

Interview with Eugene McLeMore, black lawyer, graduate of University of Mississippi Law School and Republican, April 2, 1974, by Jack Bass and Walter de Vries, transcribed by Linda Killen.

Eugene McLeMore: I am a member of the Mississippi Republican party. As a matter of fact I am on the central committee of the Mississippi Republican party. I'm the vice chairman, ~~of the~~ *and* legal council to the state Republican party. Now, all that says this: why am I a member of the Republican party? I believe there's a definite need in the South, and Mississippi in particular, for a strong two-party system. I believe that in order to bring about this two-party system, that it is necessary--and for whatever temporary abuses that one must go through in order to bring about these changes--he should be willing and able to accept it and take it as a part of bringing about constructive social, political and economic changes in the state. Having been born here in Mississippi and started off as most blacks working in the fields and hoeing cotton, picking cotton, *and* working on the hay fields on the Mississippi river, I know what happens to you with a one party system in my view. A one party system is a system ——— based on non-competition.

there's only one political party, it does not give the people a choice. And when people have a choice it appears to bring out competition. And that competition, when you get a strong two-party, Democrat and Republican party here fighting for survival, fighting for votes, I think it's going to help. The minorities in particular. But what helps the minorities, in my view, are also good for the country as a whole. But our state, and most of the old South, has been brought up on a strong, one-party system

that's been dominated in the Congress . . . the position in Congress has been dominated by our Senators and Representatives. And usually this has been a coalition, it has been a system of oppression. And I believe that regardless of some of the philosophies of some Republicans, that in the long term, by helping to create a strong two-party system, it will help blacks and I think it will help the state as a whole. Through competition.

Walter de Vries: Do very many blacks feel this way?

McLemore: Quite a few blacks, in my view, feel this way. Not many blacks are willing to. . . . Not putting myself as a martyr, because just living in Mississippi has been a strain. But not many blacks, I think, are willing to become identified with a political party in this day and time that on a national level appears to be promoting certain kinds of legislation to attempt to stifle or take back some of the rights that blacks have earned during the 'sixties. And many blacks see the Nixon administration as that kind of administration. And to a certain degree they might be right. But what I am more concerned about moreso--I'm concerned about what's happening on the national level--I'm also equally concerned or more-so about what's going to happen on the local level. About the people that go into our state houses. I'm concerned about the people who become our mayors and our governors. Now, let's look at it historically in our state in the last few years. One of the most liberal persons to run, ~~in terms of liberal not in terms of~~ I'm talking about liberal terms in

terms of wanting to bring together all the people, in my view--was the Republican candidate for governor. And I'm having problems with his name right now. He's ~~from~~ ~~Mississippi~~, Rubel Phillips, I thought, had a campaign. You know, whether he believed it or not, I really don't

know because I couldn't look at his heart. But he had a campaign based on, similar to what George Wallace ran on his first campaign, the time he lost. You know, a very pluralistic kind of campaign. ~~type~~ of ~~campaign~~. And you look at the Republican candidate that ran against Senator Eastland, Gil Carmichael, from Meridian. He ran the campaign in, I thought, a very dignified manner. And he stressed the need for all the people to participate in government. I never will forget one of his campaign speeches. Talking about the differences of black and white in Mississippi. And he said that black people want the same things that white people want.

You know, they would also like to have a boat to go fishing in on Saturdays. Something to this effect. And I think that's the kind of campaign and the kind of people that we ought to be working for.

W.D.V.: What about the strategy that some blacks believe, that the way to lift the oppressiveness on blacks is to have a third party that would run as independent of the two major political parties for local and state-wide office. Once you build that solidarity, then get back in to the Democrat and Republican party.

McLemore: I think again, this could be one of the ways of building a structure. One of the ways. A third party movement, perhaps. But I think, again, that the fallacy is, let's build a strong third party to get back into one of the parties. That's been our mistake all the years. I think the important thing is that we are still going to have to become, you know, shift to both parties. And I think it's going to be to a certain degree. . . . I might go along with their theory to a certain degree that each party should not be able to depend on us when they had a wrong type candidate. In other words, I think there should be flexibility in what we're doing. You know, let's shift to the Democrat, let's shift to

the Republicans. It's going to be a strong party like you just mentioned that's beginning to shift from both sides according to the candidate. If you wanted to use that strategy. In addition to that, though--

W.D.V.: You say stay within the two parties?

McLemore: No, no. You said independent strategy. And I said independent strategy could be another way of doing what I'm concerned about doing. Bringing about competition. But you just stated that someone mentioned to you about building a strong independent party then, at some time in the future, once the party was strong, making a decision to go to one of THE parties.

W.D.V.: No, build a strong voting bloc, not necessarily an independent party.

