January 12, 1991

C. VANN WOODWARD: I never met him [Robert Vann, editor of the Pittsburgh Courier, a black newspaper]. I always thought of him as coming by his name in the way you might suspect. He came from North Carolina. My family came from there, the Vann part of it did, were slave-owning planters. Let's see, there's several generations, I think, the first one was the one that surfaced in Philadelphia, of any importance.

JOHN EGERTON: Right. Did you ever see his picture?

VW: I may have, but I don't know.

JE: That's Robert Vann of Ahoskie.

VW: Well, he sure looks white to me.

JE: Yeah, he really does. This is an interesting piece out of a local history from Ahoskie, in Hertford County, and he talks about growing up there.

VW: That's my people's country all right.

JE: He was quite a good journalist, and hard hitting. Pretty tough fellow.

VW: ( ).

JE: I believe that's right. I just thought I'd bring that along to show it to you in case you haven't seen it.

VW: Probably the nearest kin I've got [laughter] for all I know.

JE: It's quite possible. Do you remember, by chance, election night in November of '32? I believe you probably were at Emory. Were you there by then?

VW: I would have been teaching at Georgia Tech.

JE: You were teaching at Tech. So you were in Atlanta. Do you by any chance have any particular recollection of that election or that victory of Roosevelt, and whether it represented any significance in your mind?

VW: Nothing that flatters the historical mind because I had been influenced, I think, by Walter Lippmann and other commentators who underestimated Roosevelt. I didn't expect much of him, and I guess I'm not alone in that. He really was vague, and his plans were indefinite. I do [remember], as part of the anecdote, winning five bucks very easily. It was the day of his inauguration in March, and at lunch with my colleagues at Tech, we were talking about the future and some of them were saying, "Things are looking up, you know." 'Course, every bank in the country was closed that day. So I said, "So you're all optimists? Well, I've got five dollars to bet here that every bank in this country will be closed next year at this time." I have to correct that story. I said, "I'll be happy to bet anybody here five bucks that four months from today every bank will be closed." Would be July 4th. That was a cheap trick I played on them.

JE: In that early period when you had gone from Arkansas to Atlanta, you speak of the influence of your uncle Comer and of Rupert Vance and Will Alexander. Will Alexander at that time was in Atlanta and head of the Interracial Commission. I remember the little anecdote about some disparaging remark you made about him that got used to embarrass both of you. Something having to

do with the Angelo Herndon case, and someone asked you if Will Alexander could be depended on, and you sort of dismissed him as a conservative.

VW: That's right. This was in a private conversation and this turned out to be a communist who published that in the [laughter] . . . .

JE: Somewhat to your embarrassment?

VW: Somewhat to my embarrassment then. Dr. Will sent me a clipping from it. Said, "The cut of a friend is the unkindest of all." [Laughter]

JE: Was he, in fact, sort of a hopelessly paternalistic man as you look back on him, or did he have some vision about what this country needed?

VW: No. We're talking about 1933-4. He was talking to black leaders and knew them. He wasn't paternalistic. Of course, nowadays he would be judged, and I judged him then, as a conservative, and he was a conservative compared with a young nut like myself. But that's no discredit to him at the time. He's like my uncle. My uncle introduced me to John Hope, president of Atlanta University, and similarly I met Arthur Raper in Will Alexander's office and got to know him very well. Those acquaintances meant a great deal to me.

JE: And as you think back on them now, were they men who saw down the road enough to recognize that the South, and indeed the country, was going to have to address the racial issue in some substantive way, or was it just too early for that?

VW: Well, they were notable because they were informed and were seeking to inform themselves, and Raper was writing some interesting monographs, at that time, on lynching, tenant farmers, property system, and all that. Yeah, that was unusual. But this is a very relative matter. To think, at that time, of abolishing segregation. . . .

JE: It was an unthinkable thought, wasn't it, at that time?

VW: Well, maybe in a hundred years or more, but not within a few years. And I would never have predicted, myself, what would actually happen.

JE: Another of the friends you made along about that time was Saunders Redding. Was he teaching at one of the Atlanta universities then?

VW: At Atlanta University, I think, in the English Department.

JE: Was he about your age?

VW: About. I think he's still living.

JE: No, I don't think so. At least, John Franklin told me that he was not.

VW: ( )

JE: Then you went to Columbia and you traveled some. I can't remember if you came back to Atlanta before you went to Chapel Hill, or did you go from Columbia to Chapel Hill?

VW: I came back and taught a year at Georgia Tech and then another year after that I lost my job there. That was the year of Angelo Herndon.

JE: Right. Do you think there was any connection between your losing the job and that incident?

VW: I honestly couldn't claim it so. I was called in by the President. "You know where we live and how things are down here, I've got a job to hold," things like that. Mr. Britton was his name, but the thing was about thirty of us lost our jobs at one time.

JE: And it was an economic thing.

VW: Yes, rather than my action.

JE: When you went to Chapel Hill you had already known Howard Odum through a family connection. Is that right?

