

**Lonnie King interviewed by Bob Short**  
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**Reflections on Georgia Politics**  
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**Reflections on Georgia Politics**  
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BOB SHORT: I'm Bob Short and this is Reflections on Georgia Politics sponsored by the Duckworth Library at Young Harris College and the Russell Library at the University of

Georgia. Our guest is Lonnie King, one of the founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the leading expert in the history of the Civil Rights Movement particularly in Georgia. Lonnie, we're delighted to have you.

LONNIE KING: My pleasure being here, Bob.

SHORT: Arlington, Georgia.

KING: Yes.

SHORT: Deep in south Georgia.

KING: Deep, deep south Georgia.

SHORT: Ruled by Jim Crow laws in a society where racial discrimination was commonplace.

What was it like growing up there?

KING: Well, I lived there from the time I was born until I was 8, and even though I was very young, I understood that the system required you, if you were black or negro or nigger, that you get off the sidewalk or you conform to the culture of that time which was that you were a second class citizen at best.

SHORT: Give us some of your experiences growing up there as a youngster.

KING: Well, when I was about -- I must've been about 6 I guess or 7, in that neighborhood, Eugene Talmadge was running for governor one of his last times I think or next to last time, and he used a crop duster. I didn't know what that was at the time; I just knew it was a plane, but it was a crop duster. And the crop duster was dropping leaflets all over Arlington and I guess in some other places too. And I happened to pick up a leaflet and I took it home to my granddaddy, who was a preacher, Reverend Joseph Smith. And as I read it (because they taught me how to read before I went to school), it was "nigger this" and "nigger this" and "nigger that", "keep the niggers in their place." You name it. And so I asked Granddad, I said, "What is a nigger?" because I didn't know what a nigger was. I certainly didn't know I was one. And so he tried to explain to me something about Talmadge.

And, at the same time, my granddaddy and my grandmother both were kind of like I guess you would say secret supporters of the NAACP. And when I say secret, to say that you were a black person and that you were involved with the NAACP in any way in the South at that time was almost like a death thing because the southern politicians who were in charge always saw the NAACP, especially with its avowed mission of ending lynching and what have you, as being anathema to what they had in mind, which was to keep the races separate and also keep whites in power and dominant. My granddaddy said to me that he was recruiting memberships for the NAACP. I think they were 50 cents apiece at that time for the membership. And he said that,

“One day, son, this organization is going to get us out of slavery.” He said, “We are still in slavery. The only difference is that we can go home at night, but everything else is about the same or there are no rights that you have that white man is bound to respect, including the smallest white child.”

Now my granddaddy was, I guess they called him an evangelist in the sense that he went around all over north Alabama and that part of Georgia holding revivals. And I went with him sometimes. He was a very eloquent and he was a note singer. And do you know what a note singer is?

SHORT: No.

KING: Okay. A note singer is someone who sings *a cappella*. They raise these hymns and the crowd joins in and so forth, so forth and so on. But he was my inspiration I guess at that young age. It reminds me somewhat, as I reflect on it now, Bob, of John Locke’s admonition back in the 17th century when he said that, “A child is born with a blank slate, and it’s what you put on that child’s slate during those first six years of his or her life,” – well, he said “his life” – “is going to have a lot to do with how that child ends up in life.” And I think I had on my slate before I was 8, a kind of orientation from my granddaddy that served me well when it was time to make a change here in 1960.

SHORT: Your granddaddy couldn’t vote?

KING: No.

SHORT: Couldn't vote.

KING: There was no such thing.

SHORT: White primary?

KING: Yes.

SHORT: Had no voice at all in government.

KING: No.

SHORT: Even local government.

KING: No.

SHORT: When did you first realize that you wanted to become part of what was to be a long struggle for civil rights?

KING: Well, I left – well, let me tell you a little, a little incident that still sticks in my mind. When I was about 13 years of age, Bob, I was learning how to play table tennis at John Hope Elementary School up on Boulevard.

SHORT: You lived in Atlanta at that time?

KING: I lived in Atlanta by that time. I had moved here from the time I was 9. My granddaddy died and so I came to stay with my mother then. Well, I went by – we would go by this White Gas Fill. Now let me give you a little history. Bob Woodruff, who headed The Coca-Cola Company, also headed Trust Company and the White Motor Company at the same time. And the White Gas Fill was owned by the White Motor Company and they used to park their trucks out there. But it was right behind John Hope School. So one day I was walking through there and the caretaker – it was about 6:00 maybe, and the caretaker was there – a white guy, big guy. And his dog – they had a dog that day – and the dog came out and tried to bite me and so I kicked the dog to keep him from biting me. Well, the big guy ran out and said, “Nigger, what you doing? What are you doing kicking at my dog? Don’t you move!” And so, of course, I didn’t move. He came over and slapped me down for kicking at his dog. Well, the statute of limitations has now passed so I’m gonna tell you I came back that night and I broke all the windows in that warehouse. All of them. So that was really my first violent touch with racism in Atlanta. I mean, I saw it on the buses and all that kind of stuff but, I mean, to be hit by