McLemore: Okay, okay, build a strong bloc. Fine. Now after building that bloc, from your comment it appeared that they were going to make a decision which party they were going to go to. And I say this again can be wrong. Because I think that if you're going to build that strong independent bloc, if you're going to use that approach, the independent bloc should be so flexible that it would shift to either political party according to the candidates and according to the races. But in addition to that, I think it equally important that we have some kind of a strong minority representation within both political parties to try to effectuate policies on a day-to-day, week-to-week, month-to-month level as they relate to the minorities *in the* state as a whole. I believe that just the mere fact that I am in the Republican party and the mere fact that I've been in some of the decision making processes, that I've been able to moderate or change certain views. And I believe that this is one of the ways that we can. . . . I don't believe that we're going to be

able to change the parties or change our way of life as quickly by working purely outside. I believe that if you want to use it, it should be a two-fold method. But I think that we should definitely have strong participation within party structure.

Jack Bass: Do you see yourself as a potential candidate sometime in the future as a Republican?

McLemore: That's a good question, because I really don't know. When I finished law school--

J.B.: You went to ole Miss.

McLemore: I went to ole Miss, right. When I was in school, undergraduate and the rest of it, of course I ran for political office all the time at school. Fortunately I was blessed, you know, I was very successful. When I finished law school I was concerned at that time as to whether I should run for political office. And now I don't know. Pros and cons on both sides. But I do know this. I will not run for political office in the next few years. I have no intentions of doing so right now. I believe that I can maybe be of greater service be attempting to get other people interested, other young people interested in running. Get blacks interested in running as Republicans. As well as Democrats.

W.D.V.: Is that working? Are you getting any blacks?

McLemore: We are. But to be honest with you, of course, the national situation is not helping us too much. Watergate isn't exactly helpful, you know, in terms of what we are attempting to do. But I still believe that it's just as essential now--or even more essential--since Watergate than it was before. Someone asked me before, you know, how can you really get involved in the Republican party during the time of Watergate situation? I think this is one of the most important *times* to become Republican.

I think it's a time right now when a party is in a state of crisis that you might be helpful in some way to bring order out of disorder. And you might, in some way, be able to bring about some positive changes in this new order that would benefit black people. At least I think it's worth an effort. You know, you can make a decision, I think. I had to make a very tough decision. My brother and I discussed this at length, many times. Both of us, in undergrad, were political scientists and we discussed these things and we think very similar to a certain degree. We both agreed that there should be blacks in the Republican party. But we couldn't agree who should be there. He said you shouldn't be. And really, at times, I agree with him and might even agree with him now. But I agreed that something should be done. So I tended to elicit

some of my friends. Because my friends would agree to go ~~with~~ ^{me} ~~me~~. So here I am.

J.B.: How did you get in the Republican party? My real question is, did they solicit you or you solicit them?

McLemore: You might say that it started in law school. One of my-- turned out to be one of my good conservative friends. We used to argue all the time. Was a Republican. He was a young Republican. Of course at that time I was a young Democrat. He's a member of the Republican party now and still a friend of mine. But of course we don't see each other as often and very seldom do we see each other. In law school we talked a lot because we had time. As a matter of fact I can remember sitting outside law school the night of the last Senatorial election--Brock and Gore. Of course, you know, I was pulling for Gore and he was pulling for Brock. I still had pure Democrat leanings. You know, we just argued half the night about who was the best candidate. He knew some of the people in

the Republican party. One time, when I was out of law school

for mayor campaign going on in Greenville. So I guess you might say the Republican party contacted me in that respect. Some people asked me if I wanted to run, why didn't I run for city council, wouldn't I run as a Republican. One of the reasons they had a Republican candidate in the race.

I was going to take more votes as a Republican candidate than a Democrat candidate. But, be as it may, they contacted me and asked me to run, you know, as a Republican.

W.D.V.: Did you?

McLemore: No.

J.B.: How long ago was this?

McLemore: Two and a half years ago, two years ago, something.

W.D.V.: Since '71 you've become vice chairman of the county party and deputy counsel of the state party and on the state executive committee.

McLemore: I guess it helps a lot. *To be black.*

W.D.V.: How many are there?

McLemore: You know, I'm not sure of the total number of people in the state Republican. . . . There's a black group in the state that meets every so often and I guess there must be 50 in that group. Very seldom you get the total 50.

W.D.V.: But in the county and state leadership positions, how many blacks are there?

McLemore: I'm not sure of the total number. I know two blacks represented the Republican party at the convention. No, I'm wrong. Three or four blacks. The national convention. I believe two delegates and two

alternates. Some kind of way like that. I'm not sure of the exact number. But I was not one of those chosen to go to the convention. So there are other people in the state, other blacks in the state, who see this as somehow an alternative method.

J.B.: Is it fair to say that generally in the black community the Republican party is perceived as a white man's party in Mississippi?