VW: Yes, but just. I met him and his parents lived about a mile down the road from my father who was then the head of Emery Junior College at Oxford. I must have had some correspondence with him. At any rate, I wrote him about the Tom Watson project and that I wanted to get money to go to the University and he'd said he'd be in Oxford visiting his parents and why didn't I drop in. I did.

JE: And had you known Vance before also, again through a family connection?

VW: Yes, much earlier because his father lived in Marrilton, Arkansas, and while I was in high school there in the twenties, his father built and ran a swimming pool. He hired me as one of the flunkies; not a lifesaver, but a bath-towel man. I knew Vance, but not very well. I knew him after I got to Chapel Hill.

JE: And you spent four or five years at Chapel Hill?

VW: No, three.

JE: Three years through the middle of the thirties where Odum and Vance and Guy and Guion Johnson were, and W.T. Couch and Paul Green. Chapel Hill was sort of a beacon in the South, wasn't it, in those years?

VW: Yes

JE:. . . .Frank Graham. Was there any other university in the South of that stature?

VW: Well, it depends on what you are looking for. There was certainly an intellectual community of a thriving kind at Vanderbilt in the same years, and a little earlier the Fugitive poets were there. Later on, about in the thirties, Cleanth Brooks and Red Warren went to LSU and started the Southern Review, so it [UNC] wasn't unique.

JE: But in terms, again, coming perhaps back to the focus on social issues and a more progressive way of looking at problems and whatnot, practically all these people I've named took some interest in those things one way or another. The Regionalists did, certainly Frank Graham did. Paul Green did. Couch had probably more black writers published at UNC Press than anybody in New York was publishing at that time.

VW: That wouldn't have taken a lot, you know.

JE: That's true. Nevertheless, it's sort of an unusual thing to see that interest.

VW: He published one book that shocked the hell out of him and that was called, What the Negro Wants.

JE: I'm coming to that because in a way, I'm sort of building up to a point here that I want to make in that I keep running into people who tell me now that when they were thinking of going to college or thinking of going to graduate school in the thirties that was their aspiration, to go there and work under Howard Odum, to go there and be a part of that whole social science thing.

VW: Well that wasn't true of me.

JE: It wasn't in your case, I know.

VW: I didn't take any work with Vance or Odum. I knew them and I feared Odum and I loved Vance.

JE: The sort of running scrap that was going on between the Fugitive-Agrarian school and the Regionalist school kind of continued through that period. They debated one another and so forth.

VW: Yes, they needled each other.

JE: Did you think of the Agrarians, then or now, as a. . . . Would it be too much of it as a simplification to think of them as sort of arch conservatives in this sort of philosophical construct?

VW: Well, some of them. They were different from each other. I knew some of them. I knew that they were not reactionaries like Warren. But I knew that Donaldson [Donald Davidson] was as conservative as you get. Some others were. But then there was that economist.

JE: H.C. Nixon? He turned out to be pretty liberal.

VW: We had the same ideas at that time. So I was glad to meet them. I did meet them in connection with an exchange of. . . . We had a debate. Actually, Couch did the debating, but I went along and met them all.

JE: Another sort of contentious relationship in that same period had nothing to do with Chapel Hill. I don't know if you knew either of these men, but Erskine Caldwell and James Agee had a running dislike for each other that centered on their interpretations of the poor South. You remember in addition to his novels, Caldwell wrote that book, You Have Seen Their Faces, that Margaret Bourke-White took the photographs for about two years before Agee and Evans went and did their thing. Agee was absolutely livid at this jerk going down there and doing that, you know, sort of flying in and flying out. So he went and stayed four weeks which supposedly made a difference. Do you have any reflections on either one of those kinds of interpretations?

VW: Well, I met Caldwell, but much later, and he was pretty old. I was too. And I never met Agee. I liked his book but thought he was somewhat of a nut.

JE: Yes, he had a kind of an eccentric reputation. Strange fellow.

VW: So I never sought him out, though he was about my age, I think. A little younger maybe. I did not know either of the two photographers.

JE: Some journalists out of this period who called themselves liberals in a sort of classic sense--Virginius Dabney

being maybe the most prominent because he wrote a book called Liberalism in the South in '32, and George Fort Milton in Chattanooga and John Temple Graves in Birmingham. These were men who didn't shrink from the tag "liberal" at that time. They called themselves that and yet, as events were to prove, they became increasingly disaffected with the notions of liberalism that had anything to do with any kind of racial change, so that by the time Brown came along they were in the camp of the arch-conservatives.

VW: They'd been there all along.

JE: You think they had?

VW: I mean, I didn't know all of them. I knew some, but read them and. . . no, know they were [conservatives] even for that time. They were all what were called Henry Grady and Walter Hines Page liberals, when liberal really meant jerk.

JE: It's kind of interesting to read some of Dabney's things and to see him chiding the city of Richmond for giving some Communist itinerant a hard time; locked some guy up over there, roughed him up and put him in jail and he was saying, you know, this is sort of a tacky way to behave. Everything was distanced from any kind of actual involvement. He was a sort of a split-tails liberal, it seemed to me.

VW: Well, he was a decent guy and came of an old tradition, but that was a conservative tradition.

