

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

WASHINGTON BOOKER
February 22, 2005

WILLOUGHBY ANDERSON: Today is Tuesday, February 22. The interviewer's name is Willoughby Anderson. I'm interviewing Washington Booker at his office in Birmingham for the Southern Oral History Program's Long Civil Rights Movement project. And if you would please say your name we'll see how you're picking up.

WASHINGTON BOOKER: Washington Booker.

WA: All right, so tell me again when did you go into the Marines?

WB: September 27, 1967.

WA: Okay. And where were you serving?

WB: Well, initially I went to Paris Island and that's where they trained Marines. And then I went to, left Paris Island, went to Camp Geiger, which was right outside Camp Lejuene. From Camp Lejuene I went to Fort Benning, Georgia. I volunteered for () out of boot camp, out of ITR, and I went to jump school at Benning. Left Benning, went to Pendleton and took advanced training in Pendleton, jungle warfare, then to Okinawa where we took more training and from Okinawa to Vietnam. Went to the First Battalion Third Marine Bravo Company and at that point I think our headquarters was in Quang Tri. It had moved north from Da Nang. But area operation was along the DMZ. When I got with the company we were along the () River. Not the (), the (). The () runs along the DMZ and the () runs north and south. There's a splash point at the head of the () where supplies were sent inland.

But that's a Navy story. And from there we went to, we went inland. We went to out on the dunes, out from () and we were in that area until around July.

Well, matter of fact, we spent the Fourth of July taking incoming artillery, major battle, major battle. I think we hit a regimental size unit and it was a regiment, no, we hit a division size unit and it was a regiment of us on line and we fought there for about four days and we were taking artillery. Now artillery is big shells. Shells for a 152 gun stands about three feet tall. The canister is about five inches, somewhere between three and five inches around. And the projectile will travel fifteen, someplace between fifteen and twenty miles. When it explodes it throws shrapnel. Now shrapnel is pieces of red hot metal traveling at about the speed of sound with jagged edges and various sizes from pieces about that big to pieces about that big and it throws the shrapnel approximately a thousand square meters. If a 152 round hit right here they would not find enough of the three of us to put in a teacup. It would literally just like dragging us over a gigantic grader. It would just tear us apart. And we were taking these shells. I guess we were taking the shells for about three days. Initially we were moving north and we hit the outer edges of this because it was a division command post that we had hit and that's what we were looking for. And we hit the outer edges of it. They had it bracketed with artillery fire and we started taking artillery fire from North Vietnam and they were shooting it and you could hear it. And we were out there for about four days until we got B-52's from Guam to come and bomb the guns that were over there so they'd stop shooting back over here and we were able to move.

That was, I guess, the first big, big firefight that I was in. The first firefight changes your whole opinion. When you get to the combat zone, you leave Paris

Island, first the Marine Corp does an excellent job of preparing you to go somewhere and kill somebody. You know, there's no doubt in your mind that, you know, all you want to do is for them to say you can kill them and you are ready to go. So when you get to Nam or any combat zone, you know, you're all fired up. You know, you're ready and you're going. It last until people next to you start dying. And it kind of hits you like, you know, in boot camp the targets didn't shoot back. You know, when we were practicing they didn't shoot back at us like this. And people don't get up. It's not like they say, cut, and that's the end of the scene and all the dead folks get up and, you know. They're dead, you know. Their fathers, their mothers, their parents are never going to see them again, not alive. And the reality that this is for real and that you can die kind of hits you like a ton of bricks.

Your first thirty days and your last thirty days are the most dangerous times for you. And your first thirty days you're so new and so stupid you could do something just crazy to get you killed. Eventually you evolve. You make it through that first thirty days and you begin to learn the lay of the land. Now combat and what they teach you, the book, what they tell you in boot camp and what they instruct you to do and tell you and what you face when you get out there is two different things.

Probably like in most wars, and I'm not going to talk a long time about the war, but probably like in most wars we made a number of changes to weapons and created weapons to fit the situations that were not there. We went to Vietnam with the M-14. M-14 was too long, too heavy, right. The ammo for an M-14, you know, two magazines M-14 round may weigh five and a half pounds. You got to carry twenty magazines, you know, it's prohibitive. The M-16 was developed. We initially began

to take the slings off the M-16 and put it around the butt stock and put it around the front site blade and make shoulder straps that now come on weapons. But in that time they didn't. Before Nam there was no helicopter gun ship. They took the doors off of (). Somebody welded a pipe and then they mounted the 16 machine gun on it and they began to shoot from the helicopter. Now we have Apaches and Cobra and helicopters built with these kinds of inventions. But they all are developed in the process of the fight.

So the first thing you learn is that, "forget everything," well, not everything, except the basic stuff that you've been taught. But all of the stuff they're telling you about how you're going to fight this war and what you need to do, you know, it goes out of the window. The whole war, matter of fact, was a process of disregard and then adapting and perhaps all wars are like that, you know. But it was a process of disregard and then adapting, you know, doing what, you know. They would give us bug chow for leeches, right. But a cigarette works much better and won't leave the head in, right. They would give us, I mean you know there are all kinds of things that you can think about that they teach you one thing but when you get there you make the adjustment. And so that's the first thing and once you learn these adjustments and you forget the fear of death, which becomes relative when we begin to talk about the panther party, and how we came back from Nam. You begin to develop an attitude that, and it's crazy, but if I die I won't know nothing about it, you know. And they call it, I'm going to be profane. But it's called a "fuck it attitude." And they used to sometimes say like we'd be doing something and somebody would say "attitude check" and everybody would say "fuck it," you know. It was just, but that's how you

had to get. And so once you get that attitude you're actually safer because worrying about what's coming next and what's going to happen makes you so nervous that you do stupid stuff and you miss things, you don't see things. You get comfortable with the fact that, hey, I'm here. I need to do a job. If I get killed, okay, so I get killed, I'm gone, I don't know nothing about it. And once you get that attitude you are safer. Once you get down to thirty days left then it comes back. Now you're so nervous because you're saying God, I made it this far, you know, I've got thirty days. I've been here a year and I've got one month left and if I can make this one month without getting shot, blown up, or killed I'm going to make it out of here. But people get killed in those last thirty days. And so in between it's like it's the easy part. It's those first and last thirty days.