someone when you hadn't done anything but try to protect yourself was really outrageous. I later on went into the Navy and, while I was in the Navy, that's when I think I really grew up because when I went into the Navy, I selected as the educational petty officer for my company, and my job was to try to get all of our recruits through boot camp from in terms of passing those tests. So when I finished with my 80-something guys, they put me in charge of about 30 people who were going to a ship called the *U.S.S. Oriskany* (CVA-34) that had just been I guess you would say sunk down outside of Pensacola to become a natural reef. Well, when I got there, I saluted the officer of the day and handed him the 30 personnel folders and they put us in something called the X-1 Division (that's the Orientation Division) for two weeks while they assess what job they're gonna give you. At the end of two weeks, they gave me and the guy with the lowest GCT (which is intelligence score) the Deck Force. We had to go out and paint the ship. All the rest of the guys – I was the only black person there; the other, the other 29 guys were all white – so they put me and the guy with the lowest GCT in the Deck Force and my job was to chip the paint.

Well, that wasn't good enough. Sure enough after about maybe a month, I was then transferred to the head, to clean the head. Now the head is the restroom. Now mind, just imagine cleaning the restroom for 200 men. So it was a very depressing thing to say the least, but I went in there and I decided that I would remember something that Dr. Mays once told me when I was a freshman at Morehouse (because I only went there for one year before I went to the Navy and then I came back). Dr. Mays once said that, "If it's your fate in life to be a ditch digger or whatever, do it like no one else other than God. Do that job the best that you can." And so I

went in here and I painted up the place, got it spick-and-span, shined all the brass, and I turned that S-job into kind of like a lark. So I could then go out and, after I'd take my half an hour cleaning up in the morning and after cleaning up in the afternoon, and read.

I want you to know, Bob, that after about four or five months of this, a third class petty officer – white guy – put in a billet, put in a chit, to take my job. In other words, I had taken a job that nobody wanted, painted it up, turned it around, and when I got it to the point where it was a job where you only had to work about an hour a day --

SHORT: Somebody took it.

KING: That's right. So that was a big lesson for me. So they sent me back to the Deck Force, and so that time I said, "Let me get outta here." And so I started applying for different billets that came up, different jobs that came up. So I applied for the Dental Technician School to go to San Diego. Well, before I got the answer on going to Dental Technician School, I saw an ad in *The Plan of the Day* (that's the bulletin) for a disbursing clerk/striker. That's someone who can go down as a trainee. And so I went down there and applied for the job and Ensign J.C. Claren, who was in charge, said that, "We don't want you down here." And I said, "Why?" He says, "Well, you're black" – no, "You're negro and we're all white down here and we – we don't want any negroes in here."

So I went to see the chaplain of this -- of the ship – and told him about it and he said, "Oh, they didn't say that, did they?" I said, "Yes, they did." So then he just tried to counsel me about the

conditions and what have you and, “You have to accept certain things.” So I was burning, so I then went to my division officer in the Deck Force. He was a lieutenant from – lieutenant JG from – Louisiana named Horne. I told him what happened. He said, “Come with me.” He got me up and took us down to see Ensign J.C. Claren, the guy who told me that he didn’t want us down there – and he said, “Mr. King,” he gave me the handle. “Mr. King tells me that you don’t want him down here. Let me hear you tell me that.” And he said, “Well, it’s really not me, but it’s these guys. I don’t think it’ll work down here.” So Lieutenant JG Horne said to him, “If you don’t have his name in *The Plan of the Day* tomorrow that he’s assigned to your office, I’m gonna write the Chief of Naval Operations and find out how you got your commission.” My name was in *The Plan of the Day* the next day.

I tell you that story because even though I was kicked to the ground by the man when I was 13 who was white, it was a white man who went down and told another white man, “If you don’t give this man what he’s entitled to, I’m gonna get your commission.” So that – so when that – when those kind of things happen to you, you begin to say, “You know, democracy is like mercury. It’s very slippery, but you do have people regardless of race who are – who believe in trying to make things happen in a democratic way.”

And so I went down there and I did well. I became a – I – I became an E-5 inside of about 18 months. I did very well. I came out as an E-5 after after three years, kind of on the fast track.

But I got – I had people to treat me badly down there but, finally, after a while, they came around. I would not stay in. I said, “No, I don’t want to stay in.” I wanted to come back.