JE: Some folks of another vein, Myles Horton and Don West and H.L. Mitchell and Howard Kester. Did you know any of those fellows?

VW: Yes, I think I knew all of those except the last one you mentioned.

JE: Howard Kester. Buck Kester he was called. He was a sort of. . . Fellowship of Reconciliation and Committee of Southern Churchmen.

VW: I may have and I may not. The rest of them I did, especially Don West. West was a fellow-traveler and maybe further than that, I don't know, with the Party, the Communist Party, but also a genuine countryman, a Southerner. I liked him. I knew a good many fellow travelers.

JE: Well, in those times, I mean, it was not at all unusual for people to be interested in the Communist Party was it?

VW: No. I could have been called a fellow-traveler when I went to Russia in '32. I went there to see the future. That's where they told me it was. I came back somewhat more sophisticated.

JE: Did you come back impressed at all with what you had seen, or do you think of it now as a turning point away from that whole ideology?

VW: More of a turning point away. Of course, I'd just spent a year in New York in the bottom of the Depression and I got to Russia and I saw the same thing.

JE: Yes, right. A lot of poverty.

VW: Worse.

JE: Another man in this period who fascinates me is Claude Williams. Did you know him by any chance? He ended up being

President of that Commonwealth College in Meno, Arkansas, where Orville Faubus spent a little time.

VW: I remember him. I don't know whether I ever met him or not.

JE: He was a sharecropper's son from West Tennessee who got radicalized more through religion than any other experience and that was the time of the Social Gospel and whatnot. There were a number of people who kind of came in from that point of view. He was one of them. He's a fascinating man and I happened to find in the library at the University of Tennessee a week or two ago a transcript of a trial. He was tried for heresy by the Presbyterian Church in like 1951 or '52 for his Communist leanings and it's like a morality play to read this transcript. It's just an amazing document.

VW: And Myles Horton and his wife, they were fellow travelers, I guess you'd call them.

JE: But there never was a time, was there, when the South was in any remote danger from any kind of Communist. . . . I mean to look back on that now and think about that, we're talking about a handful of people whose ideas happened to coincide with some ideas, but in terms of a strategy or any sort of anti-government activity, it just seems ludicrous, does it not?

VW: Yes, in terms of reality and possibilities. You've read, I suppose about the Alabama black radical? Well, you know, the Reds tried, but they never got anywhere with the blacks.

JE: No, they couldn't seem to get very far with them or with the whites. While you were at Chapel Hill the textile

strike happened and you took an interest in that and so did Couch and Green. Were you close friends with the two of them?

VW: Much closer to Couch than to Green, though Green was always friendly and I liked him. But with Couch I was in and out of his house all the time and I was very close to him.

JE: Skipping ahead just a little bit on my chronology here, by the time that book came out, What the Negro Wants, which he had commissioned but then had deep second thoughts about when he saw the manuscript, and I think that Rayford Logan threatened him with a lawsuit if he didn't go ahead and publish that book according to my notes.

VW: Rayford did?

JE: Yes. He pressed him right to the wall. He said, "I've got a contract."

VW: Did Rayford edit that?

JE: He edited the book.

VW: And blacks wrote it?

JE: Right. They had agreed on the people who would contribute the essays. There was a careful construction of left, center, and right so that they had broad representation. Every last one of the essays came in saying segregation is the evil, that's what's got to go here, and Couch couldn't believe it. Now this is my interpretation of the notes.

VW: The book came out a little after I left.

JE: '44. You'd been gone several years.

VW: But I remember the struggle.

JE: And he wrote an introductory essay, Couch did, which did not do him any good. I mean it reads now like a document he would be ashamed of if he were still alive. I feel sure he would not wish that to have been something he left. Did you think of him as somewhat like Dabney and Milton and these other guys? A kind of a fair weather liberal?

VW: No, I didn't. Couch wasn't more liberal than that and he came from the poor folks and identified with them and there wasn't any Dabney gentility about him. He had a job and he didn't want to lose it, but he had courage, too. It failed him on that one. I don't know the details about why he left Chapel Hill. I guess he got a better job.

JE: Yes, he went to Chicago. I'm not sure either. He and Frank Graham didn't get along all that well, did they?

VW: Well, they had problems.

JE: He and Odum also had some disagreements.

VW: I was too junior then to be acquainted much with them. But I did get to know Frank Graham and lived right behind him in the home of the editor of the local paper--I just rented a room there--but I walked over to campus with him every now and then.

JE: He comes across to me now as the most genuine kind of human being.

VW: Yes, I was devoted to him and would do anything he told me. To illustrate, after the war I was called in. I'd been discharged. I mean, I was in the Navy. Called down at the Pentagon and I knew this wasn't anything usual. What they wanted was for me to write a history of the Joints Chiefs of Staff

during the Second World War. That, I knew, was quite a job and I was tempted. But, they said, "You've got to have an interview with our security officer." The colonel said, "Let's go in my room. Now look, my job is to get you in because they want you to do this. Not to keep you out. But I've got to ask you some questions." One of the first questions was about my relationship to the Association of the Advancement of. . .