Losing the fear of death is, of course, one of the most significant things. It allows you to function. Now fear never leaves you. People who tell you they're not afraid are trying to fool you. Everybody is afraid of having harm done to them, natural human instinct, so people lie. But courage is the ability to function in spite of the fear and so you get in a firefight and initially there's that fear and you keep going and then fear gives away to this almost () surreal standing outside of the situation looking at it. You know, because it goes so fast. You know in a firefight it goes so fast. You know people are shooting. Folks are running. Bombs are going off, everything is going on and you function on automatic, you know. You have to identify where the fire is, who is the enemy, who to shoot, you know, and if it's more than one, which one you ought to shoot first. And all this happens faster than you can

do it consciously and so it's the training and the repetition of the training that comes back and you do it. But, you know, it's just routine.

A lot of days you don't see nothing, you don't hear nothing, you walk in the jungle, you see the apes. You know, you see the flowers and the trees, you know, the monkeys. It's beautiful country. Vietnam was a beautiful pristine country. I mean on the sides of some of those mountains you could see, on a clear day you could see ten or fifteen miles and there are rivers intersecting. There are mountain peaks and it's a beautiful, beautiful. It was a beautiful, it probably is again now but it was a beautiful place and when you weren't fighting you could really enjoy it.

And then some days when I got to Nam it was not unusual to fight two days, I mean all day long. All day long and in the middle of the night when they thought you were asleep, boom, it breaks out again, you know, four days, five days in a row until your eyes get about this big and your hands get like this.

But you go through all that and the trip is that like one day you're in the jungle running patrol and seventy-two hours later you're at the bus station downtown. You know, you've been in the jungle a year and a month, right, tracking and killing human beings and, you know all of a sudden you're downtown, seventy-two hours. You know, it's like okay, come on, let's go. And now everything that you've learned, all the senses that you've developed, you know, just it's all, you hear too many noises. You know, in the jungle it's so quiet at night. It's just quiet and your senses get so shocked. I used to do this. I used to follow people by their scent through buildings. People would come down the hall and go in the office I would follow them. I always know what door they went in because you get like that. I can lay in the bed in the

apartment in private and hear people's footsteps outside the house on the sidewalk that's about from here to the middle of the lot outside and I hear them walking. You know because your senses get that keen. And so now you've got to drink a pint of Jack Daniels so you can go to sleep, you know, to kind of put your senses to sleep and go to sleep.

Nobody wanted to talk about the war because it was very bad situation. It's trauma and it's been suppressed for a year, you know, for the sake of control. And then all of a sudden it's like, you know, okay, ya'll pretend ya'll haven't been nowhere and didn't do nothing because we're going to pretend because we don't want to talk about it. And that's a whole 'nother series of problems.

But men, when you find, and I guess this is more relevant to what you are here to talk about, then when you get back and you find the same kinds of discrimination and in Alabama a history of violence towards African Americans, the same kind of police brutality, the same kind of, you know, disrespect and oppression. It's like, I just came back from risking my life for a year, risking death for a year in theory to support some people I didn't even know. I don't even know why I was there. It does not make sense for me not to risk my life here to fight for my people. And so it was on. It was just on, you know.

Two things you have learned. You crack the myth of, and nothing personal, you crack the myth of the white man as superman, which you grew up with. You know, John Wayne fastest on the draw. Everybody in a fight, flying through the air, white man is superman but then you go into the combat with young white men who suffer the same fears and have the same kinds of shortcomings and are not invincible,

you know. So you get back here and you look and you say heck, you ain't invincible. I know you can die just like me. You know, so what ya'll want to do. And you know, we began to follow the police and we stole the law books and books with city ordinance in it and we would get out and talk to folks. We'd get out and they didn't know what to do. You know, because they had never faced armed black men before.

There was a time in Alabama when I was growing up one police officer could come in a bar or any place, it could be a hundred black people in there and he'd make everybody get up against the wall. Unbelievable, isn't it, but true. I mean but true. And this is the kind of power that the fear of the lynchings and all those kinds of things through the years had generated. And initially they were initiated for the sake of control. But, you know, generation after generation and so all of a sudden these cops who I used to have and black folks break and run and one cop, you know, now here's one black man saying you know, "Jack, what ya'll want to do. You know, we got guns, ya'll got guns. What ya'll want to do. Ya'll start shooting, we're going to start shooting." And it's like, "hold on one second, where'd they get these niggers from." (Laughter) "These ain't like them World War II niggers," you know. And it got at one point the FBI stopped the city police from intervening. They couldn't stop us. They couldn't intervene because they were at a just loss. I mean they would not, they didn't know what they were facing. First out of the seven of us, four of us were combat veterans. Three of us had been in combat together and so, you know, it was like and they were like you know what we going to do. And the FBI said hold on, we know about this. We've dealt with these kind of folks out in California and other places. You people are going to get some of them killed and some of ya'll killed.

And so we ended up with the FBI following us around and tapping our phones and interviewing all of our friends and they would take pictures of us. We would take pictures of them taking pictures of us and it was like crazy.

The other side of what we did was political education classes. We did breakfast for kids program. This was before the federal government came in and started feeding hungry kids at school in the morning programs. And nobody gives us credit but these programs are in place directly because of us because, you know, rather than have us feeding these kids and teaching them, you know, the government just decided that they would do it. But we would go to merchants in the neighborhood and most of these merchants lived outside the neighborhood, had been in the neighborhoods for years, made their money on the community but put nothing back. So we would go to them and say you know, we want grits, we want eggs, we want sausage. We're going to feed the kids of the parents who you're ripping off with these high prices. You're going to have to put something back into the community. And, of course, they were afraid not to give us the stuff but at the same time they complained, you know, to the police.