And I told a friend of mine on the – we were in what you would call the front of the ship (we call

it the forecastle) in Hong Kong, China, in 1956. And he was getting out, going back to San Francisco to work for Pacific Bell. I said, "Well, I'm going back to Atlanta." And I said to him – his name was Everett Renda – I said, "Everett, you know, one day we're gonna get a chance to get this yoke off our back as black people, or as negroes, and I want to be back in Atlanta and be and play a role in that." Now that happened in '56.

So when I came back in '57, I played football and did very well on the football team and got somewhat of a following. And when the Movement began up in Greensboro on February 1st, on the 2nd of February, I was in the – I was in the drug store organizing saying, "We have to do it here." And I talked to my friend, Joseph Pierce, and Julian Bond whom I had met, and the three of us went all around and began to organize. And we pulled together thousands of people to join this movement in Atlanta (and we'll talk about it in more detail as we go on) but that's the foundation.

My granddaddy, some incidents that happened in my life before I got to Morehouse and some after I got to Morehouse, and in the Navy I think played a major role in inculcating in me this desire to try to change the system. You see, when I took civics in high school, I actually believed it when I heard them say that, "We hold these truths to be self-evident," etc. And when you believe in that, then you're gonna try to see what you can do to make that a reality.

And I'm happy to know that we – a lot of us – thought the same way and we did it without bullets. We did it without dynamite. We did it with an idea and our bodies and making the way and making a witness for the cause. And I think had we done a – I think had it been a violent revolution, we'd still be segregated because we didn't have guns so we had to appeal to the

moral conscience of people who were not black, who were willing to say, “There’s something wrong with this picture.”

SHORT: Uh-huh. Let’s talk for a minute about Morehouse.

KING: Okay.

SHORT: Many, many Civil Rights leaders came from Morehouse.

KING: Yeah.

SHORT: Dr. King, you, Julian Bond.

KING: Charles Black.

SHORT: Charles Black, Senator Johnson (Leroy Johnson).

KING: Yes, yes.

SHORT: Hamilton Holmes.

KING: Yes, yes.

SHORT: What made Morehouse such a key element in the Civil Rights Movement?

KING: It has to have – okay. You had a man named Mordecai Johnson who graduated from Morehouse in about 1910, 1911. He became the first black President of Howard University. A great orator; could talk for two or three hours, like Castro. Mordecai Johnson recruited Dr. Mays to come to Morehouse. Now Mordecai was the President of Howard. Mays was his Dean of Religion. So he got Mays to come to Morehouse. Mays, in my view, became probably the greatest schoolmaster of all times in the sense that he carried himself on such a high plane intellectually, the way he dressed, his mannerisms, until people wanted to imitate him. And Mays was always preaching about the fact that you have a mission if you're a Morehouse man. If you are lucky enough to get into these seats, that means that you are part of a group of people who can lead this nation.

And the other part of that speech that he made that I mentioned earlier was that, "If it's your thought to be a doctor, be the very best doctor." Lawyer -- he went on down the line and then, of course, he mentioned the thing about the garbage collector and what have you. But his thing was you can do it as well as anyone else.

And in order to get into Morehouse (and I hope I don't get into too much trouble here) but some of your brightest young, black men were sent to Morehouse by people from all over the country because Mays was there. And, for 27 years, he was a beacon that people looked up to and

wanted to follow in many of the things that he preached.

SHORT: Julian Bond told me this story. He said that within days of the first sit-in in Greensboro, you came to him and talked him into beginning a movement in Atlanta.

KING: Yeah, that's true, but it wasn't days; it was actually the next day. I had met Julian when I came back from the war in 1957 and, at that time when you went to Morehouse, you had to stand in line to register for hours. Like all day long. And so, therefore, if you were standing next to somebody that you did not know, after eight hours or so of standing there, you're gonna get to know that person. Right? So Julian and I happened to be standing next to one another in '57 when I came back. And I learned a lot about him. I learned that he had been a *Time* magazine apprentice when he was in high school. That he wrote well or that he was a writer. His daddy was Dean of Education at AU. And I think he might've been born – I think he was born in Fort Valley maybe, but he lived a lot in Philadelphia.

So when we got ready to put the movement together, I said, "We need to have somebody who writes well." And so I went to Julian because I knew he could write. And I went to Joe because Joe's an organizer, Joe Pierce.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

KING: So the three of us actually pulled this thing together. Now the college president though,

I learned belatedly, had a tremendous network that we weren't aware of. And so when they heard that we were doing all this stuff, they called us in to have a summit conference on it. And, at that point, they told us about the fact that they had a responsibility as a trustee for these children and that we were running the risk of getting everybody hurt or maybe even killed, some of them. And so they all were speaking to us like older parents but when they went Clement was first, Mays was second, then Manley; they were kind of going in order of seniority I guess. So when they got to Dr. Harry V. Richardson, who is the head – who headed – the Interdenominational Theological Seminary (ITC) – Center, I'm sorry – he looked at the other preacher, the other preachers and people there, and he said, "I think the students are right." He broke ranks with the other presidents. I mean, it was shocking to see him do that because he was a part of the six, the big six. And he went on to give a lecture on – on the evils of segregation and how we needed to do something about it and he's gonna back us.

The next person to speak was Dr. Frank Cunningham from Morris Brown, a philosopher. He gave a eloquent speech backing Harry Richardson. So, by this time, you have four presidents who were basically saying, "Go back to class," and two who are saying, "Well, we're with you." So we had them split because the common denominator was that everyone in the room was a negro.

And, therefore, what we were trying to do, if we were successful, would benefit everybody in the room. So Mays – Clement, a clever man – said, "Well, if you're gonna do it, why don't you write up a petition as to why you want to do this?" And so I know he had in mind that if we sat down and wrote, then that was gonna get us to stop. And so we humored them. We said, "Okay,

we'll do it." And so I assigned Rosalyn Pope from Spelman – she's the President of Spelman's Student Government Association – and Julian Bond, I believe Morris Dillard I think I put in and Albert Benson, and asked them to draft this document. They came up with something called "An Appeal for Human Rights." That document – Dr. Clement raised \$12,000 from someplace and paid for it; it cost about \$4,000 to be in all of the newspapers – and that document was read into the Congressional Record. It was reprinted completely free by the *New York Times*. And it's still one of the – I think it's probably the only – document of its kind that the students wrote that's still around.

But in that document, we basically said that, "We cannot continue to sit passively by and have our rights meted out to us one at a time." And then we enumerated all the things that were wrong in Atlanta and, therefore, in the South, and that we were gonna use nonviolent means to change this. And that document resonated in the black community and in the white community, but in the conservative white community – on the racist white community – the Governor was Ernest Vandiver (who, by the way, if I may just say something parenthetically, when he died here a few months ago – a few years – a few months ago, I guess, I didn't know who they were talking about when it came out; I mean, it was such a glowing tribute to this gentleman). But, anyway, when the "Appeal" appeared (and you can check the record and the newspapers), Vandiver's comment was that, "This couldn't have been done by *any* college student in Georgia. It had to have been written in Moscow." In other words, he just ignored the fact that it was done by black students. Not *any* college student, which was – was really a sad commentary on the quality of education, in his mind, that we were offering in this school, in the school system.

But, anyway, we – we moved on. That was done on the 9th of March, 1960. And then on the 15th of March, we sat-in in about 11 different places and started our movement. And before it was over, we had thousands of students with us, and we pulled off the big boycott on Rich's. And the rest is history.

SHORT: It was not difficult to recruit students, was it?

KING: Pardon me now?

SHORT: It was not difficult to get students?

KING: Yeah, it was in a way. Early on, it was difficult because you were talking about an untried, untested something. But after this, I think students saw that other students in the rest of the country were beginning to – and the rest of the South were beginning to – join in, I think it was a matter of keeping up with the Joneses.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

KING: People like to do that. I think Thorstein Veblen in his book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, called it “honorific consumption.” People like to keep up with other people. So when we got the movement going, I think people felt that they ought to join it. But now all the students

didn't join now, but most of them did. Most of them did.

SHORT: And you had pledged nonviolence?

KING: Yes.

SHORT: Was that difficult with these young students? Did they want to fight or did they want to --

KING: We had some students – some who are prominent in Atlanta right now – who refused to participate because they said that they could not be nonviolent. We had to make sure that we had students who were willing to take the blows if necessary in order to do this. And, you know, that's very – it's kind of like brainwashing in a way. You've got to brainwash somebody to not follow their normal instincts.

If somebody hits you, you know, you're gonna try to protect yourself. But what was said to people in Atlanta is this. We said, "We're not suggesting that you adopt nonviolence as your way of life *per se*, but at least in the short term adopt it as a strategy because we believe that the strategy can work. It worked in India. And we think that it can work here." We've got to give credit though to Jim Lawson out of Nashville and Martin King for pushing this idea, but we were pretty much nonviolent from the day those four boys sat down. And you don't have any pictures of any students with any guns, any knives, any billy clubs trying to beat up anybody.

All we were asking for – and all of us were well-dressed – and we went in to say, “We want the opportunity to have the chance to sit down and eat a hamburger.”

SHORT: Did you anticipate violence on the part of the white people?

KING: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

SHORT: You did?

KING: Yeah, because – because, Bob, if you go back and look at the history, there were several hundred slave revolts in this country. Not one was successful. Not one. And the reason that they were not successful was because of something called the “slave patrol.” See, soon after blacks became the labor force, the cheap labor force, in this country, on the southern plantations especially, you had to have some kind of law and order force to keep the system going. And so they literally hired men – white men – as slave patrols and they were all over the South. Now the slave patrols were succeeded by the Klan who, in turn, were succeeded by some white policemen, like Bull Connor.

So there is a logical, you know, escalation or continuation of this idea of control of the black folks who might revolt. So we expected violence because every last one of those slave revolts ended up in violence and people being killed. You can go back to the 1700s. People tried to get out and they were killed. Denmark Vesey in Charleston, South Carolina, in about 1823-24 led

what some consider to be the largest revolt ever and, of course, the folks that he was trying to free, some of them told about the possible insurrection so they arrested about 50 people and they executed most of them.

And I can go on and on and on where we have these situations where every time someone tried to break out of the mold, they got shot, they got lynched, they got run out of town, something. In fact, it was generous and you were lucky if you got run out of town. Most of the time you got shot. Like Emmett Till.

So, yes, we expected some violence. But, Bob, let me say this to you. It's very difficult for you, as a white man, to understand what was happening at that time from my perspective, but what I saw is that we will never get free unless we create a critical mass of people who are yearning and saying the same thing at the same time. And, at the same time, we wanted to open up our arms to people who didn't look like us, who wanted to help us make that happen. And once we got that critical mass together, then it was a question of direction for that mass. And it worked out. But none of us expected to live this long, but there is one thing I think that was a common denominator for most of us and that was simply this: this was an idea that was so powerful until you're willing to give your life for it. And once you arrive at that conclusion about any idea in your mind, you're a dangerous person because if somebody cannot threaten you with extension – extinction – or kill you, you then realize that you become somewhat free and that you can move on. And you'll take chances that people ordinarily wouldn't take.

But how – why could we not do that? The NAACP for – by that time, by 1960 – had been around for 61 years roughly and they had done a tremendous job of trying to end lynching, but

they never could get the lynching ended but they won a lot of court cases. But remember what we said in that appeal. Our rights were being meted out one at a time. So it's buses today. It's schools tomorrow. You know? On down the line. It would have taken a hundred years to have gone through all of those rights through the courts. Plus, the courts are political, as you can see over the last 15 – 50 years, you know? People started getting more conservative people on the court to try to change the laws or water them down. But the NAACP, they pioneered this idea of class action where you can get one person that you represent that represents a class and bring a lawsuit. Well, by 1960, the class wanted to speak for itself and so, therefore, the NAACP was caught off guard and, therefore, they were on the wrong page of these young people.

But, you see, we were in a war. We'd been in a war ever since 1619. And wars are won – are fought and won – by young people. Bob, people like you and me, we're the – we've become the generals. But it's the young people who go out there and face the wolves, who face Afghanistan, who face Iraq. And we were the young folks who were facing the Afghanistans of that time. And we were – we are – lucky enough to be living today, some of us, to be able to talk about what happened during that time.

SHORT: Uh-huh. So you went up to Raleigh --

KING: Oh, yeah.

SHORT: -- and formed SNCC.

KING: Yeah. Well, let me tell you about that. You have all kinds of revisionisms going on about what happened back in the Civil Rights Movement, but one of the things that is not well known is the fact that I'm a member of the Ebenezer Baptist Church. I joined it in 1945 when I came here. Daddy King, M. L. King, Jr.'s father, baptized me, and I was a very – I was active in that church. So when we got to a certain point and we looked around and I saw, Bob, that – that the anti-trespass laws were passed in Virginia first and, within a matter of two or three weeks, they were passed in Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina – all over the South. And so I told the students that with my committee, I said, "We need to organize South-wide." I said, "Let me see can I call M.L." (I called him M.L. because I knew him well.) "And see if we can get him to call a meeting for us."

So I took my – so Julian Bond, Marian Wright and I went to see him down on Auburn Avenue, and we went in there to argue for SNCC being formed. Not SNCC, but us to be organized as a unit. My argument was that I have never read in history of any unorganized group of folks whipping an organized group of people.

If you're gonna battle the races, you're gonna have to organize to battle them. I mean, you can't just hope that somehow God's gonna shine on you and come and fight the battle for you. You have to fight it – fight it yourself – but you need to be organized. He agreed with that and instructed Ella Baker who was at the time his acting executive to call a meeting, and so she called her alma mater, Shaw, and got the meeting set up for there. So Martin King really was the person who called us all together at that meeting.

And from that meeting, of course, was founded the shock troops all over the South, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. They didn't have that many people, but they had a lot of courageous people. And if you have a lot of courageous people, you then – we were then able to utilize the media.

Now, Bob, I am convinced that if the media had not come of age by 1960, all of us would probably have been killed. We were – nobody -- I don't care how virulent a racist, even Bull Connor (well, maybe not Bull Connor), but most of the virulent, virulent racists would not want to be seen on NBC News beating up on a kid who's just trying to get a hamburger, or have a dog bite him. They just did not want to do that. Now if the cameras had not been there though, trust me, it would've happened.

But, you know, it's almost like a man beating his wife, you know. He doesn't want the wife to tell it, but if – but if the neighbors hear it, he's somewhat embarrassed by that. “Why are you beating your wife?”

SHORT: Yeah.

KING: You know? “Why're you beating up these kids?” And all I want to do is have a lunch, have a hamburger. So we organized and we put on blue jeans and went to southwest Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama where the real, real deep South is and began to change the political structure down there. Now the story of how America changed on race relations is really more embedded in the history of SNCC than it is in any other organization other than the NAACP.

SHORT: Did you realize at the time that bringing students into the Movement would go as far as it did?

KING: No. I realized that bringing students into the Movement would maybe get us the benefits that we were looking for initially, which was basically public accommodations. I did not know, I did not have enough foresight to know, that it was gonna be the catalyst for the Voting Rights Act and for the – well, I thought that we'd get the Civil Rights bill but not the Voting Rights Act. All that came about as kind of like an offshoot of the whole thing.

SHORT: So after the Voting Rights Act, SNCC – let's tell folks what SNCC is.

KING: Okay. SNCC was the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, formed over Easter weekend in 1960 at Shaw University. The first chairperson was Marion Barry, who ended up being the Mayor of Washington, DC. Next was John Lewis. After John Lewis, I believe it – I think it was – no, next was Chuck McDew, I think, out of Minnesota, and then John Lewis and then later on Stokely Carmichael and then Rap Brown.

So that's kind of the lineage there in terms of the leadership. We were people who put on overalls to go into the cotton fields to try to register people to vote. It was – it was a tough time, a tough time to go down there and do that. I did not personally do any of that, but I have a lot of friends who did it.

SHORT: Good. Well, now, let's talk a little bit about Dr. King. He was very supportive--

KING: Oh, yeah.

SHORT: --of the students.

KING: Uh-huh.

SHORT: And I think that he, as you said, he was instigator of your organization. How closely did you work with Dr. King's SCLC organization?

KING: Actually, it was kind of an intermittent relationship. You know, I got him involved in the SNCC situation. And then the students went home for the summer from the AU Center in 1960. So I had a core of people here planning for the fall, and so what we planned on was to put the issue of race on the minds of the people running for president. It was Kennedy and Nixon. So what we did was that we focused on Rich's Department Store here (which became Macy's) and we wanted to do it on the 19th of October, 1960.

SHORT: Magnolia Room.

KING: Magnolia – well, more than just that. It was all of the Rich’s places. Well, I recommended to our committee that we try to get Martin King, Jr. to go to jail with us because that would guarantee international publicity for us. And I also said that, “I want to recommend that we send Richard Nixon and John Kennedy a telegram asking them to take a stand on the issue of race,” because here’s what was happening. They were having the presidential election – the presidential debates – and if you had been from Mars, you wouldn’t have known any black folks were in this country and you certainly would not have known that thousands and thousands of young black kids, and some white kids too, were raising heck all over the South, from Maryland all the way over to Texas. So when I met with King in – in August of 1960, I told him my plan. He agreed to do it. Well, the night before we were going down there, I had her – I asked Herschelle Sullivan, who was my Co-Chairman (that’s like a vice chairman), to call him. Of course, she didn’t know him; she had just come back from Europe. But I said, “Well, just tell him that I asked you to call him and he’ll talk to you.” So she called him and told him that she wanted – she was calling for me and that she wanted him to come to the bridge tomorrow. Well, she didn’t even get a chance to get that far. He said, “Well, I’ve decided that I can’t come.” So she came back and she said, “Lonnie, he said that, that he can’t come.” I said, “Herschelle, talk to the students. Let me go talk to him.”

So I called him back and I said, “M.L., Herschelle tells me that you can’t come.” And he says, “Well, Lonnie, I’m on probation for having – for taking – Lillian (Lillian Smith) to the airport. And they arrested me.” And – and he said, he said, “My advisors are telling me that I ought not to risk this because they’re gonna revoke my--” what is it that they give you? They put you on

probation, I guess.

So they were all on the phone. You know, we had party lines at that time. Folks today don't know what party lines were, but they had these – they had all these different extensions. So we had Wyatt Tee Walker on the phone; you had A. D. King, his brother, on the phone; his dad on the phone all ranting and raving at me that I'm gonna get him in trouble. But I refused to talk to them because I had known him since '45. So we had this conversation. Now just imagine what – what's it like, Bob, to have a conversation with four or five folks on the phone, but you're only talking to one person; you're ignoring the rest of them, which was what was happening. So we went through this thing and so I heard all the reasons why, and I said, "Well, M.L., let me say something to you. You can't lead from the back. You gotta lead from the front."

Now I'm gonna tell you why I did that. One of the famous sermons that his daddy used to make every year or two was that. The title was "*You Can't Lead from the Back.*" So I hit him with his own sermon, although I wasn't talking to him but he heard me. So when I said that, he said, "L.C.," I was called L.C., Lonnie Cecil King, he said, "What time do you want me to be at Rich's?" I said, "At 10:00 in the morning." He said, "I'll be there."

When he came the next morning, of course, we all got there at 10:00 and four of us got arrested and went to jail, and the rest is history. John Kennedy won the presidency because what happened is that the black community all over America switched from Nixon, because Nixon was viewed at that time, he wasn't viewed as a bad guy in the black community. He had been the head of the President's Committee on Fair Employment. And even though that might've been a token thing, it was the only straw in the game.

And so Nixon did not have a negative view in the black community at that time, and he probably would've won that election were it not for King having gone to jail and Kennedy, Kennedy's brother and others got involved to try to get him out. Every black community in America changed – switched from – Nixon to Kennedy except Atlanta. How about that? Atlanta black vote still went for Nixon.

SHORT: Let's talk about that for a minute. I mean, I can remember when a lot of the elder statesmen – black elder statesmen – in Atlanta were Republicans.

KING: That's true.

SHORT: A lot of them.

KING: Yes.

SHORT: Because of Lincoln.

KING: Well, because of Lincoln and also because of Talmadge and others who were – who were in the Democratic white primary. We were not welcome in the Democratic Party and so, if you're not welcome, you don't go over there. But what you had – I've got to say this at some point if we don't get to it later on – is that we had a task here in Atlanta that maybe very few

student leaders had the same problem in other places. We had to not only fight the white power structure; we also had to fight the black power structure too.

Because Atlanta had put together a coalition under Hartsfield where the so-called “good white people” from Buckhead merged – merged with the negro leaders from the south side and they formed this coalition that kept Hartsfield in office for 24 years. And from that coalition, a lot of the black leaders or negro leaders were able to call the mayor and get their children out of jail and get a job every so often, what have you, so they had access. When you challenge the system head on the way we did, that made these folks over here who had access who were negroes a little nervous. “Am I gonna lose my access? This boy is crazy. He’s gonna get us all killed. And certainly I’m gonna lose my access.”

Well, when you look at it, we had to battle those two different forces at the same time. It was almost like going into a battle with one hand tied behind you. But the one thing that made us win that battle, it wasn’t the black leaders; it was the \$5 a day in carfare people who were riding those buses. We were able to call this boycott on Rich’s and we were able to get people to send us their credit cards. I asked for – I asked the young – I asked the people to send me their credit cards, Bob, to Rich’s department store, and do you know 300 and something people sent me their credit card? Would you send your credit card to a college kid?

SHORT: I have.

KING: Your – it was – but it was your son, right?

SHORT: That's right.

KING: That's different. But to one you didn't know?

SHORT: No, it'd be--

KING: You – I mean, you didn't know his mom or his dad, anybody.

SHORT: Yeah.

KING: But they sent me their credit cards. That told me how deeply we had reached this community. So if they're sending you their credit card, you can make this happen. We put the credit cards at Citizens Trust Bank. We sent them back after the boycott was over, but the bottom line is that it was symbolic.

And the leaders – the negro leaders at the time – were not leaders. There was an article – there was a cartoon in the – in the *New York Times* in 1960 in the spring, and that cartoon was one which depicted the students out front – black students out front – parading, boycotting, you name it. Behind them were – were these negro leaders, the NAACP, the Urban League. And the caption was – the kids are running, other folks are behind them – the caption was, "Wait for me! We're your leaders." [Both chuckling] Now that's a --

SHORT: Let – let me read you this quote.

KING: Yeah.

SHORT: Let me read you this quote from former President Jimmy Carter who told author Mary King this. “If you wanted to scare white people in southwest Georgia, Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference wouldn’t do it. You only had to say one word: SNCC.”

KING: That’s right.

SHORT: Did you realize that you were that powerful in the state?

KING: Well, we did not realize it but, at the same time, we also knew that the one thing that the white power structure in the South was afraid of was this burgeoning negro vote. And, Bob, we still have not, even 50 years later, capitalized the way we should have on the vote. Georgia, to a great extent, is a red state today not because of virulent racism, but because of nonfeasance on the part of blacks who now have the chance to vote but who are not registering.