JE: NAACP?

VW: No, the one that Frank Graham headed.

JE: The Southern Conference for Human Welfare?

VW: I said, "Yes, I was in it." "Did you hold an office in it?" I said, "I may have. I can't remember exactly." He said, "Was it important?" "Well, I'll tell you this right now. If Frank Graham had asked me to do anything I would not have a doubt. But you're giving me a hard time." So I didn't get the job.

JE: Did they turn you down?

VW: Yes.

JE: They turned you down because you had been a member of the Southern Conference?

VW: Well, I couldn't prove that. There may have been some more things too.

JE: Well, let's talk about the Southern Conference just for a minute. You went to that meeting in Birmingham in '38. Your name, at least, shows up on the. . .

VW: Does it? I can't remember.

JE: You were at Florida and your name shows up as, I think in the newspapers, as one of the delegates. You have no recollection of going there?

VW: Not offhand. I know I was a member and went to something, but where it was and when I. . . .

JE: The meetings took place in the Municipal Auditorium in Birmingham, the same auditorium where ten years later Strom Thurmond got the Dixiecrat nomination. Some few years after that Nat King Cole of Montgomery was beat up on the stage there and run out of town. That auditorium has had a checkered history. It's kind of an interesting building. But some of the meetings were also in churches nearby and the hotel and whatnot. One of the myths that has continued to circulate about this meeting: Frank Graham made the opening speech on Sunday night in the auditorium and Mrs. Roosevelt came the next day to make a speech. The story has been repeated in many versions that Mrs. Roosevelt came into this cavernous hall and saw that it was segregated and went down to the front and took a chair and put it in the middle of the aisle and sat in the aisle. I don't think it happened. I think what did happen was that when she arrived she was taken to a sort of a subcommittee meeting in a nearby church and there was segregation. She was supposed to be one of the speakers and she came in late with Aubrey Williams and sat down on the black side and someone came up to her and said, "You're supposed to be on the other side." She looked around and saw, and so she said, "I'll just sit up on the stage since I'm going to be speaking anyway." So she went up on the stage where there were black and

white people. The story has been told many times and I was going to ask you if you. . .

VW: I can't remember.

JE: But since you don't have any recollection of having been there. . .

VW: And if I were there I was in a minor position.

JE: You were pretty young then, you know, just beginning at Florida. Okay, skipping on a little bit, or in a way, looking back, by say 1940, that's Roosevelt's third term. He was elected the third time in '40. By then, whatever indications or feelings that seemed to have developed within the New Deal or without the New Deal about what it was going to do about the whole racial issue in the South had kind of settled down to an answer that said, "Not much." There were very few people there who stand out now. Aubrey Williams, Will Alexander, a few others, Southerners, who were influential in any way in the administration and whatever they were able to accomplish, and there were some things, but overall, the sense I have is that by the '40's, by the war, it was fairly clear that the New Deal had not, at least to that point, gotten around to this issue.

VW: No, they were backing off. By that time, of course, what was happening then is happening now. I mean, everything was concentrated on the war and its coming. But that doesn't explain or excuse the New Deal performance on the racial front. They just did not. . .

JE: It wasn't impressive, looking back on it, was it?

VW: No.

JE: TVA, for example. I was really struck. Here are all these northern liberals from Wisconsin, Ohio, Arthur Morgan and [David] Lilienthal and these people are real liberal folks, but the policies at TVA really did not contribute much at all to any kind of amelioration of racial problems--in hiring let alone the people who were displaced by dams, jobs within TVA. Any way you look at it, their contribution was miniscule on this issue and yet they were talking a pretty good game about social planning and progressive stuff and under a lot of fire for being a kind of a left wing organization inside the government. Does that seem right?

VW: Seems right to me. No, I never was a fiery New Dealer. I was for it, of course--it was the only thing around to be for--but I saw them fail again and again on the racial front--accepted the South as something they had to have.

JE: And they kind of used it pretty blatantly.

VW: And in my opinion, pretty much what J.F.K. did in 1960-61. He had to have the South.

JE: And so he found a way to do it. In these war years, there are a couple of things I want to ask you about. Well they kind of come together. Well, no, I guess in a way they are two separate things. There were some whites in that period, Lillian Smith, Dombroski, Foreman, Williams. . .

VW: Which Williams was that?

JE: Aubrey. And to some extent, Alexander, who I think in '44 or '45 wrote an article for. . .

VW: When he was in the Agriculture administration.

JE: Yes, right. And he finally wrote a piece for "Harper's" or "Atlantic" in about '44 or '45 saying the real problem here is segregation. "We'll never get the South straightened out if we don't take care of that problem." And I start wondering, can you think of anybody who you think was expressing this point of view publicly, openly in writing or otherwise in that period of time during the war or right after the war, saying, "We've got to deal with segregation. Jim Crow is really a problem that the South has to deal with."

VW: Anybody black you say?

JE: No, white at first.

VW: Anybody white. At what time?

JE: Say in the war years or right at the end of the war?