McLemore: No doubt about it. Hell, I would think that they--no doubt about it. As a matter of fact, in meeting with Republican chairmen in Chicago two months ago at the Hyatt-Regency, I told them at that meeting that. . . . At the time, of course, it came up about the Alabama Republican party saying they were having a hard time recruiting blacks. And I told them that one of the reasons you're going to have a hard time recruiting blacks is because black people in the South in Mississippi and other places see conservatism as being espoused by the Republicans as being nothing but a code word for racism.

W.D.V.: Is it?

McLemore: I don't think so. I think it's according to who you're talking to. I think it's according to who you're talking with. Some white people and some black people might perceive it as that. According to their own interests. I guess according to their community. According to the thinking of their community. But I don't perceive it as that, personally. I conceive conservatism in a sense

Of course, I discovered there just as many liberal racists as there are conservative racists. And found out that both want to control you. Whether you're liberal or whether you're conservative. Both want to control the black vote, the black mind, for whatever reason they have. Whether the reason is for them to be do-gooders or whether the reason is them doing it

purely for power and money. Whatever. In the final analysis, in most cases. So I don't like to look at liberalism or conservatism as being a racist philosophy, because I think there are racists in both. You know, when you look at it from that viewpoint. But I do believe that more blacks conceive of conservatism as being racist than they would liberal if you want to look at it on that basis. And of course in the way that they come off in news media and come off in other places, it's quite understandable why, in many cases. Because many times he says well, I'm going to cut the welfare roll. You know, you usually find that just in one of the conservative's stands. But, when you look much deeper in some of the programs, it also means that they have come with alternatives perhaps after making these decisions. But people do not look at what the alternatives are. Usually look at the first thing that's said. There are many people, in this state in particular, who left the Democratic party, came to the Republican party, in a sense, I think, for racial reasons. Because at the time when they came over from the Democratic party to the Republican party, the Republican party was in all respect a lily white party. You know, you had the black and tan Republicans. But white Republican more or less took over from the black and tan. And so the black and tan Republicans, as we know them, were more or less left out.

W.D.V.: Are there any of those left?

McLemore: Yes, we still have some. As a matter of fact a good friend of mine, James Evers, Evers and Evers Funeral Home, he's a black and tan Republican. As a matter of fact he's vice chairman of the state NAACP, next to Aaron *Henry*. He has a funeral home. He's a Republican, black and tan Republican. Of course he's now a member of the executive

committee of the Washington county Republican party. You have to make some decision, you know, but you make the decision, even if it is-- and that's on another premise--even if the party is conservative as we see it or based on racism. You have to make some decision, I think. Again, how can you best change that party. You may not be able to change it completely, but how do you best attempt to make use of it. You make it outside the party? And then attempt to get within there and bring about some changes. I would be one that believed that while both methods might be effective, I would believe that now is the time for more and more inter-departmental--I mean to say it's time to try to make some changes more within the structure. I feel the same way about General Motors and the rest of the big corporates, corporate structures. While I think it is important--our law firm sued a company. We ~~just~~

~~sued~~

try to bring about change in company policies. We're suing five or six other companies on Title Seven discrimination thing. But I believe, too, it's also important,

because it helps to get inside, to learn how an organization works. I think. To try to help change it for the better. I believe, again, this is one of the things that's important for party concerns. From within the party. And even if you've a white candidate, just try to make that white candidate understand some of the *racial* conditions in the community. As opposed to coming out without the benefit of any kind of counseling from a minority. So, in the final analysis, I believe, regardless of the philosophy of the party, that if you get in there and

can bring about some positive changes, I believe you should make an effort. Even if you leave in frustration a few years later. But I think you should try. I believe you owe it to your people and I think I owe it to myself, you know, to try. Because I think it's something that should be done.

W.D.V.: Do you think most blacks understand what you're trying to do?

McLemore: No, not at this time.

W.D.V.: So, what's their attitude toward you?

McLemore: Well, most see me as a black Republican and that I'm probably more like white folks in many respects and that probably out for purely monetary gains, I would think. Or for some other reason.

It's hard for them to perceive why I would do it, other than the fact that I tried to explain in the paper a couple of times as to what my position is. And I've stated my position in the paper very much like I've stated it here. That I think there's a definite need in our country for a strong two-party system in our state and I believe this is one of the ways to bring about. And that we need to have both a Republican and Democratic party out there fighting for the black vote. And I've stated that openly in the newspaper a number of times. As a matter of fact the Republican party are attempting to get my partner in my law firm to run against David Bowen in the second district. Going to have a big write-up on that. Declare ^{Ward} war. And I think the party will be willing to support a number of black candidates. It's just a matter of--

J.B.: Let me ask you this. You said they tried to get Ward to run against David Bowen, as a Republican. Here's a question of trying

to get a black Republican candidate to run against somebody who is perceived at least as a moderate to liberal Democrat. But the Republicans don't even challenge conservative Democratic Congressmen.

McLemore: I think that's a good analogy, to a certain degree.