But the people in the neighborhood, you know, they protected us. No guerrilla movement exists anywhere without the support of the people because the guerilla movement has no supply lines, no supply dumps, you know, no company ships. Everything that they do comes directly from the people. If the people don't embrace the movement the movement ceases to exist. No matter what anybody tells you it's just a fact and if you talk to folk who have been involved in guerilla operations, you know, which is a real fly in the ointment of the so-called insurgent movement in Iraq

and Iran right now, because these people can't move freely and protected through the neighborhood to get into strategic positions unless they have the cooperation of the people in the neighborhood. They can't be re-supplied, all of that.

And so we had the support of the neighborhood because, you know, the people, number one, we cut police brutality to like to, you know. We'd be out at night running patrols, you know. They didn't never know when we were following them or where we were because we'd just pop up, you know. If the police came down the hill from (), the phone rang in the office, you know, or somebody ran in the office and said the P is coming downhill, you know, because people felt safer. People feared the police more than they feared anybody, you know, anything else in the neighborhood and it shouldn't have been like that but it was. And so they looked to us to be the champions. We would get reports of police brutality from all over the city. We would go and investigate, right. We talked to the people who were there. We talked to the people who had their doors kicked down because they had no respect for anybody, that's your mama, your daddy, your little sister, nobody, you know. And they're rough up everybody in the house. We began to take these reports and so people got used to calling us, you know, and the police came. And we always moved in twos so we'd send out a team or we'd go out. We'd talk to everybody and find out what they saw.

Then we started to work with a young council member. Name was Richard Arrington, who was the only somebody who had enough guts to get up every Tuesday morning and talk about what had happened, you know. And this is what happened and these were the folks who were brutalized and so it became a regular thing and it got

him on the FBI radar too and they started watching him and tapping his phone. Sometimes we would go up to the Center For Higher Education and sometimes we'd meet him in other places but always we were getting information, you know, about what had happened when these attacks had happened. And he became, matter of fact, the reason he became mayor is because he was the champion. He had become the champion of police brutality and everybody knew that and so when Bonita Carter was killed it was only natural. And black folks didn't realize until that point that we had a majority vote but it was almost a natural occurrence.

But anyway, we started working with this young council member, educated, you know, had been a teacher and all of that, who would appear to be just the opposite of where we were. But we had people, black business people, black educators, who would give us money, who would give us cars and weapons. I mean, you know, they'd call or they'd meet us at a church some place. They didn't want, you know, they didn't want the attention. They were afraid of what but they wanted us to keep going, you know. And all of the vehicles, everything we had, like I said, we could not have existed had we not had the support of the community. Had they not really whether they, you know, they didn't get out and tell everybody or make known, you know, but in the things that they needed to do for us, you know, they just got done. And you would be surprised at some of the people who gave us donations and who came and gave us everything like from automobiles to the firearms, the money, food, all that kind of stuff.

And so but anyway, we started working with brother Richard and at the time I think it was the beginning, it was just about that time when (), the whole, yeah, that

whole program was instituted. We were more idealistic than realists. We embraced all black people without scrutiny, without reservations, without anything. And so when the FBI began to send informants and agents provocateurs among us, you know, it never crossed our minds that this brother who just came in and talking about kill the pig and all of that and seemed to be more violent than anybody, is in actuality an FBI agent. And it never dawned on us and it was the same thing that made, it's the thing that made us strong but it was also our weakness. It was the fact that we embraced everybody in the community without, you know, qualifications or reservations, that endeared us to the community but at the same time it made us vulnerable to the kind of infiltrations that went on right across the, and once it got real bad then we didn't even know who to trust.

We found out one of our biggest, who we thought was one of our biggest supporters, Perry O. Carlisle, prophet Carlisle, was working for the sheriff, you know. Meriwether, Steve Meriwether, who they recruited from the phone company or some place like that because he lived in Birmingham, you know. We found out later in trials, you know, that he was an FBI informant. And these people, Robert Jakes, oh, I want their names in history. Okay, I want their names, that's why I say their names, you know, because I want folks to understand you know if somebody happens to listen to this fifty years from today, you know, I want them to know who these people were. These were people, who were working for the FBI and for the sheriff and who sold us out, you know.

There is a difference, there are all kinds of contradictions, you know. There was a contradiction within the struggle. People within the struggle disagree on which

way the struggle should be headed. Old folks in the struggle disagree with young people in the struggle. Then there's the contradiction within people in the struggle and the forces who enjoy the status quo and that's what it's all about. I was listening to something and this will go way back. I was listening to something on National Public Radio about the New York Transit System and black people's struggle in the New York Transit System in the 1800's, 1830, 1855. You know, first they were allowed to ride then they weren't and then, you know, they were beat up. It was one woman, I can't think of her name, but she was beaten and thrown off and she sued and she was awarded five hundred dollars. But there were many of these kinds of things. And finally I guess there was the draft riots of '62 and part of the thing with the draft riots was that, you know, why should I go fight to free these colored slaves when they're going to take my job once they get free, you know. I don't want to change the status quo because it may change the quality of my life. You know, they may take my job.

And so there's always on this side and you have to strive to understand the people you confront. You can't just hate them because you'll make foolish mistakes. You'll underestimate folks you hate. You attribute characteristics to them that they don't really have, which means, you're not dealing with them realistically. And so you have to try and understand what really motivates your enemy, what really, you know, to see their side. And so you know I understand I mean if you're privileged the natural inclination would be to protect the privilege. It ain't Christian. It ain't God like. But that's the way it is and so even within the movement there's going to be contradiction. But there should be discussion. These people, you know, had no ideological differences with us or did not really deny the fact that the thing that we

were fighting was unjust, you know. They were motivated by greed, purely by greed. In the case of prophet Carlisle he was a criminal. You know, he was a criminal. But he had a good relationship with the sheriff's department because he was a snitcher and so they put him on us and for a long time we even operated out of his building, which was bugged. You know, oh, man, this got real deep. And Meriwether, Steve Meriwether, who came to us and wanted, oh, he was saying, we ought to go shoot them and we ought to do this, and you know we found out later that almost certainly that the first thing you notice about an agent provocateur is that he always wants to do something that's violent that don't make no sense, that's probably going to get everybody killed, you know. And you're thinking oh, this is a dedicated brother. This brother (), he wouldn't be, you know, and all he's really trying to do is get you in a situation where you'll be killed or captured.