VW: That would take a bit of mind searching, you know. I was saying things of that sort myself, but I can't be sure that I'm in print on it. I think my book on Tom Watson indicated this, but as far as flatly coming out and saying, "Enough of this nonsense and it's unconstitutional to deprive citizens of equal rights," it's hard to say.

JE: Essentially what the black people who wrote <u>What the Negro Wants</u> were saying. There were no whites who were saying that at that time who stand out in your mind?

VW: Well, I couldn't be sure of that. I think Aubrey Williams is as likely as anybody. You haven't mentioned Virginia Durr. She would have said it and probably did.

JE: Yes. I suspect maybe so. Maybe Lucy Mason.

VW: Yeah, Lucy Mason would have said it. [interruption]

VW: No, I would hope you would check very carefully before they said there were no whites.

JE: Yes, I will.

VW: Because some of those people like Lucy Mason and Lillian Smith and Virginia Durr. I knew people who felt that way, and we were talking. . .

JE: That's really where your hearts were and your minds at that time.

VW: Yes, whether Virginia because her husband was in office at that time and lost his office. Anyway, no I think there were people saying it. Certainly they were feeling it and talking to each other.

JE: Right.

VW: To give you one example. It's a concrete example, and I think its worth mention, and that is in the Angelo Herndon case. Mrs. Tyson was a prominent social woman and also, oddly enough, a Socialist in Atlanta. She was elected chairman of the committee that we organized. Her son was in the ( ).

JE: I can't remember her name, but I know who you're talking about.

VW: Anyway, she was elected chairman and the best they could do for a vice chairman was me because I had a job at Georgia Tech and they called me professor--that would have been about 1932 or '33 so I would have been about twenty-four. But anyway, we agreed at that meeting that we were going to hold a big, as big as we could, a fund raising meeting. We had a

turnout of several hundred people at the opera house and they all sat together [i.e. not segregated by race].

JE: In '34 or '33?

VW: It would have been in '33. '32 or '33.

JE: Yes, that's unusual.

VW: It was a combination of labor and black folks, and the radical liberal whites.

JE: The Southern Regional Council got its start in '44 arising out of a meeting of blacks in Durham. Do you know about this meeting that was followed by another in Atlanta and then another in Richmond and they ended up coming back to Atlanta and forming this organization in '44.

VW: Those were war years and I wasn't here.

JE: You were away. That's right. Politicians in this time, like Maury Maverick and. . .

VW: I knew Maury Maverick. Maury was much taken by my book on Tom Watson and proposed that we collaborate on a book about Southern movements of this sort. I said I wanted to write a biography of Eugene Debs and he said, "For God's sake, come to your senses, man. They'll call you a Red." So that ended that.

JE: Maverick had a very short career in Congress; just one or two terms and he was gone before the thirties were over. Then he was in San Antonio, I think, as mayor of San Antonio for a long time, so he stayed around. Coming out of the war, when you went to Hopkins--and am I correct--you stayed there until after Brown? After '54?

VW: I was there from 1947 to 1961 when I came to Yale. But I didn't start teaching at Yale until '62. I got the job and left, went on leave. Then there were three years in California where I taught at a college out there.

JE: In those years when Truman became President, he took a couple of executive order steps to address segregation and then appointed the committee which Frank Graham and Mrs. Tilly from Atlanta were members of, and that document reads like the first American government document saying that segregation has to go. I think it may well be. Very straight forward, what they suggest and recommend. That's '47. That's the Federal government saying, "Jim Crow must go," for the first time.

VW: That was in '47?

JE: That was in '47.

VW: Those were Southern people?

JE: Well, two of them were. Frank Graham and Mrs. Tilly, but the others were Truman's appointees from around the country: a couple of blacks and I think Charlie Wilson from GM was the chairman of the committee. In a way, I kind of see the years between the end of the war--this is admittedly a sort of retrospective view, not one that I can imagine might have been held at the time--but '45 say until the election of '50 when Frank Graham and Claude Pepper and others lost, as a kind of a golden opportunity for the South to have maybe made some real strides to bring about some social change on its own terms.

VW: During the Truman administration?

JE: Yes. Do you think that's true or not?

VW: I would like to. I liked Harry Truman. But I suggest that you talk to Virginia Durr, but unfortunately, Virginia is biased because Harry Truman fired Cliff Durr, her husband, and she didn't like that. She's and outspoken woman. But she felt he let them down and the cause down generally. But compared with Roosevelt, he was to the left and compared with whatever came afterwards too, for quite a while.

JE: Yes, that's true. The South during all this time in these postwar years showed some signs of wanting to move forward. It had a handful of politicians like Sid McMath over in Arkansas and Jim Folsom and of course, Pepper and Frank Graham and others who were somewhat liberal.

VW: Liberal Southerners in the Congress.

JE: But by the time Graham and Pepper lost, it almost seems as if the demagogues were sort of back in control. They had the additional club of Communism to bang people over the head with if they got too far out of line and it got pretty quiet through the early fifties until Brown.

VW: And then all hell broke loose with that.

JE: Another thing that happened in this period. Paul Green brought Richard Wright to Chapel Hill with Orson Welles to work on the stage play of "Native Son."