J.B.: But what's your reaction to that. Would they get him to run against Jamie Whitten or Sonny Montgomery?

McLemore: Montgomery's a Democrat, but he might change [laughter]. I doubt it. I don't know. Of course, I think they would, as a matter of fact, as a Democratic candidate. I don't think the party would have that much concern, in the final analysis, if they thought the person they were running in some ways was moderating his views.

J.B.: I guess my real question is: Do you feel they're more anxious to beat Bowen because he's a moderate liberal or because he's a Democrat?

McLemore: Well, you've got two or three concerns here. Number one, the chairman of the Republican party lives in Bowen's district. I'm quite sure he would like to see a Republican in his district. That's number one. Number two is the fact that he is a Democrat and the Republican party has been successful in two other Congressional races. So it would stand to reason they would like to see him go. Third, of course, and probably make them a little more eager to get him is perhaps the fact that he is a moderate to liberal in his thinking.

J.B.: Am I correct that this is the type of competition you would like to see? Moderate candidates on both sides competing for black votes.

McLemore: Oh, I would. You say you've got the best of both

sides. ^{Which} ever candidate wins, it won't hurt you too bad. When you come down to that, you know. I'm not against seeing moderate candidates fight it out. I would much rather. . . it's a lot more competitive when you have ~~an extreme~~, moderate fighting an extremist for a position. You know, lot more competitive in the sense that ~~because~~ you've really got ~~an~~ more at stake. But I see nothing wrong with moderate candidates running. My personal view about Bowen is that Bowen is a good Representative. That's my personal view.

J.B.: What do you think would be the effect if the Republican party in Mississippi in 1975 runs a slate of state-wide candidates, for state-wide office, and includes one or two blacks on that slate?

McLemore: That's a good question. I've thought about that. You might want to ask yourself if a black was to get into public office on a state-wide slate can ^{he} win as a Democrat on a Republican ticket. When I say that, I say this. Due to the fact that the Republican party as a whole, I would think--well, I can't ^{say} the Republican party as a whole on the state level is more conservative than the Democrat party, really. I think they're pretty much even. If anything, I think some of the candidates run by the Republican organization have been more liberal. I don't think we'd have a chance.

J.B.: You think if there were a black Republican candidate for state-wide office--we're not talking about governor. A lesser office than governor, but still a state-wide office. Maybe treasurer or that level office.

McLemore: I would think that he would have a chance.

J.B.: You think the Republican party would give him full support?

McLemore: I think the Republican party would give him full support. He might have one or two counties back down, but I really believe the Republican party would support him. I really do. In this day and time, I think they would do it. I really do. Again, this is what we're talking about. If he is moderate in his thinking--when I say moderate in thinking, you know, men can go many different ways. When we say you're talking about moderation in thinking, to another person a moderate person could be an outright radical. Either side, right or left. But when I'm saying like that I'm saying probably a person in my view who tries to use a special philosophy of doing whatever is possible to bring about racial harmony for all the people of the state of Mississippi. That kind of philosophy. That's what I call moderation. That's the kind of philosophy I personally use quite a bit. In order to bring about change in our state it will have to be a unified effort. You will have to stress the need for black and white working together. I doubt very seriously, if I would run for office, that I would run on one purely strictly, so-called black slate.

I believe every effort should be made to integrate your campaign organization, staff, and get as many people that normally wouldn't be involved involved

And I think that's one of the secrets of success of the Maynard Jackson campaign. When Maynard Jackson ran ~~against~~ some years ago I worked for him. Not full time. I was working for the Southern Regional Council at that time.

But I worked for him and I thought he did a good job of trying to put together a nucleus of blacks and whites working together in his campaign. And he

seems to have kept that nucleus, that line of thinking, all the way through. And I believe that's one of the reasons why he did become mayor of Atlanta. *He* demonstrated that he could work with the power structure, with the business people on both sides, and still work and try to bring about equal opportunity, advances for minorities, without necessarily trying to crush the majority. You know, I think there has to be fair play on both sides.

J.B.: What do you think was the political effect upon black politics of the Evers campaign in 1971?

McLemore: I believe Evers' campaign did a lot to bring out black people to the polling places. And it probably brought out people who perhaps hadn't come out before or people who normally would have stayed at home. I think he brought out probably an extra few thousand people to vote against him. Outside of that, I can't say a lot. You can say *he would* bring about a lot of pride and everything, but I believe that the works of the, his effort in the past and some others pretty much brought us to that point. Other than the fact I think it brought out a few extra thousand people, I can't say that it had a lot to do. Not a lot of impact. It's always good to see a black person running, personally. I guess in that respect blacks see a man running on a state-wide level.

J.B.: How about his advice to blacks to boycott that second primary in the governor's race and to vote for Swan in the first one as a strategy.

McLemore: I have to go back and rethink that one. Oh yeah, Swan, the singing man. ~~from~~ . I'm having problems with that one. But I think I was personally against it. I'm just trying to

think of . . .

