

James Farmer Oral History Interview – JFK#2, 4/25/1979
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Biographical Note

Farmer, (1920 - 1999); Founder and director, Congress of Racial Equality, 1961 – 1966, discusses the Freedom Rides, the JFK administration and civil rights legislation, and Farmer's support for RFK in New York, among other issues.

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James Farmer – JFK #2

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Second Oral History Interview
with

JAMES FARMER

April 25, 1979
Washington, D.C.

By Sheldon Stern

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STERN: Why don't we begin with the 1960 election and your recollections and perceptions of what the issues were in 1960. The Democrats, for example, at their convention adopted what was at the time regarded as a very strong civil rights plank.

FARMER: Yes.

STERN: What was your response to that and your response to the election campaign, to the choices of the Democratic convention, the choice in the election itself?

FARMER: Well.... If I pause, I'm just trying to think and recall the past. Well, at that time, at the time of the convention, I was program director, national program director of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], a job which I'd held since the middle of 1959. I did not attend the Democratic convention. As a matter of fact, I was not then and am not now a Democrat or a Republican. I was a registered member of the Liberal party of New York State, and an Independent now.

However, with the nomination of John Kennedy there was a spirit of some hope which I shared, that the apathy or inactivity and insensitivity of the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] administration would be at an end. Kennedy was young. His rhetoric was good

and seemed to hold some hope.

I did not take an active role in the campaign per se. I saw my role as being that of

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critic of both sides more than anything else. And my perception of Kennedy during the campaign was that while his heart was on the right side, so to speak, that he had very little acquaintance with blacks or the problems of blacks. Growing up in Boston, where you can call an Irish maf...Irish Brahmin, then he was an Irish Brahmin.

At one point during the campaign when Jackie Robinson [Jackie Robinson] was... Jackie switched from one side to the other, I think, during that campaign. He was a Kennedy supporter, and then he went for Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] and the Republicans. Jackie told me that Kennedy had said to him during the campaign, "Well, Mr. Robinson, I don't know any Negroes. Will you introduce me to some?" Which was a rather astonishing statement, I thought, for a man who was running for president. But I did not feel too critical about that because that's true of so many people in a segregated society. Especially if they are wealthy. You don't come in contact with any blacks except those who are servants for them. Most cases. So I was not surprised at that. I, of course, voted for Kennedy over Nixon.

STERN: Were you encouraged by that civil rights plank at the Democratic convention?

FARMER: Yes, encouraged, but I was not one of those who felt that platform planks had any great significance. I'm not a historian, but in my reading of history there seemed to be little correlation between what a president did and what the party platform plank said.

STERN: As a matter of fact, the evidence shows that Kennedy was somewhat disturbed at the plank in the platform.

FARMER: Yeah, right.

STERN: That it went too far.

FARMER: I know. I recall that Woodrow Wilson ran on a platform of keeping America out of war. Franklin Roosevelt [Franklin D. Roosevelt] ran on a platform of balancing the budget. [Laughter] So, you know. So I view a platform, a party platform, as strictly a vote-getting instrument. I was considered a cynic, but that was my perception of it.

STERN: How about the famous incident with Martin Luther King [Martin Luther King, Jr.]?

FARMER: Ah, yes. I think that tipped the scales. Kennedy might have lost if it had not been for that incident. In fact, Jackie Robinson says that--he was supporting Nixon at the time--that he had urged Nixon to get active, to go down, to send a

wire to Coretta [Coretta Scott King]. You know, do something.

STERN: Isn't that fascinating.

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FARMER: Get him out and this will swing the black vote. Because it did appear the black vote was wavering and could have been split badly. But Nixon hesitated, for whatever reasons. But Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] moved, and moved quickly on it. He saw the political implications of it and his message to Coretta. And then, I guess, phone calls down there to the people who were responsible for his arrest and who could get him out. When he succeeded in getting King out of jail then that was a major coup as far as the black vote was concerned. And it swung the blacks. It showed the political astuteness of Robert Kennedy, at any rate.

STERN: Once the election was over - now of course I realize that the origins of the freedom rides had more to do with that Supreme Court decision than it did with the change in administration - was the change in administration at all a factor? In other words, did you feel it was time to test this new administration to see if the apathy and the passivity of the Eisenhower administration was at an end?

FARMER: Not really. I think, had Eisenhower been president, we would have done the same thing.... We would have acted the same way. Our feeling was.... My feeling was--and I think it was shared by my colleagues at CORE [Congress of Racial Equality]--I moved from NAACP to head of CORE, which I'd founded many years earlier--my feeling was that based on our experience, the federal government would act only if we created a crisis situation so they were forced to act, so that it would be politically more dangerous for them to act than for them to remain inactive.

The Supreme Court had issued rulings before. They issued a ruling in '46 or '47, the Irene Morgan case [*Morgan v. Virginia*, 1946] on segregated seating on the buses. Now that was completely ignored. And the Boynton case [*Boynton v. Virginia*, 1960], with which you are familiar, on use of bus terminal facilities used by interstate passengers.... And we saw that that was ignored also. I was getting letters across my desk very frequently from blacks in the South who complained that when they tried to sit in the front of the bus or to use the white waiting room and its facilities, they were jailed or beaten or both, in spite of the Supreme Court ruling.

So we felt the federal government was not enforcing federal law over the laws of the several southern states and that it would not do that for political reasons. It did not want to alienate southern voters, southern white voters--there weren't many black voters--did not want to alienate them. So that, as long as we allowed them to get away with not enforcing federal law, they wouldn't enforce it. So we deliberately set out to create a crisis situation, an intolerable situation, so that they would have to act.

STERN: Did you attempt, before the rides began in May, to essentially warn the administration?

FARMER: Yes. I sent letters to the president, to the attorney general, to the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], to Greyhound Corporation, to Trailways Corporation [Trailways, Inc.], following the Gandhi [Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi] pattern of telling people precisely what you're going to do and being open and above-board. We told them what we were going to do, when we were going to do it, and how we were going to do

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it.

STERN: Did you get any response from the administration?

FARMER: No response whatsoever from any of them--either of the Kennedys or from the FBI or from Greyhound or Trailways. I had not met the Kennedys at that point. But the feedback which I got from other civil rights people who had met them was that I was considered "Peck's bad boy": I was the radical, militant, the uncontrollable.

STERN: What was the response of people like Wilkins [Roy Wilkins] and Martin Luther King, et cetera, to your effort? Were they behind you?

FARMER: To the freedom rides?

STERN: Yes.

FARMER: Not really. Wilkins.... Roy was a good friend of mine and still is. In fact, he was the one who invited me to come into the NAACP as program director. But Roy still thought in terms of litigation, legal action. And he saw something like this, where you deliberately violate the laws down there: Why don't you just go to court? Even Thurgood Marshall says, "We don't need all those test cases with all that many people. One will do it. So why do you have to have a hundred?" And Roy was opposed to the idea and said so. Medgar Evers [Medgar Evers] in Mississippi, who we talked to in advance, was strongly opposed and said, "Don't come to Mississippi."

STERN: How about Whitney Young [Whitney M. Young, Jr.]?

FARMER: Whitney was opposed to it also. King was not opposed to it. We told Martin what we were going to do. Sent him a letter. He was on the CORE National Advisory Board, a board that met once a year or something like that. He didn't respond to the letter, but when the rides reached Atlanta we called him, and he met us and took us out to dinner and then wished us Godspeed. He didn't oppose the rides at all and lent his moral support at that time. King became involved in the rides not as a rider but in giving more active support. When the rides reached Alabama--Montgomery, Alabama--then

he came there. We were under siege in that church. He was there with us then.

STERN: Were you present during the famous incident at Anniston [Anniston, Alabama]?

FARMER: No. What happened there?

STERN: Oh, I seem to remember your father had died.

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FARMER: Yes, my father died. I was supposed to be leading the test. You see, we had captains. Since I was the leader of the rides, this was going to be the most dangerous part of the trip, and so I appointed myself as the leader of the tests. In other words, every stop in Alabama, I was going to lead the group into the white waiting room, make the attack. But just, I guess, two or three hours before we were to leave on the bus I got a call or wire--I forget which now--from my mother telling me that my father had died.

Interesting anecdote to that is that my mother insists that my father willed the timing of his death. He was in a terminal illness, cancer, and before I left on the rides I showed him my itinerary and told him what we were going to do. He said, "Well, that's very interesting. I think you'll probably get along all right until you get to 'Bama. In 'Bama and Mississippi, then somebody might take a pot shot at you." My mother said every morning he'd take that itinerary and look at it and say, "Let's see where Junior is now." But on the early morning when we were to leave Atlanta to go through Alabama that he gave up the ghost, and she thought he'd willed it.

But at any rate, what that did was to draw me, pull me back to Washington to bury him, at a critical point. And I assigned a white freedom rider, Jim Peck [James Peck] as the person to lead the test and Peck almost died in the process. He was left by a mob, unconscious, in a pool of his own blood in Birmingham. He had 56 or 57 stitches taken in his head, and so on.

So I had missed Anniston. I missed Birmingham. I missed the bloody scene just across the Alabama border where white hoodlums with clubs and guns had boarded the bus on the Georgia side. And as soon as it crossed the border the bus driver stopped and said, "I ain't movin' this bus until you niggers get up out of the front seat and get in the back where you belong." They refused to leave so then these hoodlums stood up and began beating the blacks with their clubs and everything else.

Blood was all over the place, they tell me. Jim Peck tried to intervene. He was white and he was hit--an uppercut that lifted him over a couple of seats and deposited him in the aisle, unconscious. A 65 year old white freedom rider, a professor from Wayne State University, Dr. Walter Bergman, tried to intervene by placing himself between the hoodlums and one of the blacks who was being beaten, and he was so badly beaten about the head that he suffered a stroke, a cerebral hemorrhage, and he has been paralyzed, confined to a wheelchair, ever since. He still is - an old, old man now - still in a wheelchair. I missed that.

As soon as I buried my father, then, I doubled back and rejoined the freedom riders in

Montgomery. The first group of freedom riders--13 or so, I forget exactly how many there were--could not go on. Peck, of course, had had this head beating and Bergman, the stroke. The others had suffered serious, serious, severe smoke inhalation at Anniston when the bus was burned. So they couldn't go on and it looked as though there would be no more freedom rides there. But it was then that SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] - the SNCC kids from Nashville called the Nashville movement - called me at home in Washington and said, "Would you object?"

Well, we had sort of an unwritten law, a gentleman's agreement, in SNCC and CORE and SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference], that before anyone would come into another's project we'd get permission from them so it wouldn't seem we were usurpers. So they called and asked if I would object to their carrying on the freedom ride. Well, my first

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reaction was, "Look, you'll be killed. You see what's happened so far in Alabama. You go on to Mississippi, then you probably won't survive." Their answer, which I found compelling, was, "But we can't let the racists stop us with violence. If we do, then we're dead - the movement's dead." So I said, "Good. You go ahead and I'll join you." So I joined the SNCC people there. We then heard from the Kennedys, from Robert Kennedy, in Montgomery. He sent a wire asking us to call off the rides.

STERN: What reason did he give?

FARMER: Well, he said, "Halt the rides. Strongly urge that you halt the rides and have a cooling-off period." Have a cooling-off period, I suppose, for negotiations to begin then. But my reply to him.... I don't have a copy of that. There may be a copy of these things in the CORE archives at the University of Wisconsin Library, I don't know. Unless they were stolen by somebody who had a sense of history which I didn't have. But at any rate, my reply was, "We've been cooling off for 300 years. If we cool off any more we're going to deep-freeze. The rides must continue." We were still trying to create the intolerable situation, and the burning bus in Anniston and Jim Peck's bloody picture on the front pages was headline news all over the world.

STERN: How precisely did Seigenthaler [John Seigenthaler] and John Doar get involved in that?

FARMER: John Doar, yes. They got involved, yes. They got involved in Anniston and Birmingham and Montgomery, too, and it was a very heroic role that they played. I was not there during much of their involvement but when....

STERN: Do you know if it was requested, or did the attorney general send them?

FARMER: That I don't know. I do not remember. My impression is that he sent them, the attorney general sent them. They really saved some lives. Seigenthaler did. And what was the other fellow's name?

STERN: John Doar.

FARMER: Doar, yeah. Seigenthaler.... One girl was being chased, a SNCC girl, chased by a mob. And you know, he outran the mob and placed himself in front of them and delayed them long enough for her to get away. They showed great Courage - from all the reports that I got - and I was very pleased. Bobby sent in the marshals into Montgomery. And the marshals saved lives, no question about it. When we were held in that church overnight the mob, the white mob.... Oh, by the way, when I arrived at the airport in Montgomery from Washington, I was met by one of King's lieutenants, a minister. I can't remember his name. I'll remember it later on. Thin, dark fellow.

STERN: Wyatt Walker [Wyatt T. Walker]?

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FARMER: No, no, no. Not Wyatt. Not.... It was a guy who later got a church in Ohio. I'll think of his name later on. But he had the greatest physical courage of anybody I ever met. He met me with two or three men from his church at the airport. He says, "You know we got a riot down there." I said, "I heard it's a bad...." "We got to get you in the church."

And we tried to approach the church, and the mob seemed to have it surrounded - or partially surrounded - and the mob stopped the car. We couldn't get through them. Then we put the car in reverse and backed up and tried another street. Same results. The mob was coming on to the car to turn it over, or something. We backed away.

Then we went to a black-owned taxi stand and asked the guy there if he had any idea how we could outflank that mob and get closer to the church. Within walking distance. He sent us around to a graveyard - park the car and walk through the graveyard and make it in. We got through the graveyard and found that the mob had moved in there, between us and the church. And this guy, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth [Fred L. Shuttlesworth], he walked through that mob. He was a little skinny guy. Here's a mob, people with chains and clubs and guns and everything else, sweating. And he: "Move out of the way. Let me through. Come on, let me through." And they all stepped aside. Here I was, big me, you know, trying to hide behind him and I followed him through. I was scared spitless, as it were. But the mob parted, let him through.

It was the crazy-nigger syndrome, we came to call it. And they said, "This nigger's crazy," you know, and so nobody would bother him. But he got me through to the church, and there I closeted with Martin and we chatted about what we were going to do, strategy-wise. I guess it was a couple of days later when we went on into Jackson. By the time we....

Oh, I was about to say the mob busted into the church during that night, kicked open one of the doors. And I remember there in the basement a door opened and in came many members of the mob, coming toward us. I do not know how it happened or where they came from, but the U.S marshals suddenly appeared. And shoulder-to-shoulder, arm-in-arm, they forced the mob back out the door and across into a park and disbursed them. I don't know where they came from, if they came in another door or if.... They were there.

STERN: Were you even aware that there were federal marshals there?

FARMER: I knew there were federal marshals in town. We saw them occasionally then. But we probably would have been killed in that church, I think, if they hadn't been there. We were determined to go on in. In fact, we had long sessions, SNCC kids and CORE. I asked my office to recruit young CORE people who were willing to take on such hazardous assignments. They did and we set up checkpoints in Chicago and New Orleans for the recruits to be sent into and trained quickly, rather than having a two-weeks training period as we had for the first group, which comprised _____ two days. Concentrated it, and then ship them in by bus.

The young SNCC and CORE kids sat in their room, trying to persuade Dr. King to go along with us. Martin wouldn't go. He gave several reasons. "Now," he says, "I'm on probation. I was arrested in Atlanta and one of the terms of my probation is that I don't get into trouble." Well, the kids laughed at that and said, "Look, I'm on probation, I'm on probation, I'm on probation. We're all on probation. But this is a fight. This is a revolution.

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This is a war. Probation doesn't stop you." Martin says, "Well, I think that I must choose the time and place of my Golgotha." Well, you know, they roared at that one. They hadn't involved me in this discussion at all. I was just listening because I didn't want to go either. Because I was scared and I honestly did not think that we would reach Jackson alive.

The kids were determined. Well, the next morning they got on the bus, and I helped them onto the bus and waved good-bye. And one of the girls, a CORE girl from New Orleans, 17-year-old, looked stunned and surprised. 'Cause they had just assumed that I was going. They'd even raised the question with me. They said--she said, "Jim, you're going with us, aren't you?"

I said, "No. You see, I've been away from the office for more than a month now and my desk is piled awfully high with paperwork. People will be mad if they don't get replies to their letters and furthermore, somebody has to be there to help raise money to finance this movement to keep it going. So I have a responsibility. I must go back, but I hope you have a good, safe trip." She said, "Jim, please." Well, how could I face the kids later if I... I said, "All right. Get my luggage and put it on the damn bus. I'm going."

Well, when the bus started out we found that Kennedy had moved - Bobby Kennedy. The Alabama National Guard had been called out. There were at least a half dozen Alabama guardsmen on the bus with us, with rifles and bayonets.

STERN: They had federalized them?

FARMER: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. The press was with us, too. There were newspaper reporters on bus. It was big news now. It was world headlines. There were helicopters overhead. Chopping around overhead, searching the woods in front of us. There were police cars, state police and county sheriff people, careening up and down the highway with sirens screaming in front of us and behind us and so on.

We got to the Mississippi line greeted by that famous sign: "Welcome to the Magnolia State." Before we got there I saw the kids writing notes. The girls would stick the notes in their bosoms and the men would stick them in pockets. I walked over to see what they were writing: names and addresses of next of kin. They really did not expect to arrive, but they were determined to go.

When we got to the state line the bus stopped, and the driver got off and another driver got on. The Alabama guardsmen got off and the Mississippi guardsmen got on. The Alabama Director of Public Safety--I forgot his name--got on the bus and walked over to one of the reporters and whispered something to him. This reporter whispered this message to the other reporters. All but one of the reporters left the bus and got in a car. I later asked this reporter, the remaining reporter, what the message had been. He said, "The Director of Public Safety for the State of Alabama said they had just gotten reliable information that this bus was going to be ambushed and destroyed inside the Mississippi border."

Well, we had learned from the press that Ross Barnett [Ross R. Barnett] had - he was Governor of Mississippi then - had been on television and radio for the past two or three days urging law and order, saying, "Anybody who comes into Mississippi and breaks our laws is going to suffer the consequences, is going to go to jail. But let the law take its course. Let us handle it." Telling the rednecks to stay out of town; don't come into Jackson; stay home. Let the law take care of it. "We gonna take care of it; if they break our laws of race

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segregation, they are going to jail. But don't you get involved in it." And he pounded at them. He wanted their peace. You know, he didn't want the thing we'd had in Alabama recurring.

As we rode along the Mississippi there were Mississippi guardsmen, National Guard, out flanking the road, the highway, by every wooded area, both sides with their rifles there. And the one particularly heavily wooded area we passed by, I heard one of the officers of National Guard shout over a bullhorn: "Look behind every tree." So apparently this was where they expected the ambush to occur. But there was no ambush.

We arrived in Jackson. There was what appeared to be a mob there at the bus terminal. And I got out first, of course, my responsibility. I said, "Well, I guess that's the mob. I guess this is it. But we can't sit here and hide, you know. We got to go. That's what we came for."

So I walked out of the bus and the others followed me. One girl, Lucretia Collins, was with me. She walked up and locked arms with me and we walked together. The mob divided as we came along and made a pathway for us. They knew precisely where we were going. We were going into the white waiting room. And so a path was there. We learned later this mob was all media people and plain clothes police and feds and... [laughter] ...that was the mob. Everybody else had stayed away.

So I'm sure the Kennedys had something to do with this. We do know of the phone calls that Bobby made down Alabama, you know. "Can't somebody drive that bus? Get that bus moving from Birmingham - get it moving. Well, what about Mr. Greyhound? Can he drive a bus? You drive the bus - but get that bus moving." They couldn't find a driver who would risk it.

Well, we walked into the bus terminal, and Lucretia and I immediately walked across to the dining room, the cafeteria. And the Jackson City police chief, Captain Ray, was blocking the door. He stopped us and he says, "What's your name?" "I'm James Farmer." He nodded and he says, "Move on." I said, "Where?" He said, "Out." I refused on the grounds of the Supreme Court decision in the Boynton case. And he says, "I'll tell you again. Move on." I refused again on the same grounds. "I'll tell you one more time. Move on." I refused one more time. Then Captain Ray, he said, "All right. Follow that police officer and get into the patrol wagon. You're under arrest." "What are the charges?" And he said, "Disorderly conduct, inciting to riot, and disobeying an officer." Or something like that.

So we got into the patrol wagon, and everybody else who came in from that bus had the same experience. Captain Ray, you know, "Follow that police officer. Get into the police wagon." Well, it worked because we kept Freedom Riders going in on every bus. SNCC people or CORE people or recruits. It was such big news, everybody wanted to go on a Freedom Ride. We had more volunteers than we could possibly get. Many of them were floaters, were drifters who had no permanent address and were unemployed or something else. Some were idealists, and I learned later back at my office that the biggest item of conversation anywhere in the city of New York was Freedom Rides. I heard people would meet and say, "Hey man, you got your bus ticket?" It was whites in Times Square. And then there would be nervous laughter--some guilt and some concern and everything else.

Well, the rides continued and we filled up jails. In Jackson we had agreed that we were not going to bail out. We were going to stay in as long as we could. The maximum

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you could stay in and still file an appeal in the state of Mississippi was 40 days. And as we all wanted to file appeals, so we agreed to stay in 40 days. Some had to get out quickly, and some panicked once they were in jail and said, "Bail us out." But most stayed in. Some insisted they were not even going to file an appeal. They were going to serve their entire sentences, six months or something like that. And they did - a few.

STERN: Was there any communication at that point with the administration or the attorney general?

FARMER: No, we had no communication then with the attorney general's office. My office, my staff in New York, at that point was in touch with the attorney general's office who--was it Burke Marshall who was there? Yeah - they talked with several times and kept him informed, what was going on. And it was later that summer when Bobby Kennedy....

The rides continued, just built up momentum, and we were transferred to Parchman, the state penitentiary in Mississippi in the maximum security unit. We took it over. They wouldn't let us out to exercise, any sunlight or anything else. They wanted us to stay there and rot. I asked, in fact, when the commissioner or director of prisons for the state came to visit once, and I learned from a trustee that he was there. I sent a request by one of the guards that I be allowed to talk with him and he agreed to see me.

It was a little embarrassing because they wanted to make us as uncomfortable as possible. They took all our clothing away and wouldn't let us have any paper or pencils, no reading materials. My wife had subscribed to *The New York Times* to have sent down there to me. It never got to me. When I got out they presented a little box of 40 *New York Times*. They took all our clothes away and gave us just little shorts, a pair of shorts. Well, the big fellows like me they gave little shorts to, and the little fellows they gave big shorts to, so that I couldn't get mine buttoned. Here I was holding my shorts up, walking barefoot, and everything else.

STERN: Obviously a deliberate attempt at humiliation.

FARMER: Yes, humiliation. So I walked out holding my shorts up to meet with the director of prisons. He sat there in his Palm Beach suit smoking a long cigar. Crossed his legs. Here I was standing, you know, holding my pants up [laughter] and he was sitting in an easy chair, and I requested that we be allowed out to exercise. "No, we ain't gonna let you out. In the first place, the other nigra prisoners here would kill you. They hate you."

"First, I don't believe that. We developed a good relationship with the other prisoners in the Jackson jail and in the Hinds County jail. We were sending messages to each other and singing for each other. We taught them our songs, they taught us their songs, and so on. So if they will harm us, we are willing to risk that." He said, "No, we ain't gonna let you out there at all. We want you to stay there and rot. I know we got to feed you because there's a law says we got to feed you, but we can put so much salt in that food that you can't eat it. And I think that's just what we gonna do." And that was the end.

Even Ross Barnett the governor came by. He just walked around the corridors of the

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maximum security unit. I recognized him from his pictures. He was a thin-boned man with an enormous pot belly. He stopped at my cell and said, "What's your name?" I said, "James Farmer." And he just looked at me for awhile and said, "Are they treating you all right here?" I said, "Well, there's been no brutality, no physical brutality. We haven't been beaten or anything." He said, "You got no complaints?" I said, "I didn't say that. The biggest complaint is that we are here." And he nodded and walked on.

But any rate Bobby, the attorney general, called upon the ICC [Interstate Commerce Commission], as you know, to issue an order with teeth in it that you can enforce. Well, we considered this a vindication of the strategy, create an intolerable situation. It was utterly intolerable. If we had stopped then we probably would not have won. And the ICC issued an order....

STERN: Wasn't there a period of delay though, when you had to threaten....

FARMER: Yes, yes. Well, no, we threatened after the order was issued, ordering that the "for colored, for white" signs must come down and be replaced by signs saying, "Segregation in the use of these facilities is unconstitutional, illegal,

et cetera.” We notified the attorney general - I did personally - that we were pleased with his request of the ICC and the ICC’s response.

The effective date of this order was to be November first of ’61. We told him that on November first we were going to send black and white test exams throughout the South to test the enforcement of the order. And if we found that it was being enforced, fine. If it was not being enforced, the Freedom Rides would resume.

And we found it was being enforced. There were several incidents and we reported those incidents immediately, and they were cleared up. If the people who were violating - violators - were the law enforcement officers, then we reported it to the Justice Department. If they were the carriers or the employees of the carriers, then we reported it to the ICC. So we considered it successful.

Well, I had still not met the Kennedys. I learned while I was in jail by an incoming Freedom Rider that there had been a meeting in Robert Kennedy’s office that he called while I was in jail - some CORE people and some SNCC people and then some other name blacks. I believe Lena Horne was there, or Eartha Kitt, one of them. I know Jimmy Baldwin [James Baldwin] was there.

STERN: That’s a very famous meeting.

FARMER: Yes. That meeting.... The report we got from it, by the way, the report I got was that Bobby said to them - they may have been exaggerating or put it in their own words - he says, “Why don’t you guys cut out all this sittin’ in and Freedom Riding shit and get down to voter registration, something much more important? If you do that I’ll get you tax exemption.” And that was the report I received. I was not at the meeting, so I cannot verify it. But I was also told that one of the SNCC guys there was so furious at the suggestion, that he and Bobby almost came to blows. They were standing eyeball to eyeball, forehead to forehead, shaking their fingers at each other. And one of them CORE fellows then stood between them and pushed the SNCC guy back. But eventually the

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movement did go into voter registration, but not to the exclusion of demonstrations. Voter registration *was* ultimately more important.

STERN: Did you feel after your success.... Obviously, your strategy succeeded on the Freedom Rides. Did you feel that the other major people in the movement, like Young and Wilkins, et cetera, did they acknowledge....

FARMER: Oh, they went along with the Freedom Rides once it became front page and big news.

STERN: I see.

FARMER: In fact, Roy came down to visit me - Roy Wilkins - and came to my cell block and brought me a couple of books to read. This was before I went to Parchman, when I was still at the Hinds County jail. They let him bring in the books. He brought me *To Kill a Mockingbird*, was one, and I forgot the other one. And we had a good chat and he expressed his support and sympathy. Even Medgar Evers - who had opposed the Freedom Rides and opposed our coming in, urged us to stay out - supported us once we got there. It was big news then and that's what always happens in a movement. Those who object, once it becomes news, they get in.

We also learned from some of the trustees in the Hinds County jail that the authorities had tried to get black prisoners--tried to make a deal with some of the black prisoners, some of the hardened criminals--that they would shorten their terms or reduce their terms, or let them out on probation or parole or something, if they would meet the Freedom Riders and beat up the Freedom Riders. That would have been a major coup, blacks beat up the Freedom Riders. But they turned them down, according to the trustees. They said, "Hell no. We're not going to do it." Oh boy. That really would have been a coup for Mississippi if that had happened. They're smart, much smarter than Alabama was.

Well, I met the president some time after that. He was meeting with all civil rights leaders, individually. And to be perfectly candid, I felt highly offended at our meeting because the president hardly looked at me once. He had a sheath of papers. He was reading memorandum papers and making notations and marking them down. And finally I said, to him, "Mr. President, if you're so terribly busy, too busy for this conference, then perhaps I should leave and we can try to reschedule it at a time when you have half an hour." He said, "Don't. Continue. I'm listening." But he still didn't look at me, for the whole meeting. And I asked Wilkins and Whitney Young and King if they'd had the same experience. They had not. I was considered the bad boy at that point. Bobby, his attitude was quite the same.

As a matter of fact, during that time - those years somewhere between '61 and '63, probably '62 - I was out at Aspen, Colorado moderating one of those executive seminars for two weeks, and finished the two weeks and was about to go home. And the Aspen Institute leaders asked me if I would consent to stay around for another two weeks, because they had some foreign students coming in for a seminar. They were going to discuss civil rights, race issues and other social problems in the United States. They thought I would be helpful there. They said the attorney general will be here also - Kennedy.

I said, "Well, I should be back in my office, but this to me is important, so I'll call my

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office, consult with them and try to arrange to stay." They came back to me later and said, "We're sorry, but we'll have to withdraw the offer. But we spoke with the attorney general and he said, "If Farmer's there I'm not coming." He said, "I will bring Solicitor General Thurgood Marshall." I don't think he was solicitor general then - maybe he was a federal judge, whatever it was - "I'll bring Thurgood Marshall." So they withdrew the offer. So that was to show the kind of terms I was on with the Kennedys then.

I must hasten to add now that Bobby and I became quite close. We became very friendly after he became a senator from New York. And he expressed regret that we'd not gotten acquainted earlier.

STERN: That's fascinating. I know, of course, what the general position was.... And during the first year of the Kennedy administration you were, I believe, not very happy with the fact that the president deferred civil rights legislation, although....

FARMER: Yeah, that's right. We felt he was moving far too slowly and his rhetoric was not being put into action. In fact, one of the things he said during the campaign was: Something that President Eisenhower could do with the stroke of the pen is wipe out housing segregation. A stroke of the pen.

So we waited for the stroke of the pen. A year went by. No stroke of the pen. So we started a campaign of sending bottles of ink to the White House, figuring his pen must have run dry. Just bottles of ink flowing in from all over the country.

STERN: He also received hundreds and hundreds of pens.

FARMER: Did he really? [Laughter] I also felt that he was far too slow in other ways. When Meredith [James Howard Meredith] was trying to get into "Ole Miss" [University of Mississippi], for instance, President Kennedy made a speech, a real eloquent speech. And I called a press conference, or was asked by the press - I forget which - what I thought of it. I said, "I was disappointed in the speech because the president did not stress the moral issue, did not say Meredith should get in because it is right or just." But it was purely on legalism, the Constitution. You know, this is what the law says, therefore it should be enforced. Felt gratified that the president made a second speech not long after there in which he stressed the moral issue. This is right, and this is the way it's going to be. We'll do it because it's right. I said, "Well, maybe they'll hear you there. Somebody is listening."

STERN: What was your general reaction to some of the executive orders? I know that Kennedy, although he was reluctant to move in a very public way, issued a significant number, in those first months, of executive orders which accomplished a lot.

FARMER: Now which ones were those? I'm a little vague....

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STERN: Well, for example, one that comes to mind is the desegregation of employee recreational facilities in the federal government, things of that sort, which a number of people in the civil rights movement felt really did make a difference, and showed that the administration was taking a very different tack from that of the Eisenhower administration.

FARMER: Yeah. Right. I think there was no question about that and I certainly saw that. It was an improvement over Eisenhower, moving in the right direction. But my role, as I perceived it, was to prod him and to.... Not going to applaud everything. You know, I'll applaud....

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STERN: ...as all-encompassing as it could have been.

FARMER: No, we weren't satisfied with it at all and felt that he was playing politics. I think I made some sort of speech or statement to the press, said, "What started out with the promise of being bold strides into the new frontier has turned into piddling little pussycat steps." Or something like that.

STERN: What about the question of appointment of federal judgeships? Did you have any role at all in trying to advise the attorney general on those?

FARMER: No we did not. That was largely a prerogative of the NAACP and its legal defense and education fund. They did. They had a major role in that and we tried to stay out of their territory as much as possible.

STERN: I know there were some appointments that you were very unhappy about.

FARMER: Yes, there were. Yes, many. And we voiced our unhappiness when the appointments were made. Generally, we felt that President Kennedy was far ahead of Eisenhower, but neither he nor Robert Kennedy wanted civil rights legislation. Both of them said separately, "We do not think new civil rights legislation is either necessary or feasible." I think those were the words. They were opposed to it up until the Birmingham march of Dr. King, when the issue became irresistible then. And people saw in their living rooms the brutality of Bull Connor [Theophilus Eugene Connor], and saw the horrors, and the American people's consciences revulsed (*sic*). They said, you know, "Bull Connor's a beast and we've got to put an end to this thing." It was then, and then only, that the Kennedys came out for civil rights legislation.

STERN: Right. Now of course the first real crisis beyond.... Well, of course, the Freedom Riders certainly created a crisis for the administration, but in terms of a crisis in which there was major federal involvement, was Meredith...

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FARMER: Right, definitely.

STERN: ...and the University of Mississippi.... Did you feel that the administration had pursued that adequately, sending in the marshals?

FARMER: I guess. In fact, I then was sort of a pacifist. I used to be a pacifist earlier, and CORE was a nonviolent organization. CORE was not a pacifist organization. Officially we accepted nonviolence as a tactic rather than a principle, which distinguished us from King. But still I had to do some soul-searching on that. Wilkins, I believe King, and Whitney Young had sent wires demanding that the army be called in or something. Am I going to do that? Now the army is based upon force. Am I going to ask them to send the army in? I believe in nonviolence. Well, I didn't debate with myself very long, I sent a wire, too. So I thought they moved. I would have moved a little faster, but they moved on it and saw that he got in. So when the chips were down, they'd move, but we had to force them to it. There had to be a crisis, they would not take the initiative.

STERN: And do you feel that while this was happening that they were, in a sense, undergoing a learning process? I mean, the fact is....

FARMER: Yes, I think so. They were not familiar with the civil rights thing or with black struggle, and did not have a real feel for the movement at that time. We were troublemakers, CORE and SNCC. You know: Why do they do this? They should let the law take care of it.

Well, we had some of that discussion with Thurgood Marshall, who is a dear friend of mine. They couldn't understand why we would, first of all, want to get in jail - because it's the duty of a lawyer to keep his client out of jail. We wanted to go to jail - and then, once we got in jail, they couldn't understand why we wouldn't bail right out. They said, "It's the lawyer's job, if his client goes to jail, to get him out as fast as possible and keep him out." And we wanted to stay in. [Laughter] So they had great difficulty in understanding that, though I don't want to be too critical, because Thurgood Marshall saved the Freedom Rides when Mississippi was trying to put us out of business. They almost succeeded.

As a matter of fact, Jackson's city attorney said to Jack Young.... Jack was a black lawyer down there in Mississippi, who'd never been to law school, and he told us he'd never handled a civil rights case before, but he was the only black lawyer there. First time he took the bar he flunked it. He says he thinks he really flunked it the second time, but that they decided they needed a nigger lawyer who was a good nigger. He told me quite frankly that he operated as a fixer. If a black was arrested for drunken driving they say, "Boy, you got a lawyer?" "No, I don't know any lawyer." "Go see Jack Young. He's a good nigger." And Jack would get the charge reduced to reckless driving or something like that, and get him a small fine and he'd get his fee from the guy, somehow. That's the way he operated.

So we sent our lawyers in, but Jack had to be the lawyer of record since he was admitted to the bar. Our lawyers were then introduced or presented to the court and they argued cases. The city attorney of Jackson told Jack Young, "Look, we figure that if we can knock CORE out of the box we've broken the back of this so-called civil rights movement in

the state of Mississippi. And that's exactly what we're going to do."

Well, we had put up a lot of bail bond money. That was \$500 dollars for each person and had to be cash bond. We had 330 some-odd Freedom Riders, I guess, in at one time and many others who had been in and out. So we'd put up \$500 dollars on each. At the instruction of our lawyers, Jack Young reached an agreement with Mississippi that they would follow the usual procedure when there were mass arrests. Not everyone would have to come down for the trial on appeal or arraignment. There would be just typical cases selected, so we'd have one who was arrested in the bus terminal, one was arrested at the railroad station, and one was arrested at the airport. What was found in their cases would then automatically be applied to the other cases. And that was the deal. Great.

But then about ten days or a week before the date, Mississippi told us, "Sorry, we changed our minds. Every one of those damn Freedom Riders gotta be back here in Jackson and if anyone doesn't show up you forfeit that bond. That's \$500 dollars you lose." So we had to go on emergency footing. Every staff member of CORE had to have a phone by his bed and we had to have that number. As I've said, many of the people were floaters. We had to try to locate them. We found one was in Istanbul, we let him stay. One was in Saskatchewan and we let him stay. But with the exception of one other, we located all of them. Soon as we got a line on somebody, we called the nearest CORE staff person any time of the day or night and, you know, "Get him. Go to it." And then we had to charter buses to get them to checkpoint, and then put them in buses and go down there. We didn't know how long we'd have to stay. We had to feed them and house them.

Well, Tougaloo College helped us. There was room for them, but we had to pay them something for their food. So it was going to cost us a fortune. And I called Wilkins - we were still friendly even though we disagreed on strategy and tactics - "Look, we got a real problem. We have all these Freedom Riders and Mississippi is socking it to us now." And Roy said, "Well, I'll come over and have lunch with you." He came over. He paid for lunch and he said, "Well, as soon as I get back to the office I'm going to send a check for a thousand dollars to you. That's the most I can send without going to my board. When I get to my board, then we'll send another check." Well, he sent \$5000 from his board, and that helped. That was piddling in the amount of money we needed.

When we got down there to the arraignment, what they did was to triple the bond on appeal, \$1500 dollars rather than \$500 dollars, which meant an additional thousand dollars in cash for each person. We couldn't get a bail bondsman. They said cash bond. We finally got a Connecticut bonding company to agree to do it. They went down to check it out and they called us next day and said, "Sorry, we've got to cancel out because the state of Mississippi has informed us that if we write bail for even one Freedom Rider we'll lose our license to operate in the state of Mississippi." And so we were about to go out of business. We could not raise anymore. We'd gotten as many contributions as we could from CORE contributors, from trade unions, from corporations and everything. We started borrowing money from unions and corporations. If you can't give us another \$5000 or \$10,000, then loan it to us interest-free and we'll pay it back when we can.

But even so, we were far short of what we needed. And at a cocktail party, Thurgood - who was still with the Legal Defense and Education Fund - walked over to me - both had martinis - he said, "Jimmy, how's this Freedom Ride going? What happened?" I said, "Mississippi is about to kill us. We hoped that we were going to make segregation so

expensive for the state of Mississippi they'd realize they couldn't afford it. And we were hurting them. There's no question. They had nuisance taxes, which they had announced in the press that they were going to abolish, but they could not abolish it because of the Freedom Rides. We'd cost them so much money. But they were socking it to us."

He said, "What's the matter? Bail bond?" I said, "Yeah. They tripled the bond." He said, "Can't get a bail bond company?" "Nope. We got one and they backed out because Mississippi was going to cancel their license." He said, "Jesus Christ." He said, "Look, we've got some bail bond money over at the Inc. Fund [NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.] and you may have it. I think it's about \$200,000 or maybe \$300,000 thousand. I don't know what." He says, "It's not doing nothing but sitting there and you might as well use it as long as it lasts." So he says, "Have one of your guys, whoever handles those things for you, get in touch with Jack Greenberg. He's a good man. And work out the details and how we want the accounting handled and all of that, and it's yours." And we used it. We exhausted it. And so I have no criticism of Thurgood. As a good lawyer, he couldn't understand our Gandhian strategy, but when the chips were down he came through.

STERN: That's a fascinating story. Didn't you take part, I believe in '62, in a meeting at Arden House in Virginia about American policy in Africa, which I believe was attended by both the president and Ambassador Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson]?

FARMER: No, I don't think they attended. This was at the beginning of an organization that Phil Randolph [A. Philip Randolph] set up, called the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa. The members of the American Negro Leadership Conference on Africa were the heads of the civil rights organizations: Wilkins, Whitney Young, A. Philip Randolph as the founder, Martin Luther King, a representative from SNCC, whoever was chairman at the time or executive secretary, and myself. I do not think that the president or Stevenson were there. But we did have a delegation, a delegation of all of us - the heads of civil rights organizations - who met separately with President Kennedy and then with Stevenson.

STERN: I see. I must have been confusing that, then.

FARMER: I think it was in the other order. We met with Stevenson first, and then with the president on American policy in South Africa or Southern Africa, it was. We found it ineffective. (*sic*) And my analysis of it was that they agreed with us. You know, Stevenson nodded his head and he agreed with everything we were saying on principle, but nothing happened.

President Kennedy agreed with us - "You're right" - but nothing happened. My analysis was that nothing happened because they knew enough to know that we could not swing many black votes on African issues. On civil rights issues we could swing votes...

STERN: I see.

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FARMER: ...and they would respond to that. But Africa was an issue then only with a few black leaders in this country, and not with masses. And so they didn't have to respond and they didn't. Now it's different.

STERN: You say in your book that the president was not willing to move on civil rights until, to use your words, until five minutes before Birmingham. Were you being rhetorical there, or do you mean literally that....

FARMER: Did I say five minutes before Birmingham?

STERN: Well, words to that effect.

FARMER: Words to that effect? Uh-huh. I was being rhetorical.

STERN: You said that he was literally pushed by Birmingham.

FARMER: I think he was pushed by Birmingham. He was pushed by Birmingham to support civil rights legislation, to favor it, and to have it introduced. Because there was a hue and cry then, you know, and polls showed that an overwhelming majority of American people wanted an end put to this nonsense that they saw on TV, which meant they wanted civil rights legislation with teeth in it, and they wanted it enforced.

STERN: Were you content with the speech he gave in June of '63, the major civil rights speech?

FARMER: Yeah, as a matter of fact, I had a TV debate with Malcolm [Malcolm X] on that.

STERN: Malcolm X?

FARMER: Malcolm X, yes. I forget what channel that was on. It was network. Present there was, in the discussion, Wyatt Walker, the late Mr. Morrison, who was the New York representative of the Johnson Publishing Company publications, *Jet* and *Ebony*, Malcolm X, and me. And in the discussion, which became a debate between Malcolm and me, Malcolm talked about Kennedy - "that Ku Klux Klan president we got there," and "that Ku Klux Klan speech he made, now." Well, that was a bit much, you know. I wanted to be fair. I started to say, "Now let's give the devil his due" - and caught myself before I said "devil," because the Muslims then referred to all whites as "devils." I said, "Let's give the president his due." It was the strongest civil rights speech made by any president, Lincoln [Abraham Lincoln] included.

STERN: And it had raised the moral issue.

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FARMER: Yes, it raised the moral issue and I said, "Let's give credit where credit is due." It was a good speech and a strong one. Malcolm backed down on it. I heard from Wilkins that the Kennedys were pleased with that debate. They heard the discussion and said, "That Farmer's a stand-up guy. We liked the way he handled that."

STERN: That's fascinating too. On the March on Washington.... I know you were involved in the initial planning, but you made a distinction in your book, which I thought was very interesting, and I want to pursue with you. You said that the march did not turn out the way you would have preferred. To use your words, you would have preferred, instead of a "massive controlled demonstration," a "direct action march." But you were overruled, essentially, by all the other civil rights organizations. If you had had your way, just how different would a direct action march have been? Exactly what would you have substituted for what happened?

FARMER: Well, we would have raised some nonviolent hell. We would have had some sit-ins on Capital Hill.

STERN: In what sorts of things?

FARMER: A few of those congressmen and senators who were not going along with the civil rights act and we would have pressured them. The NAACP, of course, was strongly opposed to that and the Urban League was opposed to it. The UAW [International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America] was strongly opposed to it, and the Kennedys were strongly opposed to it. In fact, the Kennedys feared that a march on Washington might turn into a riot and they wanted it cancelled; tried to get it called off. In fact, Walter Reuther [Walter P. Reuther] was backing them on this.

STERN: Really?

FARMER: Yes. But they reached a compromise. The compromise was that there would be a giant prayer meeting instead of a nonviolent demonstration. It turned out beautifully, though.

I missed it. I was in jail in Plaquemine [Louisiana], but I did see it on TV. The jailers let some of the local blacks bring a TV set. So I watched it and it was impressive, and I probably was wrong. It probably was better this way, because it got an overwhelmingly favorable response from American viewers.

STERN: Which direct action might not have done.

FARMER: Might not have. Might have created more irritation and hastened the backlash. But I didn't see that at the time.

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STERN: Did you feel it was strategically wise not to ask the president to speak? I know there was some debate about that, too.

FARMER: Well, yeah. We didn't want it to become a Kennedy demonstration, or Kennedy meeting at all. Because we felt he, the administration.... Well, anyway, no matter who was president or what the president had done, we wouldn't want it to be his meeting because then we would be the tail of the administration's dog. We would be owned by the administration, and I certainly did not want that impression to be given. So I think it was good that the president was not invited to speak, though the leaders who were there did go and see the president afterwards. I was not there.

Whenever the civil rights leaders would go and see the president - and several times we did it in a group with Kennedy, with Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] - it was an amusing scene. When the photographer would come in you would need shoulder pads and a helmet. Everybody leaped up and ran to get right next to the president. I usually got left out because I'm not a hustler like that. Well, oh boy, Whitney, he moved fast. He spotted that camera.... And Wilkins wasn't far behind. [Laughter]

STERN: I've seen a lot of those pictures.

FARMER: Yes, oh dear!

STERN: As far as you know, did the administration consult in any systematic way with people like Young, Wilkins - as a matter of fact, with yourself - on the civil rights bill before it was sent to Congress?

FARMER: They did not consult with me. They probably did consult with Wilkins and with Whitney Young, who were much more in their good graces than I was. But I have no doubt that they consulted with them. They would not have consulted with SNCC. There was a Burke Marshall with the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department that kept in touch with CORE and SNCC.

STERN: Right.

FARMER: It was at that level that we had communication.

STERN: What was your general sense of the bill? I mean, once it emerged.

FARMER: Oh, I was pleased with it. I thought it was good. We were especially pleased with the public accommodations section, Mrs. Murphy's rooming house, that argument - that came up and that was included. So we thought it was strong and had to go through. Lyndon Johnson was something else in his wheeling and dealing and pushing it through. But that's another story.

STERN: Yes. Of course, there are those who argue that they feel it would have passed even if Kennedy had lived.

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FARMER: Well, I think Johnson could have done it more easily than Kennedy. He was a southerner speaking with a southern accent. He could twist those arms better. As a matter of fact, he demonstrated that when I was talking with him shortly after he became president. He spent half the time talking on the phone with senators on the civil rights bill. I think this was for my benefit. Cajoling, threatening, twisting arms and really going down the line on it, "They'd buy this bill. The southerners would buy this bill if I'd just take that civil rights section off. I can't do it because that's the guts of the matter. Leave it in." "Somehow I gotta get the Republicans. I think you civil rights guys could help me on that. You should tell the Republicans that if they vote for this bill you'll vote for them. I think you should. If I can't get them, I gotta get the Dixiecrats." That's a southern Democrat, you know. A little Johnson-ism. "I don't know how I'm gonna get them. Somehow I've gotta get to 'em. Somehow I gotta break down their resistance." He said, "Jim, somehow I gotta get my hand under their dress." [Laughter] Never would have heard anything like that from Kennedy, of course.

STERN: How would you, at this point.... If you were coming to the Kennedy Library to look at the public exhibit on civil rights, what sorts of things would you want to see in it? In other words, your assessment of that period? Did it represent a turning point?

FARMER: Oh yes! There's no question! At least we had rhetoric, which gave us something to go on. We could build on that rhetoric. We could throw the rhetoric back at them. So that was positive. We didn't have that in the Eisenhower period. We didn't have a sense of hope or a sense of getting the nation on the move again. So there's no question but that it was, that the administration gave us a receptive climate for our activities, which we had not had before. We would have done the same thing before. I'm not sure that Eisenhower would have responded as well or as quickly as the Kennedys did. But still, we had to pressure them. We had to keep the pressure up. But it was that period in American history when compassion came from the White House, the spirit of compassion. Now we have a spirit of "me-ism." The administration, the Kennedy rhetoric and the Kennedy image, did help that.

STERN: I was struck in your book by your description of the response in Africa to Kennedy's death.

FARMER: Oh yes.

STERN: And how you found that such a striking phenomenon.

FARMER: Well, it was true. And let me tell you that it hit me hard too, in spite of the differences that I had with Kennedy. I was playing a role. But I was impressed. I was a part of that sentiment, that we have a vigorous young president there who we can use to help change this nation for the better. And I loved him, in spite of the fact he never looked at me. When I heard that he had been killed, I was crushed

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for weeks. Just couldn't cope.

I was someplace in Ohio, someplace in the Midwest. I think it was Ohio. I was in an elevator. Somebody said, "Did you hear? They just killed Kennedy in Dallas" - two businessmen talking. And one of them said, "Yeah, they got the wrong fuckin' Kennedy. They should have killed that little devil Bobby." You know, it was all I could do to keep from going after those guys physically. You know, how could they?

So for weeks I couldn't cope. I was hit hard. In Africa, I found the same sentiment. People stayed in tears for a long time afterwards, because he gave them a spirit of hope too. His rhetoric and the image that he had that's useful. I don't say "rhetoric" in any demeaning way because rhetoric is terribly important. Nixon said, "Don't hear what we say, watch what we do." Well, what you say is terribly important. We watched what he did and we followed that, too. But what a president says is of great importance, enormous importance. Africans generally loved him. I didn't find any exceptions.

STERN: Even those who were anti-American?

FARMER: Even those who were anti-American loved the Kennedys.

STERN: Ghana - how can I not think of his name - the president of Ghana.

FARMER: Oh, Nkrumah [Kwame Nkrumah]. Yeah. He was the most popular man in the world as far as the developing nations were concerned.

STERN; And, of course, there was also, I would assume, the uncertainty about Johnson. There hadn't been a great deal of.... I know that you were very upset when he was nominated for vice president. And now, of course, he had succeeded to office and you were not sure what to expect.

FARMER: Well, he moved very quickly to try to ease those fears. In fact, Johnson phoned me at home just a few days after the assassination of Kennedy - you know, I'd never been called by a president and this is flattering - he called me at home and an operator with a southern accent says, "This Mr. Farmer?" I said, "Yes."

“Mr. James Farmer?” I said, “Yes.” “Hold the line for the president.”

I was about to give the usual answer, you know, “President of what?” On came Lyndon, talking fast. He says, “Mr. Farmer? This is Lyndon Johnson talking. I just want to let you know that I remember when you were in my office, and I was vice president and chairman of the President’s Commission on Equal Opportunity, and you came in and we had a good long talk and I asked you to do something for me, and you followed through. You came through on that. I want you to know how much I appreciate that and I’m going to need your help in the months that lie ahead. And I just hope I’ll have it.”

“Mr. President, if we’re going the same way, we’ll go together.” “Fine, fine, Mr. Farmer, and the next time you’re in Washington, drop by and see me.” I thought it was flattering, the Johnson treatment, which was quite different from Kennedy, who was more aloof.

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STERN: Were you involved at all, as a matter of fact, with that whole President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity reaction to the Troutman [Robert Troutman, Jr.] business? Are you familiar with that?

FARMER: I’ve forgotten it.

STERN: Plans for Progress and whether or not....

FARMER: I remember it vaguely now, but I’ve forgotten the details on it.

STERN: Hobart Taylor coming in...

FARMER: I remember Hobart, yes. All I remember.... I remember two conversations. One with the vice president, Mr. Johnson, on the question of affirmative action. It was unnamed at that point. And the CORE staff figured that we weren’t making any progress in employment as far as color-blindness, you know. Tell the employer all you got to do is hire the best qualified who applies. So we said we’ve got to give a push, an extra push to those who are at the bottom of the economic ladder. Well, CORE called it.... We called it, when we talked to Johnson, “compensatory preferential hiring”, you know, a terrible term, public relations-wise. It was just incredibly bad, but that’s what we called it. This is our new program, a new philosophy. I believe that Whitney Young of the Urban League came up with something similar about the same time. We were all thrashing around. Johnson’s reaction was, “That sounds like a good idea. But don’t call it - what did you call it? Compensatory what? That’s awful. Call it affirmative action. We’ve gotta move ahead and forge ahead and look forward.”

STERN: I didn’t know that Johnson coined that term.

FARMER: I think he did. That's my recollection of it. "Gotta call it affirmative action." Then they tell the story, the anecdote of Kennedy, President Kennedy, stepping off the plane one day and observing the honor guard and seeing all white and calling an officer over. "I see there are no Negroes in the honor guard." Officer said, "That's correct, Mr. President. You see, none have applied." And the president allegedly said, "Well, go out and find some." And the next time he stepped off the plane there were some blacks there. This was not color-blindness; this was affirmative action. This was color-consciousness to wipe out color-discrimination. So the Kennedys did buy that idea. Became a policy, though I had arguments with a lot of civil rights people on it. I remember having a long, almost violent argument with my dear friend Clarence Mitchell [Clarence M. Mitchell, Jr.] on that. "No, we don't want any special treatment. No, that's special treatment."

STERN: He was very critical of Kennedy.

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FARMER: Yeah, yeah. "No special treatment. No affirmative action." Anything. "Just don't discriminate against us." Well, now he's in favor of affirmative action. Who isn't? Well, a lot of people aren't. But who in civil rights isn't?

STERN: Do you have anything to add?

FARMER: Well....

STERN: By way of summing up?

FARMER: Don't want to cover Robert Kennedy? Just President Kennedy?

STERN: No, as a matter of fact, I was just about to move on to that.

FARMER: All right, we'll move on to that.

STERN: You said that you became much closer to Robert Kennedy after he had left the attorney generalship and became a New York senator. If you could elaborate on that.

FARMER: Well, as I told you, my relations with both Kennedys, and especially Robert Kennedy, had been very, very strained, from the very beginning, and the Freedom Rides didn't help at all. Bobby, I'm sure, never forgave me for my flippant response to his suggestion we call off the Freedom Rides and have a cooling-off period. I think he detested me.

But then in New York at the time of the surrogate judge battle.... I had left CORE by then, I resigned as national director of CORE. Burke Marshall called me at home. "Jim? Burke. Burke Marshall. Remember?" "Oh sure, hi, Burke." He says, "Look, the senator

would like to know if you will support him in the surrogate race, support his candidate and come out for him and back him.”

“Burke, I been traveling constantly and I know nothing about the surrogate campaign here. In fact, I don’t even know what the hell a surrogate judge does or what he is. So I’d have to look into it, see what the issues are, who the personalities are, and then make a decision.” He said, “Well, we don’t have much time. We’re in a hurry. How much time do you need?” I said, “Twenty-four hours.” “All right, call you back in 24 hours.”

Then a couple of hours later I got a call from another Kennedy person, the lawyer in New York whom I knew - I can’t think of his name now, the tax lawyer there - asked me the same question. He says, “Will you support us and back the senator in the surrogate fight?” He was in a battle with Tammany and it looked as though he was going to lose Harlem. Percy Sutton [Percy E. Sutton] and all the black Tammany people were against him. They thought he was going to lose the election.

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So in 24 hours Burke called back. He said, “Well?” I said, “Okay, I’ll back him.” He says, “All right, senator wants to know if you will”--I think this was a Friday--“if you will ride in an open limousine with him through Harlem tomorrow and speak at several street-corner meetings with him tomorrow, then ride down to the silk-stocking district and speak at meetings there, and then at meetings in Greenwich Village.” I said, “Sure.” He says, “Great.”

So we arranged where I would meet them, and I did. The meetings were good. He spoke and I spoke. We rode through the car and he was recognized by everybody, of course. Nobody showed any hostility, though this was in a rough period when anti-white sentiment in Harlem was at its height.

STERN: It was the period of the riots, wasn’t it, more or less?

FARMER: No. Well, riots, yes, but the Harlem riot had been much earlier, but Harlem could have erupted any time. This was the period when many blacks, movement-conscious blacks, carried guns. And there was much talk of political killings and assassination and guerilla warfare and urban guerilla warfare, and all of that. So I was a little concerned. In fact, I had a couple of guys follow us very closely in a car, bodyguards. I’m sure the Kennedy people had their security people, too, but I was watching the crowds very carefully through all of this. When we stopped the car once on 125th Street and some fellows came up to Kennedy and said, “Look, we have a mobile TB inspection. Will you come in and take an x-ray so, you know, encourage other people to do it?” And we said, “Sure.”

He got up and went in. I was a little concerned to have him go in there, in Harlem at this time, alone. Closed door. I called one of my guys and said, “Let’s go in there.” We went in and sat in the waiting room lobby till he came out. He looked sort of surprised to see me there, but he smiled and we got back into the car. People, some of the kids.... One place we were passing by, a vacant lot where kids were playing baseball, they recognized Kennedy and one of them yelled, “Hey, Bobby? Gimme five!” Kennedy looked and said, “What does

gimme five mean, Jim?" I guess he thought he wanted \$5 dollars. I said, "No, that's an expression of affection. It mean give me five fingers. Shake hands." He said, "Oh, I see." Then somebody else yelled when they recognized him. They said, "Hey, Bobby, we want Kennedy for president." Bobby thought that was very funny. He laughed.

So after the meeting the next day I was challenged to a debate by Percy Sutton on television. So I went through with the debate, though I knew that Percy knew much more about the issues than I did. He lived with it all the time. But I went through with the debate and it worked out all right. Bobby was pleased with that. After we won the election, well, we were sitting in.... During the campaign we were sitting in Frank's Restaurant on 125th Street, it's no longer Frank's but it's still there, and the blacks who were with us were saying, "Oh, Bobby, we got it locked up. You're going to take Harlem, 95 or almost a 100%."

Bobby said, "What do you think, Jim?" I said, "No, we're not going to take Harlem. We'll split it, and I hope we can split it big. If you split it big like 40% then we might win this election." He nodded. And that's what happened, I know that - big split - and we won it. And afterwards Bobby said to some of his guys, "Jim's a stand-up guy."

Then in what I thought was, or came to believe was characteristic Bobby fashion he

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says, "If there's anything I can do for you, come by and see me." You know, he wanted to pay me off politically, or however. So I thought about it for several days and then called him, said, "I'd like to come by and see you."

I went by his apartment on the East Side, I think. And he was closeted in the room with somebody, and his aides served me drinks and we chatted. Then the door opened and out came Bobby, and it was a guy who was a friend of mine who's now under indictment, Anthony Scotto [Anthony M. Scotto] of the longshoremen in New York. They had been chatting and we greeted each other like long lost-brothers. In his Italian voice he said, "Jim!" I said, "Anthony!" And we embraced, and Bobby was amused and surprised that we even knew each other.

Then after Scotto left, Bobby sat down and said, "Well, Jim, what can I do for you?" Just like that. I thought it was a little crass and I said to him, "Save CORE." He said, "What does that mean? What does 'save CORE' mean?" "CORE has a big debt now. I left it with a debt because of the Freedom Rides. We had to beg, borrow and steal money. You know, when we finally won these cases in the Supreme Court, Mississippi didn't send the money back to us. They sent that \$1500 dollars to the individual Freedom Rider at the last address they had from them. In many cases, it was the wrong address and they got it back, or even when it was the right address, people didn't sent it to us. We got a letter from one guy saying, 'Well, thank you wonderful people for this marvelous Christmas present I just got.' Fifteen hundred dollars. We paid the Inc. Fund back whatever we got in, but still both of us took a beating on it."

I said, "'Save CORE' means help them out of this financial bind that McKissick [Floyd B. McKissick]" - I'd supported Floyd as my successor - "is in, and we got to deal with it." He says, "Well, who's the money owed to?" And I told him it's owed to suppliers, and suppliers of goods and services and so on. He thought for awhile and he says, "Well, I suggest two things, three things. One, set up a tax-exempt arm of the organization." He

says, "Have McKissick have one of his guys get in touch with one of my guys, and give us the name, and we'll work out the papers and we'll walk it through." Get it through quickly.

"And second, call your creditors together. Call a meeting of them and offer them 25 cents on the dollar. Be prepared to go up to 35, 40, even 50. Their alternative is to get nothing because you'll be forced into bankruptcy. They'll take it. Then," he says, "let's do a dinner. Have McKissick's guy, whoever he is, get in touch with my guys and pick out a ballroom, a big ballroom, and \$100 dollars a plate and we'll fill it. Let's get to work on it." Well, Kennedy helped us wipe out that deficit. He did that.

I met with him again. He says, "Jim...." Well, we chatted about a number of things, Malcolm X, and he says, "I thought you handled it well." I remember that. He also said, a bit more recently, "I saw you in a debate with Buckley [William F. Buckley, Jr.] and I thought you handled that well, too." That was a surprise.

Then we talked about Malcolm and his death, and I told him I did not think the murder had been solved. He was surprised at that. I told him why. He went into deep thought. I learned that he was looking into it and investigating it. I told him that two of the people who were serving time were innocent and I was absolutely certain of it. And I told him why. But he was killed before anything came of that.

He says, "Jim, I just regret we didn't get acquainted long ago, because I think a lot of

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things would have been different then." He said, "What are your plans? What are you going do to?" I said, "Well, I'm pondering it and I have two alternatives. One is academia. I've an offer to teach at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, teach at New York University. The other is to go into politics in some way." He said, "Well, I think academia would be a waste, and if you decide to go into politics get in touch with me." But he was killed.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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