VW: I wasn't there.

JE: You weren't there.

VW: When was that?

JE: In '45.

VW: No, I left in the thirties.

JE: But I thought that was kind of interesting and also about that same time, maybe a year or so later, Bayard Rustin and a group of people came through Chapel Hill riding a Greyhound bus to enforce the Supreme Court's recent decision of interstate travel was. . .

VW: Freedom riders.

JE: Kind of the early freedom riders, and they got arrested and jailed in Chapel Hill and spent time in jail there and had to come back a year later and be tried there and were convicted. Kind of an interesting little by-play during that time.

In reading [The Strange Career of] Jim Crow again, I get this feeling that the great social revolution that almost happened before the Civil war and then almost happened again in the Reconstruction period could be said to have presented itself as an opportunity for a third time right after world war II.

VW: Are you thinking about Nat Turner?

JE: Well, I'm thinking that in the 1840's and fifties there was some sentiment for abolition in the South.

VW: Yes, there was.

JE: There were people who felt the South could work out this problem if it would put its mind to it and they were essentially overwhelmed by the opposite view by the time the war came.

VW: Pretty good book by Kenneth Stamp on those people of the South who were abolitionists or near-abolitionists. Yes, there were those.

JE: And then again, the people you found like Harvey Blair and. . .

VW: They were individuals and not members of anything, but much of this earlier movement in the forties and fifties was religious. Quaker, Primitive Methodists and guild people.

JE: By the late 1940s when you were at Hopkins, you were interested in desegregating the Southern Historical Society which you and John Hope Franklin successfully maneuvered at Williamsburg. You did some research for Thurgood Marshall as background for the Brown case, and then finally you came down to Chapel Hill and gave that lecture right after Brown that became the Jim Crow book.

VW: It wasn't at Chapel Hill. It was in Virginia.

JE: I'm sorry. The University of Virginia, and that was the basis of the Jim Crow book. Did you feel any. . . . By this time your views were very firm about what the South needed to do in terms of race, and Jim Crow, it seems to me, is an eloquent statement of what history says the South by rights ought to do.

VW: Well, I was putting it in what it had done and what it had not done.

JE: But the implication is fairly clear that here is where it ought to go. You drew some criticism from some of your colleagues for that book and kept on drawing it some down through the years. Did you ever feel that it was in part, a resentment at your sense of activism, of taking a position, of not being detached and disinterested and separated from your subject?

VW: Well, I never really felt any resentment or criticism. There were critics, but I tried to treat them in this little book of mine called, Thinking Back. You might be interested in that.

JE: Yes, sir, I have read it.

VW: But I didn't feel much of that. Nothing much happened to the book in the first two years, but then it caught on. It's the only book I ever wrote that sold in the hundreds of thousands. Way up there. 700,000. Still selling.

JE: Still selling. Where does it fit in with your own assessment of your books? Do you think of it as being. . . . Well, how do you rank it?

VW: So far as books having an effect, I think it had more impact and practical effect than anything else. As for its importance in revising Southern history, it treated only one aspect and was narrowly focused, and other books were, I think, much more important and more difficult.

JE: With all that background and all that interest in race and the South going all the way back to the thirties, and indeed with your own involvement with Marshall and the NAACP prior to Brown, when that decision came down in May of '54, what feeling did you get? Were you surprised? Did it shock you that it turned out the way it did, or were you expecting that outcome?

VW: Of course, I was very much involved and I knew what had gone into the preparation of the case and the amicus curae brief prepared by the NAACP, and all of that. And the court showed signs of welcoming interest and I can't say it caught me off guard. I was of course enormously pleased, though I admit that

that phrase they put in there about "all deliberate speed," and I thought, "Well, how many decades does that mean?" Actually it wasn't as bad as it sounded. But I was not caught off guard or particularly surprised. Just very delighted.

JE: Did the unanimity of it surprise you?

VW: I guess so.

JE: That seems to be what a lot of people say, that they could conceive of it happening, but maybe five to four or six to three, not a nine to nothing. I think it surprised a lot of the conservatives in the South a lot, too. They were really caught off guard by that. I talked recently to Herman Talmadge; had an interesting conversation with him and that was one of the things that he said, that what surprised him most of all was that it was unanimous and that he was just flabbergasted that it was. He was fully expecting at least a couple or three members of the court to go the other way.

Throughout the whole Jim Crow thing, the sort of historic acquiescence of the North, and indeed, you say in Jim Crow that it was a Yankee invention, that segregation was really. . . . I think I'm not making that up.

VW: Well, I think I was quoting deloqueville. At least I could have--don't know if I did or not. The racial separations and tensions were greater in those states and territories which never had slavery than it was in the South. Of course, it's difficult to interpret that. I think there's something to it. People who have lived together for hundreds of years just are not going to be as tense about it. Their relations are established.

No doubt about that. So it's not altogether a flattering conclusion.