~~go off~~ ^{I am} and not be sure of exactly of what I'm saying. I believe that I was against that particular stance of his. And I'm trying to think of why, exactly why. It had to be a very intricate kind of thing. I believe he said there wasn't much difference between what Swan and Waller, something like that, wasn't it?

W.D.V.: Swan, Waller and Sullivan.

McLemore: Yeah, that's right. Okay. The first one we had Swan, Waller and Sullivan, right? The first one. Okay. Now the second one we had Sullivan and Waller.

J.B.: the boycott on that one.

McLemore: He supported that on the second one.

W.D.V.: Said vote for Swan on the first one and boycott the second.

McLemore: Well, his thinking is, of course, in the first one perhaps that by him endorsing or telling blacks to vote for Swan--of course he knew it was going to get out in the news media--that maybe it would take some of his, the white folks probably wouldn't vote for him on that basis. And that the whites want more of a viable candidate. It might have boiled down that Swan had gotten the white vote ^{and} that it would put a choice to the people, a real choice. I say real choice. You know, you're offering two extremes, in a sense, to the average voter. If you've got a white, right winger and Evers, who was considered moderate to left winger. And the state would have a choice like it never had before.

J.B.: What's the predictable outcome of that choice in Mississippi?

McLemore: Of course, it would be Swan. And that was just the chance we had to take. I didn't think we should take that chance.

W.D.V.: How realistic was the strategy to start with?

McLemore: It wasn't realistic worth a damn.

W.D.V.: Why do it?

McLemore: I didn't agree with it. I think I told you, my thought-- I was trying to talk to you to give me some things about exactly who was in the race I was just having problems. I told you I disagreed but I couldn't just think why. Then I just explained to you why, in a sense. It wasn't good strategy. Because there's no way, you know, in my view, *Sullivan* ~~was~~ going to beat Swan. No doubt about that. Look at other intangibles and other tangible things. Let's say we did have thirty some percent black. And so you go out and you pull some of the liberal to moderate whites in. Do you think ~~of~~ that thirty percent blacks who are directly influenced by whites. You know, we are, as a whole in this state, a more serving people. Serving to consumers, you might say, because we don't own anything. We don't manufacture. Walk downtown here, you won't see one black store. What I'm saying is, we're controlled so much, to a certain degree, by people of more means. Your maids. People who go to work for. Who work for years for Mr. Charlie. And Mr. Charlie says I want you to run in and vote for *so - and - so* and you vote for Mr. So and so. Due to ~~that~~ thinking over years, she's going to just about go vote for the so and so. Because she feels, to a certain degree, that Mr. Charlie just might be looking in that booth when she pulls that lever. What I'm getting down to is that they're so conditioned, because of the fact that

we have worked for so long in certain positions, under certain people. That out of that thirty some percent I would say that the whites could control, without a problem, ten or fifteen percent, due to these certain kinds of positions, economic ties. So again, you're talking about-- even if Evers had been able to pull out some other votes, he still was going to lose by a whopping number. That's what I'm getting at. And again, one reason why I say perhaps, in some elections, if you get the party support, that party support means a lot more than just the fact that you've gotten Democrats or Republicans to support you. But it means also, that once you get that party support, that you're going to have many black people who are normally going to vote along with whatever their economic ties are. These same people are going to vote along with these people. In other words, the cooks and the maids and all the people who work for *white employer*, are going to vote along with them. So all this, I think, is in your favor, to a certain degree, if you really can get the party, either party, to come strongly behind a black candidate for office. I guess it worked very much like it is. V.O. Key said long time ago in Southern Politics that almost everything that happens in the South is related in some way to race. You know, black and white issue. And I still think it exists. But to a certain degree I still think V.O. Key's pretty much right in his analysis. It hasn't changed tremendously. I think it's been moderated some, but I still think in the final analysis--

W.D.V.: It's not as open but it's--

McLemore: --still there. Our style of politics is becoming more like the rest of the nation. In other words, a little more subtle. Due

to certain acts and civil rights--

J.B.: And it's changed also to the extent that blacks now have votes.

McLemore: Yeah, yeah. Of course.

J.B.: We were told, for example, that when the legislature passed this consumer protection act last week that it was a generally understood, underlying fact that that had racial overtones from the standpoint that the white legislators, many of whom are dependent on black votes, very much perceived that this was an issue that had very strong appeal to blacks. There was no clear racial thing and yet there was a lot of racial motivation in the voting in a reverse sense. Because they were responding to that more than to the traditional pressure from the white merchants. Retail merchants association opposed it.

McLemore: Right. Well, you know, ^{this racial} attitudinal thing, too. Now, for instance--I don't know too much of what happened before I got out of school, to be honest with you because I didn't have any occasion to call my state legislator or representative--but I know now, when I call them, I get response.