But anyway, our demise was the same demise as everybody else's. We ended up having people within our ranks who weren't really legitimate, who did not, and we made bad decisions. We made emotional decisions based on, you know, lack of knowledge. It's almost a throw back to the demonstrations. When I went downtown as a child and I marched I was marching for freedom. But had someone said okay, what is freedom, I would have been like uh, uh, ask me another question. I don't know, right? Liberation struggle with knowing some place in you that this ought not to be like this. And other people fight for liberation and freedom but not sitting down thinking, okay, so where are we going, what are we going to do besides just kill the pigs. I mean but you know that's that youthful zealously and that's what we had, but unrefined ideology or unrefined sense of, a real sense of direction. Quotes from

Chairman Mao and you know, tenth point platform and program, which are really just sound bites but not based on sound ideology that had depth, which gives you real direction. And so as they took the leaders it kind of dissolved. You know, we just kind of came apart at the seams. The shootout at () City was probably the key thing. When Doc was wounded, () was wounded and everybody was out there, Carlisle had, I was with Perry O. Carlisle, Mobile () the informant, and didn't even realize. We were all supposed to be going back to the house. We were all supposed to be in the house. But they sent me some place with him and he knowing that the sheriff was coming in force in the morning and that the thing was, they meant to kill us all in the house, right.

WA: Kill you?

WB: Yes. They shot up that house. I mean from all four directions, you know. It was like it was unbelievable how many rounds they pumped into that house. We were all supposed to be in there, right. They sent me some place with Carlisle, who left me at an apartment in Smithfield and said he'd be back and I sat there, went to sleep in a chair and when I woke up it was about six o'clock in the morning. I started trying to reach him then I finally reached the house out there and Doc told me the place is surrounded and I said okay, I'm on my way. That's where I was supposed to be. He said no, go to the radio station, go to the radio station, let people know what's happening. I kept trying to call Carlisle. He was gone. He could not be found. It was only later that we realized when we began to unravel things that we knew that he was working for the sheriff. And then later we found he had been working for the

sheriff. Long before we came on the scene he was an informant for the sheriff's department.

But anyway, that brought us to a, you know, we were able to get, our whole movement then turned into a defense fund, you know, everything else we were doing, political education classes, all that kind of stuff, kind of ground to a halt once you know. Defense movements become movements of their own and they eat up all your resources, all your time, and all your effort because now we're spending all our time going to churches and civic groups and talking to folk and trying to convince people to give to the defense fund for "the Birmingham Seven." And so the other kinds of things that we were doing, the political education classes and all of that kind of stuff, just kind of faded in the background as we became totally involved in the defense, you know, which ended up, you know, Doc ended up going, Doc ended up getting five years. () got five years. Brenda, I can't think of her last name and Robert Jakes both turned out to be informants, who would have also been killed in the house, but they were expendable. They should have been killed. Ronnie left. Ronnie was involved with Susan (), is a whole nother story. Susan's father had been one of the folk, had been put out of the country during the great red debate, red scare. He was a Communist and a socialist years and years before and had actually been sent into exile. I didn't even know before then that they actually put people out of the country, which they did. Ronnie and Susan went to Washington. Her father went to school with the then governor of Washington, who refused to expedite Ronnie back to Alabama because of the lack of justice for black people in Alabama. So as long as he stayed in Washington he was free, as long as he didn't leave the state of Washington,

which is like putting him in prison anyway, you know, the key thing. () they sent back to wherever it was in Georgia he was from and restricted him, put him on a hundred years or some crazy number kind of probation and one of the stipulations was he didn't come back into Alabama. Doc did his time, came back, was the activist around for a long time. Was involved in a whole lot of hunger programs, southern poverty. Not southern poverty, what's the other thing? Southern Law Program, but he was involved in all of that kind of stuff.

I kind of drifted into the underground and spent the next I guess six or seven years, whatever, outside, you know, no license, no social security card, no address, nothing, you know, there but not there, living in the underground. Doing all kinds of stuff, you know, criminal and otherwise, everything, just name it because I couldn't go back into the system. I couldn't just, you know, say okay, all right. It was so anti, you know. And so the next place was the underworld, you know, was the next logical place. And I guess I ended up back in the system through the arts. At some point I started putting together a theater group and we did dramas. We did poetry, music, and dance, productions would be (). We traveled all of the major colleges and universities and you know I did poetry and they did, you know, we did and I did that.

In the process of doing that the state of Alabama got some EASA money I guess in the late '70s and opened these artists in residence programs. And this is strange. This friend of Donna's who teaches at, what's the college in Columbia? You would know. There's a, it's not Bethune. But she now is a professor of dance and drama in Columbia, South Carolina. But Donna taught the dances. We had dances and dramas and then we had writers and I wrote poetry and plays and that kind of stuff

and Donna trained the dancers and (), who lived in Africa taught the drama. We had a whole cadre of drama. So they opened up these residences and you know we weren't getting rich doing theater. Black theater back in them days, you know, wasn't like Tyler Perry and them now. Back in them days, you know, you do something at a church or at a hall somewhere and folks would come but it wasn't the kind of business that it is today. The business that it is today was built on what we were doing but it was something altogether different. You did this because you loved it, because you felt like what you were doing and the message was important and so, you know, sometimes they'd take up a collection, you know, but most of the time, you know, it was like.

So when they opened up these residences, they opened up six across the state and so Donna said well, come ride to Montgomery with me. I'm going to go down and try out, because Donna had a master's in dance and she said I'm going to go down and try out for one of these positions. And so I said okay and so I just rode down there with her, right. So we get down there, was at the Montgomery Library downtown, that's where they had the tryouts, big old theater room they had in there and so everybody signed up and it was like, it may have been seventy-five or a hundred people there. And so I said I'm not going to go in there. You know, it was people there who had doctorates in music composition, all kinds of crazy stuff. The young lady, who ended up working also in Decatur, where I ended up, ended up getting a Fulbright. She played the harp and she got a Fulbright and when she left the EASA program she went to England, went to Europe. But these were the kinds of folks that were there, right. And so I was sitting outside on the steps and so they called my

name and I said tell the folks that's okay. You know, that's all right. And so Donna came out, "what, you came way down here! You ought to at least go in there! You ought to just at least go in there and just say so!" I went in, you know, and they had you come in and stand up in front of the folks and they asked you questions. I went in and sat on the stage and laid back, you know. I was just talking all flip, you know, because I didn't think, you know. So they said okay, well, let us hear some of your work. So I did some of my poetry, you know, and they said well, thank you, thank you. I got one of the six positions. Donna didn't. (Laughter) And I don't think she ever got over it, you know.

And that was the first that was like the bridge that brought me back within the system, you know. And I think from there I left there and into the political empowerment movement that Dick [Richard Arrington] was starting. I ended up back in Birmingham just about the time, well I was going back and forth. I was in Decatur and I was artist in residence for Decatur city schools, three days in the classroom, two were studio days and coming back and forth. And then Bonita Carter was killed and I went to see Dick to talk to him about you need to run for mayor, you know, because people were saying we got enough black folk in Birmingham now we could handle that now. And then, of course, you always got some Negroes saying, no, master didn't say we could have no black mayor. No, ya'll don't be doing that. So you always got them () Negro. They're going to be with us forever. They was in heaven. Oh, God, you ought not to be inventing no human being. That ain't right. They just ain't no! (Laughter) You know, so they're always going to be with us. They was with us then, you know.

And so finally we talked Dick into running. And I hadn't ever been in a campaign office in my life and ended up they got this building, I walked in and picked up an apron, put it on and started helping Tallmadge Foster build the cubicles for the campaign. And I ain't been home since, you know, ain't been home since. But that was scary too. Of course, the death threats began to come. We had to put together a security force that didn't nobody really want to be on. There was a brother named Fred who had worked in the Secret Service who had been fired for alcoholism. He was back in Birmingham. There was Ike who was at that time chief of security for Bruno's. But we were all supporters and so we kind of put together just a little security team.

And then the FBI, the night of the election, my God, you talking about something spiritual. The night of the election that day the FBI called the campaign and said that this group had brought in a hit man from Texas and that if Dick was elected they were going to try to kill him. So it got even thinner. (Laughter) You know, it got even thinner and like we were at the parliament house. It's now closed. It's right across from the armory. When we went in, you know, we were working that day and I guess about six we went to the hotel and we went upstairs and there were a couple of hundred of people I guess in the lobby. And so, you know, we spent most of that time from around six or six-thirty until the time we really started getting official counts, just checking the hotel, just trying to keep him secure because now, you know, it's real crazy. And so I had not been back outside. I had not even looked out the window. And so I guess about nine or ten Jimmy Carter called and said, you know, congratulations and all of that and I just happened to walk over and look out the

window and there were ten or twenty thousand people all around the hotel, just the whole hotel, just I mean as far as you could see. As far as you could see there were just, I'm sorry, and my voice dropped. But it was unbelievable, you know. Then calls started coming in from everywhere all over the country, probably all over the world, everybody people were calling in and saying you know. It was a real, real, real spiritual night, yeah. Of course, it was just the beginning of hell. (Laughter)

They just got up and you know, the attitude was then of people in city hall was like, okay, ya'll got it, now run. It was like you just get up and walk away. If you couldn't ask us the exact specific question to get exactly what you want, you know, so those first few years. Oh man, and then you know, Dick was the mayor but he wasn't the mayor. It was like when the brothers first got on the police force here, white folks would tell them you can't arrest me. You can't give me no ticket.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

BEGINNING OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

WB: ...and a slate that would create a majority black council. God didn't mean for ya'll to have! Lord knows, ya'll ain't got no business having no majority black vote! (Laughter) This city going to be a ghost town and we going, and so we had to fight. We had to fight (). We had to fight the people. And it was like, you know, we just got indicted. We lost miserably. You know, they just beat us real bad. And so took another four years and finally we began to get a council because it wasn't about whether he had a good idea or not. It was the fact that he was black. And if he said let's go over here they said we're going over here. But that's the swamp. Well, we don't give a damn. He said go that way, we're going this way. And it went like

that until we were finally able to start getting people on the council and who we could work with. And, of course, at that point the city took off and grew and moved faster and further than it had ever moved in the history of the city. He was, without question, he was the best mayor the city ever had. I mean statistically, you know, just rationally, objectively, if you look at the numbers all of the numbers say he was. And then, you know, things began to change. In the early '80s the republican party had a, right wing folk had a meeting in upstate New York. Black people voting, the rise of black politicians, black people seizing political power posed a problem. Three ways to deal with it, scare them off, buy them off, or discredit them. There is a study that was initially done in '83 called the Harassment of Black Elected Officials. Are you familiar with it?

WA: Un-huh, I think I actually have a copy.

WB: I still have a copy here. It covered all the United States. There were over like two thousand, twenty-five hundred cases and it was basically the same scenario. First there's a news story based on a rumor. Then there's an investigation based on the news story. Then there's another news story about the investigation. And it becomes self-perpetuating. Out of twenty-five hundred cases the scenario slight differences but always the same basic scenario. And the news stories that are always outlandish. Well, it was said that they did this and they did that, it was said that he, you know. Then there's this grand jury investigation that nobody ever finds out about anybody getting indicted but the fact that these are the things that the grand jury looked at, that there was money changed and all of this lasted until the next election. Now you've got an elected official running with all this. Win or lose, ninety

percent of the cases nothing ever happened. Nobody was ever indicted. Nobody was ever found guilty of anything. But the process and the media destroyed, you know, destroys the politicians, destroys the person. And so now you got people removed from office.