JE: These are some of the things that I find myself beginning to conclude. I guess I would appreciate more than anything your notes of caution if these sound ridiculous to you. I have a feeling that by 1950 it was fairly clear that the only way the South was going to change its racial pattern of segregation was by at least the courts and possibly a revolt among blacks and both of those things seemed out of the question at that time. I mean there was no evident. . . . But the courts were beginning and they had since the thirties had been handing down some decisions that seemed to be moving, the Supreme Court seemed to be moving in that direction, and so there was some reason to have hope there and then there were blacks who since that book from Chapel Hill in '44 had said a lot about race. But the institutions that had earlier been liberal, white institutions, the church, the university, the press, the political parties, even labor--it almost seems to me that in the thirties when racial questions were more abstract, those institutions were more potentially liberal in dealing with social questions than they had become by 1950 when race was very much of a real and present issue and the press. . .

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

JOHN EGERTON: . . . . Dabney, George Fort Milton in Chattanooga and John Temple Graves.

VANN WOODWARD: You see, I always thought of them as. . .

JE: And you've already said that that didn't represent a change.

VW: No. They were there all along. In this connection, I'll mention a book you'll run across eventually. It's not published yet, but will be shortly by a man I don't know, but I'm reviewing it for the New York Times and am very interested in it. It's by an author named Nicholas Lemann of New Orleans. Do you know him?

JE: Yes, I know who he is.

VW: Well, the book is called The Promised Land, and he dates much of the change from the end of sharecropping and with the mechanical cotton picker in 1944. I think he oversimplifies that, but maybe there's a point there. After that, sharecropping was over and so was dependence on labor for picking cotton and for weeding cotton, with chemical weeders and mechanical cotton pickers. So was segregation unnecessary.

JE: He sees that close a connection between the two?

VW: That may be putting it too strongly, but he's got a point.

JE: Well, do you see any case to be made that the institutions, the pillar institutions, failed the South in a time when it. . . . You know, the people in the South have always said, "Leave us alone and we'll fix it." You know, it's just

been part of our history to say to the North, "We'll fix it. Leave us alone."

VW: Said about slavery.

JE: Yes. Said it about slavery, said it about segregation. We've always said it about race. If we had been left to our own devices, would we ever have fixed it, in your view?

VW: Not for a very long time. I think it won't be too many generations before Americans will all be a little brown. But no, I think it would have been a very long time.

JE: A very long while. And so I guess my question is, was it these institutions that we look to for our wisdom, our belief structure, our political and economic guidance, the press, the church, the university, how did these institutions fare? How would you rate their performance through that period of time?

VW: In the period of the forties?

JE: In the forties and early fifties in terms of helping the South come to grips with its social problems.

VW: Well, except for the war years and except for three years in California which took me out of the racial issue at that time, but from the time I went out of the Navy and into Johns Hopkins in '47, no we were very--at least at Hopkins, I had some black students, mainly interested in graduate training, but I had black students then. When I came to Yale I made it known that I wanted good black students and I got them. They are now leading their professions, I might add. I wouldn't say that the educational institutions were ( ).

JE: What about the Southern ones?

VW: Of course, I was out of the South by that time and not keeping up with it and I'm not much help, frankly. I know the usual cases at Oklahoma Law School and there were various professional schools that won decisions admitting blacks, but those were legal and not moral questions. But I guess that's all I can say on that.

JE: Would it seem to you that maybe I'm overstating the case to say that that '45 to '50 period was a kind of a window of opportunity, if you will, when the South might have been able to fix its own social wagon a bit had it been willing to do it? And that when the time passed and the heat of the anti-Communism and all of that came, that it seemed very unlikely that it ever would? Or would it be more accurate to say that even in the forties it really had no realistic hope of doing anything voluntarily?

VW: Well, it's of course speculation, but I think you've put your finger on an essential point; that is, the Cold War came in '46 or '47 and that changed the whole of politics. It took the wind out of the sails of Truman and brought in General Eisenhower.

JE: In a way, it almost did to Truman what Vietnam did to [Lyndon B.] Johnson.

VW: Pretty much. You're not going to get into this as far as the Johnson [presidency]?

JE: No, sir, I'm not.

VW: Yes, its, I think, a reasonable expectation that if the Cold War hadn't come when it did and with such force, that there

were in the South forces that would have become more vocal, and more courageous than otherwise.

JE: When do you think personally, looking back, when do you think you saw the ultimate inevitability of Brown or of some kind of very dramatic change finally come into the South?

VW: Well, I guess it was in Atlanta.

JE: In the thirties?

VW: Yes and there were big black universities and colleges there and I knew people there. A simple minded anecdote, but, "Enough of this nonsense," I said in 1932. I knew a woman, a librarian, at Atlanta University; a young woman, but older than I was. In other words, this wasn't an affair of the heart. I knew her and she said, "There's going to be a big inaugural ball at Atlanta University and why don't you go?" I said, "You're on." So I went with her.

JE: An inauguration of the President?

VW: Yes, I can't remember now what the occasion was. Anyway, I went and asked the black students, the girls, to dance with me and they did. There had never been more uncomfortable people on sidelines.

JE: You could feel it.

VW: I could feel it. I went through with it, but that wasn't enough. There was a social hour at the women's college there.