But if I call them in Jackson, they call me back. They want to know what my concern is. When I'm down there, you know, I really get first class treatment. What all this boils down to is the vote. But if you take the vote away--

W.D.V.: Well, if the voting rights act were not extended, what do you think would happen?

McLemore: Well, I think first of all they're going to start a very sophisticated campaign changing voting places. Very small,

sophisticated methods of harassment. Saying that, you know, on the application you left x off. You know, just all kind of little simple errors that a normal person--

J.B.: Are you talking about, as an example, the kind of bill that I understand the senate passed this year, the Mississippi senate, killed in the house, to require someone to bring along a means of positive identification for them to register?

McLemore: *Some* little sophisticated measures, I believe, would be instituted in order to at least not bring us back, but at least take some of the edge perhaps off any potential from some of our--

W.D.V.: But you wouldn't go all the way back?

McLemore: No, it wouldn't push us all the way back. Because I think now that we have enough people who are aware to keep it from going all the way back. But, you know, even with the voting rights act we only have one state representative. So it does mean that they could have an impact.

W.D.V.: Well, the basic political change in the last ten or fifteen years has been the enfranchisement of a large group of blacks. About 37 percent. The basis social change has been the massive integration of the school. Now, if the anti-busing amendment passed, as it has in the House, do you think the same thing would happen in terms of school integration? A movement back.

McLemore:

W.D.V.: You wouldn't bus for the purposes of integration. Just open it back up again. Neighborhood schools.

McLemore: Right. as you are stating it, it wouldn't take it all the way back, but it would take us part of the way back. Yes. Because it couldn't take us all the way back, to a certain degree, because I still think on the local level you're still going to be able to make a heavy impact with your city councils and the rest of many of your local people because of your voting strength.

J.B.: To what extent are Mississippi schools integrated? Whites usually tell us Mississippi is the most integrated state in the nation.

McLemore: Well, I don't know, except--I only deal in the Mississippi delta area. Of course, you know I go all over the state, but you just don't have the occasion to really look into them that close. As you know, there's a large private school apparatus in the state. There are two private schools here in Greenville. The Country Club private school and the poor private school. I call it the poor private school, but anyway, it's the Christian school. The Country Club school would have another name. I think it's the Day School. And in the Day School you have many of the kids from the rich and influential people in the community.

J.B.: My real question is, to what extent are the classrooms desegregated within the integrated schools?

McLemore: That's another good question because as I understand in some schools *they have* all white classes, two or three white students may be in the class or two or three blacks in a particular class. And then they use the system of IQ evaluation and your fast students.

So, to a certain degree, its not nearly as integrated within the school

system as it appears on the surface. As I understand it. I haven't gone to these schools or really checked everything out. Most of it is going from hearsay information I've been getting. Our law firm represents teachers. *there is*

man by the name of ~~_____~~ *lover* in Lenore, who's been a constant candidate for mayor. *He's been trying to get*

his wife back into the system. She'd left on a pregnancy leave and they wouldn't hire her back. Mainly was they tried to come up with

excuse why they couldn't hire her back. Inside information to the effect *that her husband's political* activities running for

mayor. Of course the district court just overruled the school board and now she must be offered a contract for the 74-75 school year. We

have other cases of principals who have been demoted. Demoted up to an administrative assistant to the superintendent with nothing to do

or demoted down to the junior high school principal or back to the

class room teaching. As a matter of fact I believe that the black principals and black administrators have been tremendously depleted

because of integration. Integration has helped, to a certain degree, and has hurt to a certain degree. The other key problem is the in-

sensitivity, in my view, of white faculty members to the concerns and background of their black students. I understand in

Greenville that's a real problem there. I understand there's one teacher ~~particularly~~

stated the fact that she hated to be there with all of them. She's only there because she was trying to get her kids an education over there at the all white private school. She's teaching in the public. Sure you have many such instances happen across the state every day.

And that really probably calls for a lot of kids drop out of school
because of frustration.

J.B.: What sort of a political alignment do you see developing once the Democratic party in Mississippi merges? The two Democratic parties in Mississippi merge.

McLemore: That's a good question. If there is a merger--I'm not even sure there's going to be a merger. Thought there was going to be one for so long, now I'm getting to the point where I'm very pessimistic about it. But of course I think that at some point and day it will be. If minorities from the Freedom Democratic Party or the loyalist party are in effect given policy making decisions on the areas, committees, it can't help but become a more moderate party in the state. Much more moderate party, I think. As far as the Republican party is concerned in its bid to become a strong challenger to the Democratic party. . . it's going to depend on the type candidates that they run for office. It's going to depend upon the type leadership that we have on the state level. Whether that leadership is going to be moderate in tone or whether its going to be reactionary in tone. Right now I think the Republican party, on the state-wide basis--

reference to Clarke Reed--I think that they're moderate in tone. And I think that the future leadership must be moderate--
 [End of side of tape]

--going to be a challenge, I think, in the long run, to the Democratic party. If we don't get that kind of moderate. . . if we don't continue to get the kind of moderate leadership that's necessary party will revert back to an all white political party. And I believe that would be a tragedy for our state and our people because then all the

issues would start coming up purely black and white. I think we'll be on the road back to what V.O. Key was talking about back in the 'forties and 'fifties. Back to that again. And it means that in areas such as the delta area here have strong liberal, moderate leadership. But in areas such as east Mississippi there are very few blacks, it means that you will have a annihilation of black leadership.