Dick was a classic example. () Brown who's an engineer whose daughter had been busted, her and her boyfriend, husband, whatever, for drugs in Atlanta, right. () Brown was doing work. He's from Damascus, he's my home boy, piece of work, (), he had been doing work with us in this other thing, right. He told the FBI that on this date he came to Birmingham and brought () a five thousand dollar prize in an envelope, right. FBI launches an investigation. There's a news story based on the FBI investigation, right. So it's cranking right along. Carolyn Knowles, who was Dick's secretary, who was a white woman, who was Dick's secretary, but Carolyn kept, like if you came to see Dick, you know, anything, she wrote down everything in her book. And so nobody had even talked to Carolyn and this thing was going on and everybody was scratching their heads, you know, and Carolyn came in and said Mr. Mayor, what was that date. And you know, he said well, it was November 12. And she said, well, November 12 you were in Washington, D.C. meeting with senator so-and-so and senator so-and-so. Boom, you know, there goes the whole.

So then the FBI they don't quit though. They back up and say we want to subpoena her date book. Going to subpoena her date book. So ya'll can pick a date that he was there? We just look this dumb because of the lighting. You know it's just the lighting. It ain't real. (Laughter) And so the judge issued a subpoena and, of course, Dick said ya'll are crazy. Tell me the date you're concerned about, I'll give

you the page. Tell me the date you say it happened, we'll show you that date but we can't give you the book because we already know you've already told one lie. And so it went back and forth and back and forth and the judge finally said if you don't give us the book we're going to put you in jail, going to put you in the penitentiary. And so Dick said ya'll have to do whatever ya'll got to do. So they ordered Dick to report at five o'clock to the federal courthouse downtown. So, of course, got to have a rally. (Laughter) So about two o'clock we're at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. About two-thirty they called in the bomb scare. We're going to blow the church up again. Yeah, we did that already. Didn't nobody leave. So I guess people are starting to gather at the courthouse, right. People would get off at five o'clock, right. And so by three-thirty they called back and said un-uh, we want him here by four o'clock, right. It was still about ten thousand people showed up. We had this big rally on the courthouse steps. I've got pictures at home. With this big rally we all walked him down to the federal courthouse and had this big rally on the courthouse steps. And then they took him down to Maxwell [minimum security federal compound near Montgomery] and he was down there three or four days and he finally worked out some kind of compromise. What we were told is that the U.S. Attorney got a call from the Attorney General and he said just point blank either indict him or leave him alone. Either indict him or leave him alone. And so it just kind of, you know, and all of the accusations that were made over that period nobody ever came back and said, you know, none of this stuff was true.

But you know we started out talking about but it was part of a whole scenario to undermine black political power. And for some reason, for some reason, America

sees bureaucrats in American government, qualified and (), everybody, see black political power organized as a national security threat. Martin Luther King was perceived as a national security threat. Without question Farrakhan is perceived as a national security threat. Nor the Million Man March that people try to make go away but we never talk about that many people never gathered for one reason any place else on earth but we're like we never even talk about it. It's like it never happened, you know. It's like, did you read about it? Of course, you read about it. It's like it never happened you know. That was perhaps one of the most significant events in human history and over two million people, you know, conservative estimate of me. But when you got people four blocks this way from the Capitol to the Potomac, you know, that's a lot. That's more than can get on the ark. That's a lot of folk. But that, you know, he's perceived as a national threat because he is a man who can say I want a million black men to come here and we came. And everybody was like, they had Army units on standby. They had brought tanks and troops in. Nobody knew what was going to happen. And the irony of it is that such a peace fell over Washington. The crime rate dropped and it was just, you know, even people who didn't support the march was talking about it was so peaceful, you know, a million people, over a million people. If you just say one million people, not a single incident, not a single argument or disparaging word and we just spread all over the city. It was a beautiful thing and all the folks who just, I mean but they panicked. You know, it was like we got to bring the Third Division, we got to bring them out of Fort Mead and got to have helicopters because they may try to (). You know, it wasn't about that. It wasn't about that. And I think and now I'm philosophizing, it's about guilt, that makes you

know certain people in certain places inside the bureaucracy feel like our empowerment is a threat to the status quo and maybe it is, you know. I don't know. How do you feel?

WA: (Laughter) Do I think that blacks in government—

WB: That's okay, I withdraw the question.

WA: Okay, thanks.

WB: Have I rambled enough for you for one day? Have I rambled?

WA: This has been great. I don't think you've rambled. It is about five but I do have a few more questions if that's okay.

WB: Go ahead, go ahead. You got a few more minutes?

(): Un-huh, I'm fine.

WA: Is that okay? So let me ask you just some specifics about the Alabama Black Liberation Front. Just, you know, when was it founded?

WB: Date?

WA: Were you an official Black Panther sub-unit, that kind of thing. Who started it, that kind of thing.

WB: It was seven of us who started it. I don't know the date.

WA: That's okay.

WB: The dates were irrelevant. I guess the first real meeting we had was in my mama's living room when Mike and Doc came from the Georgia Black Liberation Front and came over. And I guess after three, a couple or three months we began our affiliation with the Black Panther Party. We enlightened with the California and got the training and we became officially, he brought back, we had the newspaper and all

of that. There were never more than seven of us. There were people who came and went and who were there when the times, when there was no threat, you know. But there was never more. There was never more than seven of us. And, you know, I don't even remember the date we started but you can call the FBI and they got it. They can tell you. They can tell you a date, the time, how many people were there, and what was said. They do wonderful recording keeping.

WA: So tell me a little bit about why school breakfast.

WB: Because kids were hungry and it's hard for kids to learn when they're hungry and it was something we could all relate to. And, you know, it started in Oakland. They started doing them Oakland and it just spread and we had the same problem in Birmingham. We had kids coming out of Loveman Village and out of Little Korea and, you know, out of shotgun houses going to school in the morning, lot of them parents were already gone, had to be on their jobs, manual labor jobs over the mountain. If you worked over the mountain and the man wanted you at nine o'clock you know you had to leave home at seven, six-thirty or seven o'clock. And people worked hard and they worked long hours and a lot of times these kids were leaving home and no adult was there when they left. And in many cases when they got back either, you know. And so it was just a problem. It was a problem and it was (). These children just ate (). (Laughter) It meant something. It was tangible. It was something that needed doing and then you could begin to teach the kids. You know, you teach the children, you arm, you arm the next generation.

Digress. I went to an all black school. We were constantly taught that God will step in and protect you if you are righteous. Shadrach, Mechach, and Abednego,

Daniel in the lion's den, Sampson, the Bible is just full of stories where all you have to be is right and righteous and God will protect you. Little did they know they were training us to go in and face Bull Conner down in the middle of the street because we felt like we were right and nothing could stop us. They couldn't scare us because we felt like God was on our side. Same thing, you know, you begin to teach the children they have a responsibility to the community, that they are somebody, that they should be proud, that here's your real history, that we had people who were lawyers and doctors and that, you know. One of the most traumatic things for me was thinking that my history went back to the edge of the jungle somewhere. You know, not knowing that Egypt was in Africa and that the great pyramids were built by great African pharaohs and that there were great civilizations, the () civilization, and Timbuktu, and there's a history from one side of the continent to the other, greater Zimbabwe, all those kinds of things. All I knew as a child is that my history went back to the edge of the jungle where somebody came and took me and put me into slavery. You know what that does to you? And we had an opportunity to teach these kids that no, no, no, your people have done great things and you have the capacity to do great things and you also have a responsibility not just to yourself but to your community, which was an important message. And if you get any opportunity, you should off the pig. (Laughter) So, you know, it was a golden opportunity. (Laughter) Right?

WA: So which communities were you serving? Where were your offices?

WB: We had an office in Titusville and we had another one in Roosevelt City. But we served all of the communities because we went everywhere to do these reports. I mean the whole thing with Charles Cannon, look that case up. Jack Warren was

chief of police. His son was killed by, Charles Cannon was accused of it because Charles Cannon was somebody who worked for us in Collinsville, right. And he was active. He sold the newspaper in Collinsville, Black Panther newspaper, Collinsville, and he would be, you know. And so he had already been identified by the local cops on the beat over there as somebody who was connected and so Jack Warren's son, son of the police chief, who ran a service station there on the corner and who, you know, later it revealed that he had a habit of always pulling his pistol on folks, especially on, well, there was nobody on the neighborhood but black folks but he was very abusive, carried a big pistol and he always. Well, he pulled the pistol on the wrong brother one day and the brother shot him between the eyes, blowed his brains out. The brother left and went to Detroit. I know because I worked for Charles' lawyer and I did the investigation to find out exactly who because Charles was not. Boy, let me show you how things work. Charles was about five blocks ago at a shot house with fourteen people at the time that this man was killed and they convicted him of murder, sent him to the penitentiary. I mean we eventually got him out, got it overturned after he had did eight or nine years. Fourteen people, fourteen people saw this man at this one place and they convicted him of murder and sent him to the penitentiary. Look the case up. Look the case up. Robert Bryan handled the case.

But so we had people in different, we served all of the communities. We had people in different sides of town. We had places where we could meet in Smithfield, you know, people that would just open up their home. We could talk and, you know, people would come and get newspapers and sell them, you know. So we had offices in those two places but we responded all over the city.

WA: And my final follow-up questions, will you spell the name of the art scholarship that you got?

WB: EASA?

WA: Yeah.

WB: I don't know. She could spell it.

WA: Could you spell it?

(): No. I wasn't listening.

WB: It stood for something.

WA: I'll look it up maybe.

WB: It stood for something. Yeah, it stood for something. It was one of them federal programs with a name that long, artist in residence program. It was done, the money came from the federal government and it came through the State Council on the Arts and Humanities.

WA: Okay.

WB: They can tell you. Call them.

WA: I'll find it. That's okay.

WB: She can find it. She'll research it. She'll know before nightfall.

WA: Was there anything else? I mean I know there's plenty else but is there anything else specifically about I guess what we've talked about most, which is the Alabama Black Liberation Front that I haven't asked you about that you want to get on tape today?

WB: We traveled all over the state too. We'd go speak to a group in Tuskegee and in Montgomery and other places. And most of these cases, you know, it would be

black upper middle class intellectual kind of people who would bring us in and we would talk to groups and it was almost like, you know, we had some kind of celebrity status. And these are people who you would not think would be associating with people in the black liberation movement. But those were the kind of people, you know, in our old station wagon with no brakes and three thousand Black Panther newspapers in it. (Laughter) Traveling across Alabama, oh, boy. Were we crazy? And sometimes man, we, you know, the station wagon didn't have no tail lights, you know, you press on the brakes and it tried to turn the corner. It was like, you know, it was ragged and old and then on top of all of that we got a whole back full of Black Panther newspapers. That's part of being young though.

I can't think of anything else. It was time. It was the thing and what we did was a lot of good. It made Martin Luther King's philosophy acceptable, you know. It's like who you want to talk to, him or me. Let's talk to these black folk over here. You know, it's a shame but in a lot of cases it's necessary. It is necessary. It would not have had the same kind of impact. The John Lewis's and the Andy Young's and, those kind of people wouldn't have seemed so rational and acceptable, you know, in what they were saying had you hadn't had folks like us saying, to hell with them, let's just fight their ass. You know, let's just see what they want to do. We just kill as many of them. We used to say ain't nobody, you won't have a right to die until you kill ten white folks. (Laughter)

(): You ()?

WB: Yeah. Well, you have to understand that we all perceived all white folks as part of the problem, you know, which I hate. It ain't personal, you know. I mean you're all right. You ain't like them others.

WA: I know.

WB: Okay, all right, but yeah, I think we served a purpose, the kids programs. The people who have come back, young people who have been inspired to pursue certain kinds of careers who got just enough push who have come back and said, you know, I remember when ya'll were out there in that office and it was the first time they'd ever been exposed to the fact that black people had a rich history because it wasn't being taught nowhere else. And so you know, yeah, there's a lot of good that we did, lot of good that we did. You know, we didn't have all the answers but we had good intentions and we put forth the effort and that's as much as God expects from us. So who cares about anybody who expects more, right?

WA: All right, well, thank you.

WB: You're welcome. (Tape recorder turned off and on again.) You know, I had the privilege of knowing Doug Jones, who led the prosecution [in the 2001 and 2002 trials of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombers]. And it really, really takes you to another place to have grown up and become adult and lived with the fact that those four young ladies were killed and that nobody ever, ever, you know, served any time, was ever prosecuted, and then all of a sudden, just when you're about to just give up and just think that, you know, it happens. And it gives you a whole different perspective on a whole lot of things, you know. And I'm glad that they were finally, not for any sense of revenge but for the sense that it makes people stop and think

before they do things like that because now, you know. It gives you encouragement when people can do things like that and they get away with it, you know. Other people try to do things like that. But when it finally catches up to you it makes you stop and say wow, you know, you do that you're going to get caught, maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, you know, but maybe not thirty years later. It might be ten years later just when you think you've got it beat and, you know, you've really got your life going for you good, here it comes. And so for that reason and it gave closure to a lot of people, you know. It made a lot of people feel safer, you know, who probably had not felt safe for thirty years knowing that that kind of thing could happen. But knowing that people are going to be a little more apprehensive because, so I think it was important. I think it was very, very important.

The Institute [the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute], you know, most people don't realize that the Institute is supposed to be a dynamic evolving place. It's not a museum and people think of it as a museum. But it's a place to do research and to pursue the very, very noble quest of human rights and guarantee human dignity for all human beings, which is a very Christian kind of philosophy and thing to do and that's why it was established. And just the fact that it exists and that that's what it's supposed to be about, you know, offers encouragement, not to mention the fact of all the articles that are now housed there. They have their own oral history program that's there and they bring speakers and events that are culturally significant. They give insights that are thought provoking. All those kinds of things are needed in the cookie cutter sheet orient of the society. You know, anything that's going to make us think, you know, right outside the box and not only think right outside the box but to

think outside the box in the direction that as human beings we can all take care of each other and all have an excellent quality of life on this planet because we have all of the resources that we need and it's only human greed and selfishness over here that makes suffering and poverty over there.

And so what they are pursuing is something that's key to the survival of the human race because as the planet gets smaller and more people get nuclear weapons, you know, you can just send an Army and enforce stuff no more. You've got to explain stuff to people. You've got to share and that's what we need to be pursuing. We ain't going to be able to do it with bombs, you know, for much longer, especially when everybody's got a bomb. And so, you know, there's a place for the Institute and what it's pursuing, not only just in Alabama and in America but worldwide, worldwide. We need that kind of institution, yeah. It's a good thing. Next to high top sneakers, you know, it's one of the great things of the twentieth century. (Laughter) I swear, I cross my heart. Okay, all right, okay, yeah, about the Institute, I don't remember.

WA: Okay. Really quick, going back to the bombing trial. Do you remember the 1977 bombing trial, the Chambliss, Robert Chambliss who was convicted?

WB: Vaguely, I didn't go, didn't pay much attention to it. Paid more attention to Cherry I guess because I was more in tune with this. I was still kind of outside, you know. I was working my way back in but I was still kind of outside. Didn't pay a lot of attention to it.

WA: Do you remember the bombing itself?

WB: Un-huh, sure do. Was at the house. Didn't go to church. My church was right down the street. It's on Sixth Avenue. It's a block down, Zion Hill, and one of those rare Sundays because my mama didn't play that. You went to church. You went to choir rehearsal on Thursday night. You went to Sunday school and you went to church unless you were just, you had to show blood, you know. You had to show blood. You couldn't just, mama, my stomach hurt. You know, you had to have a fever, something be swollen, or you're bleeding. But it was one of those rare Sundays when I didn't want to go to church and she didn't really press it, you know. And so, you know, I really was enjoying the fact that it was Sunday morning and I was at home. And I had the TV on or something. Wasn't nothing on the TV on Sunday morning in those days. Wasn't but three channels and all three channels had somebody's church service on it or something. And I heard the explosion and then I guess I didn't know what it was. I'm on the other side of town in Loveman Village, which is over near Elmwood cemetery and the bombing was out in, you know, and I heard boom. I didn't know what to think and then folks started calling so I got dressed, of course, and headed down there. And you could only get I guess, I went down the railroad track, got to Sixteenth, came off the railroad track and came up and for some reason I couldn't get up close. I couldn't get up close. So I went down to my church and everybody was, they were outside. Folks were standing around and then, of course, Mama took us back to the house. Then that night () about like this you started hearing sirens and all night long. Every white business in the black community was burned. You know, people were calling the fire department and the fire department would come out and they would stone their truck. You know, they ran

off and left the whole fire truck, you know. We got on top of it. The next morning we got on the () where () comes under (). It's Martin Luther King now. And anybody white who came on, we just stoned their car. We made a big old bag of railroad rock, just dropped it on folks cars. I mean, you know.

(): Nothing that you can get in trouble for now, right?

WB: No, we didn't kill nobody that I know of. The only thing that holds the statute of limitations indefinitely is murder. Everything else has statute of limitations. But yeah, we just, anybody white, we just broke out all their windows and then we burned up S&R. We burned up Sam's. It was Walton's. No, Mr. Walton owned Walton's so we didn't burn that up but all the grocery stores around Sixteenth Street, everything, you know, I mean you could see the fires. You could look and see way over there and you'd see the flames in the air way over there because, you know, it was like all night, all night. I don't think nobody went to work the next day. I don't know if they declared martial law or not. They may have brought troops in then because I remember a couple of times state troopers came in and National Guard came in and I don't really remember but I do know that there were fire hoses cut and firemen were struck with beer bottles and policemen and, you know, it was like, it was something. It was like the straw. Everybody was mad. You know, everybody was mad. It was enough to have () and doing all that crazy stuff. Then they blow up the church. These fools gone crazy, you know. And so everybody just, you know, we just went off. And anybody white that happened to be close to a black community, you know, it was like the roles were switched because white folks used to do that, you know. I mean that didn't make it right.

WA: Thank you very much.

WB: Hey, it's been my pleasure. You're going to send us a copy, right?

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

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