JE: Spelman.

VW: Spelman. So I turned up at the tea hour and had tea with the coeds. [Laughter] A little story.

JE: It's an interesting anecdote, though, because obviously you were giving a lot more thought to this issue then in the early thirties than most people were.

VW: Well, yes, that was true.

JE: And indeed, I'm struck now by the number of people I've talked to of all political persuasions in the South who when I say, "What was your reaction when Brown came down?" they say, "Utter shock and amazement. I never thought, I never dreamed, I never. . . " It's as if they were awakened from a deep slumber at the notion that this kind of social change was imminent and yet a few people I've talked to recognized that twenty years before Brown that it had to be imminent at some point, or else the South. . . . No region as poor as the South, which could not afford one school system, one housing system, one health system, could ever dream of trying to have two and still catch up with the rest of the country. And it seems so obvious to me now, and yet it was not obvious to people then.

VW: No it wasn't. Of course, I was naive in these actions, but it came along within a few months, with the Angelo Herndon case and these two instances that I've mentioned, but it showed thinking on impulses. Not very rational.

JE: Yes. Do you think that you foresaw the indigenous uprising of blacks that came pretty much with the Montgomery bus boycott and all that followed that became the Civil Rights movement? Did you foresee that?

VW: It depends on what you mean.

JE: As a movement.

VW: I did not foresee, and was appalled, at what began at Watts and went on for four summers after, following Lyndon Johnson's civil rights and his voting rights bill. Actually it just seemed to me preposterous and outrageous. But that's not what you're asking about.

JE: No, I'm really wondering whether in '50, '51 and '52, even when you were working on the background for Brown, or even when Brown came down, was it possible for you to look ahead and say, "At some point the masses of blacks or large numbers of black people who live in the South are going to go to the streets to reinforce this court decision to bring about social change."

VW: I may have misunderstood you, but I thought you used the term violence. I don't consider that it became a movement of violence. It was nonviolent.

JE: No, I didn't mean to. Not at all.

VW: It was nonviolent and I think the most important thing about it, it would have failed if it hadn't been. It failed to do what the black power guys wanted to do, but that was doomed to fail anyway. They'd have been shot if they had carried on. But no, I knew that kind of person and I knew Martin King and the type of person he represented with a northern education and a southern background, so that didn't surprise me. And I went to the march in Selma and all that without any fear of any violence.

JE: I assume you never had any notion, even earlier on, that the idea of separate but equal could ever be made to work as a social policy. The Plessy policy, which by the time you came

along was thirty years old, had already demonstrated, had it not, that it could not rescue the South?

VW: It was a blatant rationalization of segregation, that's how it struck me. Back to the period we've been talking about, it was a combination of things that figured in my development in this lin, and that was in Arkansas when I was going to school there. How old I was and just when this happened I've forgotten now. But there was what was then called the Elaine riots?

JE: That was in 1919 or '20 right after the war.

VW: Was it that early? Well, I remember. Then I remember my father. . . . The Governor was named Brough. I believe he was from Johns Hopkins. I remember that name. He knew my father and entertained him at home. He got him to serve on a commission to go out there and report, not that he did anything or could do anything, but he did go. And through that I got a notion of the horror of what might happen and what was happening. I wasn't old enough to assess or understand it.

JE: Something your father conveyed to you verbally, do you suppose?

VW: I can't remember. By that time I was only eleven or twelve years old. My second such shocker about that time or maybe a little later was seeing a Klansman in uniform come into the Methodist Church that my father was a member of and march up and give a donation to the church and was thanked by the minister and walked out. That would have been around the 1920's.

JE: Do you remember Brown? The day of Brown? The day the decision came down, where you were? Did you celebrate that in any way?

VW: May 17, 1954. Yes, I celebrated. I remember it coincided with what would have been the last. . . . Well, shortly after or about that time, I got an invitation from the University of Virginia asking me to lecture on Southern history and I connected it to Brown.

JE: "This is my chance. This is my shot."

VW: Yes. And I had to do it fast because I had already accepted an invitation to teach for a year at Oxford, so I did it that summer.

JE: Do you remember the audience at Virginia when you gave that lecture?

VW: I remember that there were blacks in the audience and that they were not separate. How many I don't know. Maybe a hundred, maybe two hundred, but I did watch a man who I had reason to respect in the law school. He was a member of the law faculty there. I expected him to come up and say something positive. He came up and he didn't say a God damn thing. But that wasn't. . . . I don't think. . . .typical. I was received respectfully, but there weren't any fireworks about it. I was just a visiting professor.

JE: Well, it's a fascinating period of time. What I'm going to end up doing with this, I truly don't know. That probably sounds a little. . .

VW: No. You have got quite a subject. I'm sorry I've been so autobiographical, but. . .

JE: This is exactly what I wanted you to do, though. That's why I was so eager to come and talk to you.

VW: I've tried to be accurate and may have made mistakes. One does in these things. But I have recorded some of it in the book I mentioned, Thinking Back, although I haven't written much since then.

JE: Well, I certainly appreciate it.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW