

**James Farmer Oral History Interview—JFK#1, 3/10/1967**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** James Farmer

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**Biographical Note**

Farmer, was the founder in 1942 of CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) and was the organization's national director from 1961-1966. In this interview he discusses his impressions of John F. Kennedy (JFK) during the 1960 presidential campaign; the contact and sometime antagonistic relationship between CORE and the Kennedy administration; interactions with Robert F. Kennedy and the Justice Department during the Freedom Rides and other civil rights actions; and JFK's impact on civil rights, among other issues.

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James Farmer—JFK#1

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First of Two Oral History interviews

with

James Farmer

March 10, 1967  
New York, New York

By John F. Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: Mr. Farmer, why don't we begin by my asking you if you recall your earliest impressions of John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

FARMER: Yes. I suppose you mean impressions during the campaign or...

STEWART: Before.

FARMER: Before the campaign. Yes. I had not met the President until after the campaign, as a matter of fact, after he became President. My impressions of him before and during the campaign were that he was a man of goodwill and good intentions, but frankly I did not feel that he was extremely knowledgeable in the civil rights field or that he had a feeling for it. I would not say that now. He had a feeling for it. I would not say that now. He had a feeling for but not enough knowledge or acquaintance with civil rights. I felt that he did not know much about Negroes or their struggle because his life had been pretty much isolated from it up until that point. But he had the capacity to learn and to grow. That was my impression of him.

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STEWART: Did you see any significant difference between all of the Democratic

candidates in 1960 as far as their potential impact on the civil rights movement? I'm speaking, of course, between Kennedy, Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey], Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] or Symington [Stuart Symington, II].

FARMER: Yes. Well, prior to the campaign, I felt that Humphrey was the more knowledgeable and had been more closely associated with the civil rights movement. He had been associated with it for years, had spoken at many meetings and conferences on civil rights. Johnson had not. At that point Johnson was still unacceptable to civil rights organizations, and unacceptable to me personally, because his record in voting against civil rights legislation was all too clear and emphatic in our minds. Symington—I had no strong feelings at all. Now, Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] had in a way captured the imagination of many people, and I differed from many of my friends on this. I did not feel that Stevenson had a real feeling for the civil rights movement. He had a general liberal attitude, but I did not consider him knowledgeable.

STEWART: Did you feel that the selection of the Democratic candidate would have a very significant impact, assuming he was elected, on the long-range course of the civil rights movement?

FARMER: Yes. I thought it would have a very definite impact. I realize, of course, that a president responds to pressures, to political pressures from all sides. But I thought that the point of view of the individual would determine how he would respond to those pressures and how much pressure it would take to cause a response.

STEWART: Do you recall what your first contacts were with members of the Kennedy campaign staff?

FARMER: No. As a matter of fact, I had no direct contact with the campaign staff during the campaign at all. Our contact came after that.

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STEWART: Did anyone ask for your support during the campaign?

FARMER: No. As a matter of fact, none did.

STEWART: Not at all?

FARMER: Not at all.

STEWART: That surprises me.

FARMER: Yes. You see at that time, 1960, CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] was not a political organization yet. We had a policy, a clause in our

constitution which forbade participation in political campaigning. We were non-partisan, non-political. That only began to change about 1963 or '64.

STEWART: Did you see any significant difference between Kennedy and Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] as far as their response to the civil rights movement?

FARMER: Yes, very definitely so. We were fighting with Nixon, and I personally was. I remembered far too well his history and record in California politics where he had been very close to the extreme rightists. And Nixon was wholly unacceptable. The fact of the matter was, therefore, that while we had not been asked to cooperate in the campaign or support any candidate in any way, my personal preference formed very easily for Kennedy.

STEWART: Did you feel that Kennedy possibly had made commitments to the South for second ballot support at the Convention which might be a real problem in the Administration?

FARMER: Yes. We certainly felt that that was a possibility. We had no hard facts on it so the posture that I adopted was a wait-and-see posture. So we had that reservation in the back of our minds, that perhaps there had been commitments to the South in the selection of the vice-presidential candidate, and I seem to recall—though I haven't checked records

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on it—that there had been some kind of a meeting, a highly publicized breakfast meeting with one of the Southern politicians.

STEWART: It was the Governor of Alabama.

FARMER: Yes, Governor Wallace [George C. Wallace].

STEWART: No. It was Patterson [John Malcolm Patterson] at the time.

FARMER: Or was it Patterson? Yes, yes. And we questioned that and wondered what the implications were and what commitments had been made.

STEWART: Were you extremely disappointed in the selection of Johnson as a running mate?

FARMER: I was extremely disappointed. My position then was that this was a sop that was tossed to the South, and that this indicated that the Administration was going to go slow on civil rights. That was my feeling at that time.

STEWART: What was your opinion, and the basis for it, of the type of advice that

Kennedy was getting on civil rights questions during the campaign? Did you have any direct knowledge of or direct relationship with the people around him who were advising him on civil rights problems?

FARMER: No, I did not. But my impression during the campaign was that he was being well advised. I think particularly he was well advised in that the people around him took action to help get Dr. King [Martin Luther King, Jr.] out of jail in Atlanta, some place in Georgia. It was my feeling at that time that would swing the Negro vote. Up until then, it seemed that the Negro vote was pretty much divided.

STEWART: It has been charged that some of his advisors were somewhat out of the mainstream of the civil rights movement.

FARMER: Well, I think they were. My impression is that they were not terribly close to what was going on. But you must understand that this was not unusual for us

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at that point. In the past, no president had been surrounded by people who were close to civil rights.

STEWART: Were you fearful that during the campaign the Democrats in their all out attempt to get Negro votes were promising more than they could possibly deliver and, therefore, there would inevitably be some frustration?

FARMER: No. That was not our feeling at all. As we look back on it, with hindsight, it would have been a reasonable feeling. But we didn't feel that at that point in history. We wanted to get as many promises as we could, hoping that we would get some of them fulfilled. One of the promises we were particularly interested in was the "stroke of the pen" executive order on housing.

STEWART: Which he made during the campaign?

FARMER: Yes. He made that during the campaign in a speech, I believe, where he indicated that there was one huge area of racial discrimination which could be wiped out by a stroke of the pen from the president. That was in housing. Apropos that, he stated that he, if elected, would use that stroke of the pen and issue an executive order banning discrimination in housing.

STEWART: But you had absolutely no contact then with anyone in the Kennedy organization during the campaign?

FARMER: I had no contact with anyone in the Kennedy organization.

STEWART: Do you recall what your immediate reaction was to the news, in probably December or January of 1961, that the Administration wasn't going to push for legislation in the 1961 session?

FARMER: It was disappointment. Our reaction was one of great disappointment. And as a matter of fact, the attitude of the Administration up until the Birmingham

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demonstrations was opposition to civil rights legislation. It was their feeling, which they had expressed to civil rights organizations leaders, that new civil rights legislation was neither needed at the present time nor feasible, that there were enough laws on the books, and what was needed was an enforcement of those laws. The Administration's point of view changed at the time of Birmingham and subsequent demonstrations throughout the country. It was generally our feeling that we had to keep up the pressure. And we saw ourselves as being in the role of being in front of the President on civil rights issues, trying to pull the Administration forward, recognizing that there would be many who would be in back of the Administration trying to slow them down or pull them backward.

STEWART: Some civil rights leaders, and I think specifically Mr. Wilkins [Roy Wilkins], were fairly well convinced, at least in early 1961, that probably the Administration was taking the proper course in delaying in favor of other legislation that would be related to it.

FARMER: Well, yes. That's one point on which we have disagreement with Mr. Wilkins and some of the other civil rights leaders. We felt even in 1960 that there was great need for civil rights legislation, and in 1961, at the time of the freedom rides, we were even more convinced.

STEWART: Moving on then to the freedom rides. Did you have any direct discussions with the Attorney General [Robert F. Kennedy] regarding—he came out, I believe, in favor of at least stopping the continuation of them in June of '61.

FARMER: Yes. I had no direct contact with the Attorney General on this issue until after the freedom rides. That was after I had gotten out of jail in Mississippi.

STEWART: Yes.

FARMER: Prior to the freedom rides in preparation for it, I did send a letter to the Department of Justice, to the Attorney General, telling them of our plans and giving

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them the itinerary and telling them of the reason for the freedom rides. There was no response to that letter at the time. I don't know what happened. We sent similar letters to the President, to the Federal Bureau of investigation, to Greyhound and Trailways Corporations, and so forth. There was no response from any of them. Presumably, they thought that it was merely a bluff and that this was not going to amount to anything. Then after the freedom rides went through Alabama, and the bus was burned, and people were brutally beaten, and there was something of a riot by white rioters in Montgomery, the Attorney General did send in U.S. Marshals on a rather massive scale. We were pleased with that and with his response, which was positive. He then called upon us to halt the freedom ride and have a cooling off period. His call upon us was not in direct communication with me. As I recall it, it was through the press. And our response was through the press. Our response was to reject it and to say that we'd been cooling off for a hundred years, and if we cool off any more, it'll be a deep freeze, or something to that effect. Our plan and our rationale was that we had to keep up enough pressure on the Administration—even if it were a friendly Administration, we had to keep up that pressure—so that a crisis which was intolerable would be created and the government would have no choice but to act. That was the rationale. In other words, it would be more dangerous politically for them not to act than it would be for them to act. So we indicated that we would continue the freedom rides right on into Mississippi. Now, the Attorney General responded positively after we had several hundred people in jail in Mississippi and more were coming in. Then he called upon the ICC [Interstate Commerce Commission] to issue an order, which is enforceable. And we considered this to be a partial victory. And when the order actually was issued, we had test teams go throughout the South testing the enforcement. We found by and large it was enforced. And in those few cases where it was not enforced, our test teams kept records of who had denied them their constitutional rights and under what authority. If it were police officials, then we sent that information to the Department of Justice. And if it were carrier officials, as Greyhound and Trailways, we sent the information to the ICC. And our records show that that information was followed up on and enforcement followed. So we were pleased and considered this a great victory.

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STEWART:        During all this period, you had no contacts with anyone in the Justice Department?

FARMER:        No direct contacts. While I was in jail in Mississippi, my staff in New York contacted me and told me that a meeting had been set up with the Attorney General. I, of course, would not bail out of jail at that time because our plan was to stay in till forty days, which was the maximum that one could stay in and still file an appeal. But members of my staff and members of the staff of SNCC, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, did meet with the Attorney General. That was during the riots while I was in jail. But I had no personal contact. I had never met either the Attorney General or the President at this point.

STEWART: Well, at what point did you meet either the Attorney General or the President?

FARMER: Well, I met the President before I met the Attorney General, at a meeting of civil rights leaders at the White House. My impression at the time...

STEWART: Excuse me, was this December of '62 on the Arden House recommendations regarding aid to African countries?

FARMER: Yes. That was my first meeting with the President. And I think there were about two others after that. That was the first meeting. And I found him sympathetic and most impressive, but still I did not feel that I personally had a good relationship with him, good rapport. My feeling then was that CORE was still considered the bad boy of the movement, and we didn't mind that characterization because that was the role that we had decided upon for ourselves.

STEWART: What was the general result of that meeting as far as what you were seeking? Were you somewhat satisfied that you got across what you were attempting to?

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FARMER: Well, we were satisfied that the President understood what we were talking about. He was very quick and absorbed what we were saying very quickly and reacted. He also had brought in Stevenson from the U.N. who sat in on this meeting. And then he urged us to pursue the matter with Mr. Stevenson later. Nothing really came from these discussions because we were urging, among other things, that the United States government take a stronger stand on South Africa. We wanted sanctions. And Mr. Stevenson's view, which I assume represented the Administration's view and the State Department's view, was that that could not be done without violating the U.N. Charter because the Charter indicated that such action could be taken only when there was a clear and present threat to the peace and tranquility of the world. And he did not see South Africa at that moment as posing such a threat. Also, he felt it would be ineffective and that it would not hurt South Africa. Another point that Mr. Stevenson made was that the first people to suffer in such sanctions would be the poor blacks of South Africa, and he did not want to hurt them. Our response to that, of course, was that their position was not much different from the position of many Negroes in the United States, especially in the South. They have suffered so much that they're willing to endure a little more suffering in the hope of getting a meaningful change in the situation to end the suffering. But nothing happened in terms of a change in United States policy.

STEWART: Did you meet with Ambassador Stevenson after that?

FARMER: After that? Yes, we met with Ambassador Stevenson there at the White

House after we talked with the President and subsequently met with him in New York at the U.N., at his U.N. offices.

STEWART: But you never felt you made any significant progress?

FARMER: Well, we felt he was sympathetic and he had goodwill, but I didn't feel that there were any changes in the policy. In other words, I feel that our efforts had failed.

STEWART: Well, when, then, did you first meet the Attorney General?

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FARMER: I first met the Attorney General in his office with several other persons. I'm trying to recall precisely what we were discussing at that meeting. This was also in '62. Very frankly, I don't remember precisely what was discussed. But we had gone a couple of hours with him. At that point, I still had the feeling that we were out, we were outside, that we were considered the rabble rousers and troublemakers.

STEWART: Was this feeling based on their personal performances or the way they approached you personally or what?

FARMER: Well, it was more subjective. It was subjective. In this movement all of us pride ourselves, rightly or wrongly, on having grown antennas which sense the feeling. And I sensed a little coldness and aloofness and perhaps suspicion even, while there was much more warmth toward the—I wouldn't say more conservative, but less activist leaders, Whitney Young [Whitney M. Young, Jr.] and Roy Wilkins, but not toward CORE and SNCC. And at that point CORE was more of the bad boy than SNCC because it was in the limelight.

STEWART: The roles later have changed a little bit, haven't they?

FARMER: Yes. [Laughter]

STEWART: Did you recall discussing at this meeting or any other meetings with the Attorney General the appointment of some pretty controversial people to the bench in the South?

FARMER: Yes, yes. We did discuss that with the Attorney General at the meeting to which I referred, now that you've refreshed my memory.

STEWART: What was his reaction, do you remember?

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FARMER: Well, his reaction was that there were many factors to be considered, and he thoroughly agreed with us that we ought to get judges in the South and all over the country who are as sympathetic as we can, but there was considerable pressure from Southern senators, who carry a great deal of weight, in sponsoring their candidates.

STEWART: Do you think he was quite open and frank about his reasons? I mean, did you feel that he recognized just what these people were and what impact they would have on the civil rights movement?

FARMER: Yes, I got that impression entirely. I felt that the Attorney General had contempt for some of the people who were being appointed, but felt that this was a political necessity at that time. Now, my own position was that we had a different role. And I understood his role perfectly, that he was in a position of an administrator, he had to keep things moving smoothly. While we were not in such a position. We were very frankly combatants in a war, as we saw it. So while I could understand his position, I could not share it.

STEWART: Yes. What importance did you attach to the placement of Negroes in high government positions? The Administration, of course, made certain progress in this area and naturally was quite proud of it.

FARMER: Yes. And I think they had a right to be proud of it, and I certainly don't deprecate those things. But I did not attach the same importance to it as the Administration did. I felt that the appointment of individual Negroes was fine for the individual Negroes and was fine for the image of a competent Negro holding a good position. But I didn't think that's where the key problem was. I was more concerned about elevating the masses, about improving their life, rather than giving them a model in high position.

STEWART: And you felt this had no real significant impact then on the civil rights movement as a whole?

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FARMER: Well, I was not opposed to it, any more than I would be opposed to motherhood or God or country, but I didn't think it was the crucial issue.

STEWART: As many people made it out to be, I guess.

FARMER: Yes.

STEWART: Did you have any involvement with the State Department, particularly on the desegregation of restaurants along Route 40?

FARMER: With the State Department?

STEWART: Weren't they involved in this whole area because there had been incidents of diplomats from African countries not being served in some of these restaurants?

FARMER: Oh yes. Yes, the State Department was involved. I had no direct contact with them at that time. You see, at that point you have to understand that CORE and I were in the position of not being a part of the establishment, and we were leery of getting too closely tied in with the establishment because that would dilute our effectiveness in the role that we had chosen for ourselves, of pulling them forward.

STEWART: Was this role ever questioned within CORE? Did you ever feel, for example, that it would have been somewhat more advantageous to have a closer relationship with, for example, people in the federal government?

FARMER: Well, yes, up to a point. I thought a closer relationship might have been useful in terms of better contact. As a matter of fact, we did begin around 1962 and '63 in developing a closer relationship, not especially at that point with the Attorney General but with Burke Marshall who was the civil rights man. And we were in close communication with him. In fact in 1962, when we were still testing the implementation of the ICC order, we were in almost constant phone

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conversation with Burke Marshall. We had some testers in Macomb, Mississippi, for example, and it was a touch-and-go situation where it looked as though they might be killed. They were completely isolated and cut off. The phone lines were burning up between Burke Marshall's office and ours. They were giving us information, and we were giving them information, and there was complete coordination there.

STEWART: Were you generally satisfied with the relationship that you did have with Marshall and the Justice Department?

FARMER: Yes, with the personal relationships we had and with his integrity and everything else. But still we didn't want to be entirely in. We wanted to be in a position to criticize him or to attack him like anyone else. So we didn't want to be buddy-buddy too closely.

STEWART: In your conversations with either the Attorney General, Marshall, or others in the Administration, did you feel that they fully understood or almost fully understood the meaning of demonstrations per se as a part of the civil rights movement?

FARMER: I felt that Burke Marshall did. I felt that the Administration, quite naturally, would like for the demonstrations to have gone away. They didn't say so, but I felt that they would, and I could understand that position. But we didn't intend to let them go away.

STEWART: But you don't think they.... Do you think they understood the reason for them, or at least your reasons for them?

FARMER: Yes, I think the Administration understood why we felt we had to have the demonstrations, and they had to keep going. As a matter of fact, to go back a moment—an earlier question. At that meeting that CORE staff and SNCC staff had with the Attorney General while I was in the Mississippi jail, they reported to me in a memorandum that the Attorney General had suggested that, rather than having

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demonstrations, they ought to concentrate upon voter registration and that this would be far more constructive in the long run. Well, we of course were interested in voter registration, but we did not see it as being in contradiction to direct action or demonstrations. We wanted both and rather than either/or. In fact, we saw that demonstrations would aid voters registration by motivating and stimulating people.

STEWART: Do you recall what your reaction was to the wide publicity given to the so-called Plans for Progress programs the President's Committee for Employment Opportunity?

FARMER: Yes, my first reaction to it was, "Well, this is another talk thing that will have no real results." And I was not conscious of the fact that there had been some results until the meeting that we had with the Vice President then, Johnson. And he called and asked civil rights leaders to come down for a conference and brought out charts and figures and statistics. This was the first time that I had met him, and I was impressed with his sincerity. I thought that he was for real on this issue, was planning to do something. My view since then has changed somewhat.

STEWART: But you were impressed that...

FARMER: I was impressed, and I felt that we had done him an injustice.

STEWART: Did you feel that the publicity attendant on this whole program in the long run was a good thing?

FARMER: Yes, I thought it was a good thing. I was....

STEWART: Despite the fact that, as someone has charged, there was a lot more publicity than there was performance?

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FARMER: Yes. But there was some performance and that impressed us.

STEWART: Did you feel that the image of the Kennedys—and of course by 1962 people in the South were referring to them as “the Kennedys” rather than the President and the Attorney General.

FARMER: Yes, yes.

STEWART: Do you feel that this image had any significant impact on the success of the civil rights movement in the South?

FARMER: You mean the image in which Negroes held him or the whites?

STEWART: No, the image of white people, the fact that so many white people could throw all of their antagonisms onto the Kennedys.

FARMER: Well, yes, I think it did. By 1963 the Kennedys were thoroughly identified with the movement and with our thrust forward. Now, our position had been that this was the result of our having kept up the pressure and that the pressure had become intolerable, so they had to respond. So, that may be right or may be wrong, or partially right and partially wrong. Who knows? Who is able to say? But they were identified with the movement by the South and, to a great extent, then, by the movement itself. We considered that they had come a long way, the Administration had come a long way, in understanding what was taking place. Now, I personally regret that I did not get to know the Kennedys better during that period on a personal level because I think there was mutual misunderstanding at that point.

STEWART: Could you describe the other occasions on which you met the President? You mentioned one, were there others?

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FARMER: Well, I remember one other one clearly. This was when the President had decided to push for civil rights legislation and all the civil rights leaders were called in. And at that meeting the Attorney General was present and several other persons, advisors to the President. Now, the President did not do much talking then. We did most of the talking, and he listened and made a few comments. But I thought he was interested.

STEWART: You made the statement in your book that as late as five minutes before Birmingham the President intended to drop civil rights legislation from the

agenda of urgent business in order to safeguard other parts of his program. Do you recall what led you to that conclusion?

FARMER: Well, statements coming from the Administration opposed to civil rights legislation. The President and the Attorney General had been very frank with us on that, that they were not going to press for civil rights legislation. And I felt that they would hear balancing pressures. And you recall the difficulties that we had in getting the executive order in housing, the “the stroke of the pen” order. And we had really expected or hoped that it would come early in his Administration. It was, when, late in '62 or was it early in '63?

STEWART: November of '62.

FARMER: November of '62.

STEWART: On a quiet Thanksgiving weekend.

FARMER: Yes. And following the same role that we had chosen for ourselves, we were extremely critical of it. In fact, prior to the issuance of the order, we had started this “ink for Jack” campaign, or cooperated with such a campaign. And we felt that the order, when it came out, was far too weak, and that it had actually applied to only about 25 percent of new housing and none of the old housing. Once again, we understood the reasons for it, but it was not our position to accept those reasons.

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STEWART: How did you really counter the argument by the Administration that civil rights legislation couldn't pass? It's, of course, often been thrown back at people that an issue is no good, that as far as Congress is concerned, it's the end result that counts. Did you have any more confidence that Congress would act than the President did?

FARMER: Well, yes, and that confidence was not in the Congress per se, but in our capacity to bring pressure to bear on Congress through the demonstrations and the same rationale as we used in the freedom rides. We thought that we'd have a good chance of getting some meaningful legislation through Congress by keeping up the pressure on them.

STEWART: By keeping up the pressure on individual...

FARMER: On individual congressmen and the pressure through publicity on the demonstrations. We were using the press. In fact, those who claim that we were out after publicity were in part right. We saw publicity as an important weapon in achieving the objectives.

STEWART: Did you ever feel that a major defeat in Congress would set the movement back more than the publicity would be worth?

FARMER: No. It didn't seem so to me. I thought that even if we should fail the first time, the next time we wouldn't start from the same point. We'd start from the point where we were when we failed before, and the second time we'd have a better chance of passage.

STEWART: What was your counter to the argument that a defeat or a rough time over civil rights legislation would endanger a lot of social welfare legislation that was, many people say, as important to Negro people in general as civil rights legislation?

FARMER: Well, to take a broad view, it was important. But we had to be single-minded and rather simple-minded. We were a civil rights organization; we were not

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welfare organizations. And we felt that there were other organizations that could have pressed for welfare legislation—there were ADAs [Americans for Democratic Action] and other such groups—and that if we didn't press for civil rights legislation, nobody was. It was our feeling that for too long the civil rights cause had been taking back seat to other causes which were related to it. So this was *the* issue as far as we were concerned.

STEWART: And you felt that the other would follow on its own accord?

FARMER: The other would follow on its own accord. We didn't want to be the tail to the kite of generalized legislation.

STEWART: Were you generally critical of the approach the White House took in its contact with civil rights leaders? Did you feel, for example, that they made enough of an attempt to talk to representative people?

FARMER: Well, I felt that the militants were too much ignored. You see, the militants were new, and it seemed to me that the President and the Attorney General didn't know anything about CORE or SNCC. The NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] everybody knew, and the Urban League everyone knew, and everyone knew King, but we were newcomers and sort of interlopers. And their impression was that we were just out for publicity. "Where did these fellows come from?" "Whoever heard of them two years ago?" "What are they here for?" There was a little suspicion there, and we felt that they ignored us. And we didn't want to be ignored even though we didn't want to be a part of the establishment. We wanted to be taken seriously.

STEWART: What conscious steps, if any, did you take to try to get a better hearing as far as the White House was concerned?

FARMER: Telegrams and some letters to the White House and to the Department of Justice. By that time, in those years, the response usually came from Burke Marshall. Now, we'd get a form letter, first saying that the inquiry or the complaint had been referred to Burke Marshall and that they were sure he would investigate it, give us some reply.

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STEWART: You also state in your book that President Johnson identified with the American Negro much more than Kennedy did and that he is far superior in the civil rights area because he has perceived how significantly the Negro has altered political realities in the last ten years. Could you comment on that and give some of the basis for that conclusion?

FARMER: Well, if I wrote that today, I'd write it somewhat differently. That was my feeling at the time. Now I'm not sure that I was right. I think that President Johnson has a way about him. He has greater warmth, and he gets down to the person that he's talking to—the "Johnson treatment," so to speak—while President Kennedy seemed more aloof and more intellectual and removed from what we term the "nitty-gritty" of the struggle. But I am now convinced that while President Johnson, I am sure, is a man of goodwill and wants to do something in this area, he felt at this stage that he desperately needed civil rights people in order to overcome his background, to overcome his Southern constituency and his accent. So he made a very special and definite appeal to us. For example, I got a call from President Johnson just a few days after he assumed office one night here at home. And, naturally, I was flattered. The President of the United States called me, said, "Come down and see me whenever you can. I want to talk. I need your help." And I'm sure that I was overly impressed with that at the point.

STEWART: Then you had never got anything like that from the Kennedy Administration?

FARMER: I had never gotten anything like that from the Kennedys. I had never been called or had never reached either of them in personal calls.

STEWART: What role did you play in planning for the March on Washington, if any?

FARMER: Yes. I was a part of the original committee made up of civil rights organizations. We met several times, and then we enlarged it to include labor and church and general liberal groups.

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STEWART: Do you recall any serious disagreements you had with other people regarding the nature or the exact form of the March?

FARMER: Well, at the outset, when the March was proposed by Randolph [A. Philip Randolph]—and Randolph had proposed a march way back in the forties—early forties, I believe—we were thinking in terms of more direct action. In other words, it was to be a massive demonstration rather than a mass meeting. And it seemed to us that the older and larger organizations, the Urban League and the NAACP, were not going to accept this kind of action because we did not see them as direct action organizations and they did not see themselves as direct action organizations. And we felt that they were going to be opposed to it. I think they were, in the initial stage, opposed to the idea of such a march. Later their point of view changed after they came in and helped to change the course, the direction of the March. It became a different kind of a march. It became well ordered and organized and controlled. It was a controlled mass meeting, which was good. I don't deprecate that at all. I think it served the real purpose. But it was a different kind of a march than was first anticipated.

STEWART: At what stage in the planning, if any, did the Administration, let its views known and have any real contact with the people who were planning this thing?

FARMER: Well, at the meeting we had at the White House with President Kennedy and with the Attorney General and others that I mentioned a moment ago. This was after the March on Washington had been discussed. I don't recall precisely how, but the Administration had made its position clear at the outset, from various sources, that the March would be a mistake. But at the time we had the meeting at the White House it was clear that the March was going on, some kind of a march. Then their position seemed to change, and since the March was inevitable, they would seek to control it and be a part of it. Our feeling then was that the March was going to be made a Kennedy march, *per se*.

STEWART: Your feeling?

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FARMER: My feeling, CORE's feeling.

STEWART: This didn't really happen, did it, as far as you were concerned? Or did you think the Administration did get a certain amount of credit for it that really wasn't deserved?

FARMER: Well, I don't say it wasn't deserved. The Administration did get some credit for the March, and it helped the Administration's image. As a matter of fact, in one of our discussions very shortly before the March actually took place, there was some discussion as to whether the President should be invited to speak.

And, well, we threw up our hands then and said, “No, that will take everything out of the March. All the authenticity would be gone.” We wouldn’t go along with it. As a matter of fact, Wilkins and the others agreed that this would be a mistake for us to have the President speak at such a rally.

STEWART: Then the arrangement was that the people would go over and meet with him afterwards?

FARMER: They would meet with him afterwards. I wasn’t at the March. I was in jail, I think in Louisiana, at the time.

STEWART: Do you feel that many people in the Administration were confused by the whole problem of black nationalists and white liberals? I’m thinking, for example, of the Attorney General’s well-publicized meeting with James Baldwin and Kenneth Clark in 1963 at which he kept asking, “What do you want me to do?” He got quite frustrated, I think, at not being able to understand what these people were trying to tell him.

FARMER: Yes. Well, I wasn’t at that meeting either. I was down South someplace. I don’t know if I was in jail at that time or not. It seems to me I was. But the reports I got from the meeting—and I talked with Baldwin afterwards and I talked with one of the CORE field secretaries who was there at the meeting—and the impression I got was that the Attorney General, in spite of goodwill, did not really

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understand the feeling of Negroes at that point. Subsequently, in my contacts with Robert Kennedy, he does understand. But I think at that point he did not, and that he has grown and has deeper understanding. But at that point he didn’t. He couldn’t understand what the young CORE staff member was talking about when he was talking about the impossibility for us to be enthusiastic about fighting for freedom in Cuba and every place else and not really having freedom here in this country. And the Attorney General, according to the report I got, was irritated by that, that this seemed to imply a lack of patriotism, a lack of understanding what it is to be an American if you don’t see the necessity for fighting there in spite of any problems which you may have here. Well, now Robert Kennedy would understand that perfectly. He may not agree, but he would understand what you were saying and why.

STEWART: Can you think of any other examples of things he didn’t understand at that time and, presumably, other people in the Administration didn’t understand?

FARMER: Well, it’s hard to think of specific instances, but you had a general feeling.

[BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

FARMER: I felt that when he asked us to stop and have a cooling off period during the freedom rides, if he had had more understanding of the mood of Negroes and the mood of the movement at that time, he would have known that that was an impossibility. We had to do it.

STEWART: Did you personally ever stop and try to rationalize as to just why he didn't have this understanding?

FARMER: Yes, I pondered that many times. And I felt that the Kennedys then had grown up in a different milieu; they had not come in contact with Negroes, especially

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with activist Negroes, in their life; the problem to them was a more theoretical or intellectual problem rather than one that they had felt; and that they needed education on this, it seemed to me. And that was in a way the difference that I saw between Johnson's feeling in the movement and Kennedy's attitude toward it. Kennedy had been well-to-do all of his life and had not felt the barbs of want and had not come in contact with Negroes, except two or three individual Negroes who were almost on a par with him, who had arrived, who had made it. But he had not met the little guy.

STEWART: And you felt there was a definite relationship between this feeling and this understanding in their approach to definite problems.

FARMER: Yes, I think there was. And I would want to stress the point that in the United States today, or any day, it's extremely difficult for most white people or most Negroes to understand how the other feels because they live in different worlds and different societies and very rarely do we have the same frame of reference. If you pick any white person at random, he probably knows no Negroes on a personal or a social level. The same thing is true of Negroes. So it's difficult for them to get together. I felt that this was particularly true of the Kennedys. Their life had been isolated from the struggles of Negroes.

STEWART: Do you feel they had an understanding of the distinction that you discuss in your book between separation and segregation?

FARMER: Well, now. In fact I didn't think of the Kennedys in that connection at all. But, now that you ask, I don't think that they did at that time. They were listening to advisors in the civil rights area who were sold on one specific point of view and, thus, were not equipped to understand divergent viewpoints.

STEWART: Do you recall any instances at all of your personal position being changed drastically by any of the Administration's explanations for particular actions or policies?

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FARMER: Well, not really. Not really because I had no real difficulty in understanding why they did what they did. And I felt, in most cases, I would have done the same thing had I been in their position, had I had the responsibility of trying to run the country and to keep divergent forces from cutting each other's throats. But, here again, I wasn't in that position. I was in the position of a combatant in a war. So I could understand why they did that. But that didn't mean that I wasn't going to criticize them for doing it.

STEWART: This is a hard thing for some people to understand because usually, especially in a political situation, if a person can fully understand the other guy's point of view and the other guy's situation, then there is some area for compromise or some area for the meetings of the minds. But as far as your relationship, it was a—you understood their positions and their reasons for it and they presumably understood yours, and there was just no meeting.

FARMER: There was no meeting, no. In fact, I didn't feel that I was communicating with them in those days, that there was any real communication. I think that Wilkins was and Whitney was.

STEWART: Does this bother you to any great extent?

FARMER: Well, I, of course, would have liked for there to have been more communication and more meeting of the minds. But I felt that we could still operate on the basis of pressure, of applying pressure and getting modifications and changes; such pressure as King's Birmingham demonstrations which helped to change the Administration's attitude on legislation. We followed that up with demonstrations elsewhere in the country, including the North. But I thought then that legislation was seen in two ways by the Administration: One, to do something about these problems which were causing demonstrations, and two, to get the people off of the streets and into the courts.

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STEWART: In your discussions with Burke Marshall and other people did this whole problem of possible violence become a greater and greater concern? Was there an indication that the Administration was extremely concerned with it?

FARMER: Possible violence by Negroes, riots?

STEWART: Well, possible. Of course, not necessarily connected with the civil rights movement, but just possible riots as happened in Watts and other places?

FARMER: Yes. Well, at that point nonviolence was still the watchword of the movement. And the only point at which there seemed to be great concern about violence, wide scale violence, was when the discussion of the March on Washington came up. Then there was great fear on the part of the Administration, which had been communicated to us in various ways that this might lead to mass rioting if you get that many people together. There may be provocations, and then things will explode.

STEWART: Yes.

FARMER: But we didn't feel that that would happen. The March could even be a direct action march without there being any violence. We had a confidence in our capacity to control it.

STEWART: But other than that you don't recall any real discussions about...

FARMER: Violence. No. No, I don't. Because then you must understand that through '60, '61, '62 and '63, there had been no riots, as such, and the demonstrations had been peaceful, had been non-violent and highly disciplined. It was only as they really became mass movements that the one question of discipline was a crucial one.

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STEWART: Did you feel that the Kennedy Administration's policy in Africa had any significant impact on Negro thinking in this country?

FARMER: No, not on Negro thinking per se. On some of the leaders, yes. However, when I visited Africa later—I visited Africa in January of 1965—I was frankly surprised at the extent to which President Kennedy was revered throughout Africa, admired, almost worshipped. I was told that when radio announcers announced his death, almost invariably they broke down in tears themselves and could hardly finish their announcement. And all over Africa I found the same reaction. It was their feeling that they were on the way while Kennedy was there and that something happened to American policies in Africa after his death.

STEWART: Why were you surprised at the reaction, or were you surprised at the extent of it?

FARMER: I was surprised at the extent of it, yes. At the extent of it and the fact that they took it so personally, as though a personal friend had been lost. I really did not know that he had that great an impact on Africa.

STEWART: And you found this even among the...

FARMER: Even among rank and file.

STEWART: Both the leaders and the...

FARMER: Both the leaders and the rank and file felt the same way. Invariably. I can't think of a single exception.

STEWART: Do you base this primarily on the identification with his age, with the time that he came to power, and so forth?

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FARMER: With his age and with the rhetoric, which was more than rhetoric. It was a point of view and new horizons and "we are marching forward." This captured their imagination. Many of the words that he spoke seemed to be directed, immediately and directly, to underdeveloped peoples just achieving independence. And they responded to it.

STEWART: Did you get any assistance at all from the Administration in some of your major fair employment programs—I'm thinking with any of the large chain stores or major department stores? Or did you ever seek any assistance?

FARMER: The fact is we didn't seek any assistance from the Administration on those issues. In our campaigns for equal employment, we sort of went at it alone. And we had our techniques. We would use the boycott, the picket line, the sit-in, and so forth. We thought that was sufficient.

STEWART: Looking at it for a long period of time would you say that a heavier involvement of the federal government in the years '61 to '63 would have practically changed the course of the civil rights movement, considering the stage at which it stood in 1961 and the point where it stands now?

FARMER: Well, no. I don't think it would have had a tremendous effect upon the course of the civil rights movement. I think, instead, that our course was determined pretty much by historical factors and in the evolution of the movement itself as we were getting more and more people involved in it. I did not see at that point the federal government as being a major partner in the struggle. We ourselves, the movement, was the important thing.

STEWART: Yes. Do you still feel that way?

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FARMER: No, I think much more involvement of the federal government is

necessary, is essential. We need to get them involved. But my views have changed on many things since those days. The more involvement we can get from the federal government, the better it'll be. But I still feel that that involvement we'll get to the extent that we are able to exercise pressure or wield some power, political power.

STEWART: Did you attend the celebration in February 1963 of the Emancipation Proclamation Centennial in the White House?

FARMER: Yes, I did attend that.

STEWART: Do you remember anything significant about that affair?

FARMER: Well, yes, I sensed—and here, again, this is entirely subjective—greater warmth on the part of the President, greater understanding. Maybe it was because it was in a social gathering rather than in the cold walls of the meeting room. But there was greater warmth, and he seemed much more human to me. He came across then. I really regret that I didn't get better acquainted with him prior to that time.

STEWART: Okay, that's about all the questions I have. Is there anything you want to say in conclusion or summary?

FARMER: No, except to say that while we were criticizing the President from '60 to '63 and were in a way prodding him, pushing him, sticking pins and needles in him, I failed to really understand—we were too much involved in the battle for me to understand—how important the President had been to us. That hit me all of a sudden at the time of his death, of his assassination. And it seemed then, incongruously, as though everything had dropped out of the bottom of the civil rights movement. The bottom had fallen out all of a sudden. But this was inconsistent with the kind of relationship we'd had in the past.

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STEWART: Do you see this even more now, looking back on those three years?

FARMER: Yes, very definitely. Very definitely. I can look back on it with a little more perspective now and see the forest instead of the trees which were in our eyes at the time. But there is no question but that the President's attitude and the positions he took on issues, as well as his speeches, helped us a great deal in building up the head of steam in the civil rights movement. I remember, before the March on Washington, getting a long telegram—I'm sure all the civil rights leaders did—a long cable from China, from Mao Tse-tung himself right after a great rally had been held in the square there in Peking, pledging support to the black man's fight in this country. And I remember how outraged I was when I read it. It said that Kennedy is a Klu Klux Klanner and things have gotten worse in the civil rights movement and for the Negro since this Klansman has been in the White House and so on. I hit the ceiling—really, this is pure nonsense—and sent

a very strong telegram back saying precisely that. I pointed out that it appeared that things had gotten worse because more people were involved in a fight to make them better and the issues were drawn more tightly, and that Kennedy had helped to draw that issue, to draw the lines and bring the controversy out into the open.

STEWART: That's very interesting. I didn't realize that. Okay, unless there's anything else.

FARMER: No, that's quite enough.

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