So I think this could be a mistake because it would become then a party of blacks against whites. And that, I think, would be a error.

W.D.V.: Do you see that happening?

McLemore: I don't see it happening. I don't believe it will happen. But I'm only throwing out that possibility of what would happen if we don't continue to have some kind of moderate leadership. And I hope it doesn't happen. And that's one of the reasons why I believe that I should continue to participate in the party. And other blacks to participate in the party. To try to ensure, as best you can, that doesn't happen. If it start happening, do the best you can to keep it from happening.

W.D.V.: How have you been received by the party?

McLemore: I would say that my reception has been good to excellent. Of course there have been some people, like in any party, who have not been too encouraged by my presence. But I would think as a whole the reception--really, I guess as a whole the reception has been excellent. The people that I come in contact with and talk with, you know, party members, have always received me pretty much as any other party member.

W.D.V.: So you intend to stay with it?

McLemore: Yes. At this time I think that I should. Unless I do some other things, you know. Because my general tendency, of course, is that I would like to do some other things. I enjoy when I work through Southern Regional Council. I've worked with Vern Jordan with voter education project.

J.B.: Has the voter education project done anything substantially since Vernon left?

McLemore: Not that I know of and we'll just leave it at that because I just don't know a lot about it. John *Lewis*, good friend of mine. I just wouldn't want to get into personalities. So I just don't know. But what I'm saying, that kind of work. That kind of work of getting out with the people. Still appeals to me even now. And deep in my heart--

W.D.V.: Well couldn't you do the same thing if you ran for public office?

McLemore: Well, yes and no. I think in doing it like that, you do it with a nonpartisan attitude. You attempt to, anyway. If I run for public office, I'd have a very partisan attitude. You know, whether I have it or not people are going to perceive me as having it. Therefore I believe I'd be able to help less people. But if you go in, in my view, on a nonpartisan basis, as people do who work like that, I believe a tendency to cross party lines more and perhaps be of more assistance. People now, that I would want to help to a certain degree, would look at me as being, you know, strictly *A* black in politics *77* or

On the other hand, if I was in the Democrat party, people look at me as

being strictly a Democrat. But maybe if you go into it on a purely nonpartisan basis. And I think George *Easen* is doing an excellent job with Southern Regional Council in trying to bring about other kinds of changes through the council. Such as long term planning on regional basis. Southeastern region

But I just believe that you can be more respected if you go into the thing on a nonpartisan basis. People don't see you as a threat. But when you come on as a party member or a party person or a party candidate or a person running for political office or in office, they see you as probably trying to feather your nest or trying to prepare for re-election. And of course to a certain degree many times you do things in your power to try to ensure your next election. When you're not under that kind of pressure I think it would work better both ways when you're not under that kind of pressure.

I happen to feel in Greenville one of the best candidates to run for political office in the last few years was a Republican who ran for mayor of Greenville. A little unknown guy who was a navy officer and he came down here and was running a tape shop, of all places. He lost by 40 votes to the incumbent. The incumbent beat him three times. And I believe he's a very sincere person and that if he becomes mayor of Greenville I believe it's going to be better for all of us. Because he sees things more in the view of a common person. He's kind of a common man in a sense. You know what I'm saying. He seems to understand the views of the average person a lot more than, let's say, many of the people I know. And I believe that he would make an excellent candidate. Of course, some of the people, ~~Demo-~~ crats in this area. Such as Ham Miller, who I think is an excellent

representative. He's a Democrat, but I think he's a good representative. I ~~think~~ ~~a good representative. Of course,~~

~~is a lot more political than Ham is.~~ Hanna seems to do more things, I think, you know, out of gut feeling, personal, deep feelings. Whereas I think Sonny would be more political. But both, I think are representing their district very well. Douglas Abraham is a Democratic state representative. Again, he's more like Sonny--

[Interruption]

J.B.: The delta representatives now in the legislature, are they much more responsive to--

McLemore: The representatives in this area are much more responsive now than they were a few years ago. I think it's because of black voters, right. But, you know, Greenville itself has been an unusually moderate town as far as many towns are concerned.

J.B.: How much of that is a reflection of the newspaper?

McLemore: I believe much of it. I have to give Hodding Carter a lot of credit. I think it does help. And of course, in addition to the paper, *the* business community have tried to keep the lid on it. You have a large number of Jews. Jews, they're going to make money. And you're not going to have a whole lot of interracial conflict if you're going to make money. You've got to face it. Of course and Jews, too, have been oppressed like all of us. And ~~I think they~~ in that respect. But I think the combination of your strong business community, your newspaper, your Jewish community, all this combined, I think, help keep a sense of moderation in your policies in Greenville.

J.B.: For blacks, would you consider Greenville the best place in Mississippi to live?

McLemore: I really don't know. I believe Greenville is one of the very best. Of course you have ^{a good place for} a family and everything. I consider it that.

You get a place like Greenville where you have moderate leadership. You only have one black--well, you have two blacks, but one within the city, and that's a black lady on the city council. And it only happened recently. You can kind of be lulled to sleep. It seems to take initiative away from you sometimes. To the average black person. We should be out there really hustling. Because of the moderate trend here you don't hustle as hard. Which means you never really put anybody in office. So it can be good on one side; it can beat the devil out of you on the other. But I guess when you put them all together, I would say that Greenville is still a nice place to live.

J.B.: Is there any kind of black political caucus state-wide in Mississippi?

McLemore: Not that I know of.

W.D.V.: Is there one within the Republican party? You mentioned fifty.

McLemore: I mentioned that the Republican party has a group of blacks who meet every so often. Every full moon or whenever they feel like they have an issue they ought to raise hell about, or something. Talk and discuss something about it. We used to sit around a round table and talk and discuss and things

For instance, during the campaign--I'm just going to throw out a couple of issues--during the campaign, we could deal pretty good with Thad Corcoran down in Jackson. You know, Republican candidate who I think has moderate views. But all of us were very dissatisfied with Trent Lott down there on the coast. Of course Trent didn't have a lot of blacks on the coast. You don't have as many blacks on the coast as you do on the delta.

Very hard liner, in my view, Trent Lott is. And we were very much dissatisfied with him. We wanted to try to get some of his views changed and stuff like that. Tried to get him to slack up a little.

J.B.: Did you talk to him?

McLemore: I personally didn't. I had been planning to see him.

J.B.: Did the group talk to him, anybody from the group?

McLemore: He got an expression of our views but I don't know that the group itself talked with him, because I was supposed to be the one to talk to him.

J.B.: How about in Carmichael's race? Was there any black input in his campaign?

McLemore: Yeah, yeah. Lot of black input. As a matter of fact, *one* black ^{was} working for him. I can name one who worked a lot with him. One who did a lot of campaign work for him.

J.B.: Do you foresee any sort of black political organization, or black political caucus, developing in Mississippi, where black Democrats and Republicans get together just to discuss black issues?

McLemore: I think we're going to have to. You take Hodding Carter. Hodding Carter, in my view, is a very fine man.

A good liberal Democrat. Sound liberal. Clarke Reed is a good, sound conservative, in my view. That's where they are. They're just that close, like brothers.

So I'm saying the same view. I think it's time for blacks to get like that. And I think blacks are talking like that more than before. Regardless of who's in power, let's see if we can convince them to do it for our people.

[Interruption.]

Charles Young, out of Meridian, black, who supported McGovern initially. Charles Evers was for Shirley Chisholm, but in fact I think he really went along with ~~with~~

Humphrey in the state more or less, Democrat party. Except, you know, Charles who was with Shirley. and the rest of them were for Humphrey, including, I believe, Carter. But Charles was one of those who was with McGovern from the beginning. But anyway, Charles sees a need for all of us, I think, to pull together, to discuss issues, regardless of our party. And I believe we're slowly coming to that point. But we talk a lot of reform sometimes, and I've seen

There's a conference coming up, I believe, at Toogaloo College around the 11th of this month to talk about probably the same thing. A black leadership conference. I think I'll be attending that conference.

because usually we have a tendency to invite people who think like us
and most people

But I believe that I'm very moderate in my thinking. And ~~when I at-~~
~~tempt to get~~ ^{And} that is my thinking, just like when
 Martin Luther King was assassinated. I went through a hell of a
 period of readjustment because all of a sudden I just felt *lost*.

Martin Luther, from my view, was a moderate man.
 And white Americans decided to kill him. That was about it.

th thing to do now is to _____ shoot that
 white son of a bitch. You go through a hell of an *adjustment* period.
 Almost like a suicidal period, when you sense that the system is not
 going to work at all, that there's probably no hope. And it really
 tears you to pieces when you're going through a period like that. And
 I had to go through a period, I thought, of serious readjustment after
 the assassination. And the reassessment was, you know, that very few
 Martin Luther Kings are going to come, but the efforts for freedom must
 go on *own* small way. Any other way would be a
 cop out.

J.B.: Is there anything else? Is there anything you wanted to
 comment on that we didn't cover.

McLemore: I think you did a good job. I can't think of anything.
 [End of interview.]