We still have about 4 to 500,000 African-Americans in this state who are eligible to vote and will not register for whatever those reasons are. Now we did get 100,000 to register this past summer

to help Obama. But you still have a lot of them who are not registered. If we were to register in the proportions that we should, this would be a blue state. And a lot of other states in the South would also be blue states.

So we still have this lingering legacy of non-participation on the part of – of our people. And, Bob, you could spend five or six lifetimes trying to overcome this problem. It will eventually be overcome, but I recognize it as a shortfall in the Movement. You open the door but folks don't go through the door. And, as a result, the people who were opposed to your coming through the door in the first place have now taken over, solidified.

SHORT: But you didn't meet the same resistance in Georgia that you did in some other southern states (Alabama, Mississippi) in registering voters, did you?

KING: Yeah, you had some serious problems in registering voters outside of Atlanta. Yeah, in those smaller towns, you did have some problems with registering voters there. You mean recently or back during the '60s?

SHORT: Back during the '60s.

KING: Yeah, you had some problems outside of Atlanta. Yeah. In fact, Atlanta – Georgia – Georgia has several counties that had been identified in the 1964 – '65, I should I say – Voting Rights Act where they were problem counties that are still – they still have to get pre-clearance.

And those counties that have to get pre-clearance are those counties that were problem counties in 1964.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

KING: Yeah.

SHORT: Lyndon Johnson once said that the most effective tool that African-Americans could have in this country would be the right to vote.

KING: There's no question about that. You see, if – if it were – if the right to vote was something that was not that good a thing, then why do people deny, want to deny you? See, when the country was first started, Bob, as you well know, only white men, landed gentry – could vote. And they had property. You know, you had – you also had to have property. Well, white men though in with Andrew Johnson – Jackson – were able to get the right to vote without all these fights in, you know, 1820, 1828.

So when you look at this thing, you know, and then black men got the right in – in 1866-67 and women got it in 1920, but it's been meted out. It's been a little bit at a time. But Johnson is right. If people voted, you'd have a different kind of system here. But this is a young democracy – or should I say this is a democracy that is still young. And I think that its best days are probably ahead as opposed to behind it.

Now America's going through a transition right now. Obama has raised the curve worldwide and you're going to see, in my opinion, more people like Obama who are going to be running for office in countries that are predominantly white. You're gonna see people who are white all over the world taking a different view at America, you see, because three-fourths of the people in this country are not white and, therefore – or should I say in the world are not white – and, therefore, you'll have to take that into account with all this interdependence that we have. You see, we are so interdependent today until if you sneeze here, man, someone's gonna get a little snuffle someplace else because of all this inter – this interdependence. But you know what though? With all the foibles that I have seen here, with all the problems that I've seen, I've been all over the world and I tell you something. With all of our problems, this is still the best country in the world.

And I do believe that we can make it even better, but it means that people of goodwill have to stand up and say, "Look. Enough of this racism. Enough of this other stuff." Because a lot of folks don't understand why the whole concept of racism was invented in the first place. It was for economic reasons. It wasn't for color. The color thing was used as the basis for making some other people rich.

People who came here from Western Europe understood something. In order to be wealthy or successful, you have to have land, capital, entrepreneurship and cheap labor. And it's the cheap labor that caused them to go to Africa. They they thought about going to India first because the Indians over here wouldn't work for 'em because, you know, they would -- they'd work a little while and then they'd run off into the mountains and then you couldn't find 'em.

But they – they considered going to India, but that didn't work so they went on to Africa because the Africans were immune to many of those – of those diseases that were – that were killing off people. But it was all – it wasn't about race *per se*. Race was the – was the battering ram that was being used to divide people. And it's still what's going on now.

SHORT: Uh-huh. Let's get back to Atlanta for just a minute.

KING: Sure.

SHORT: Your sit-ins were successful. The – the restaurants were integrated. As I recall, though, it was dependent upon the schools, and that was what, 1961?

KING: Yes.

SHORT: The big shots in town decided they would integrate the restaurants after the schools were integrated.

KING: Yeah.

SHORT: Was that satisfactory to you?

KING: Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, no. In fact, we had a knock-down, drag-out fight with the Chamber of Commerce about that, and I would not agree with it because, you see, Bob, if you have won a battle – if you've won the race – you're entitled to a victory lap.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

KING: This battle that we had with the white power structure and the black power structure, they denied the students a victory lap for political reasons. The black power structure was trying to hold on for dear life because a younger generation of black folks were gonna take that place and, in fact, ultimately did take their place – like Jesse Hill, Leroy Johnson. So they were fighting for dear life, and what they had to do was to try to discredit the students. But it didn't work because the lunch counters were, in fact, desegregated. But, yes, I had a monumental battle down at the Chamber of Commerce, but let me tell you the person who convinced me to at least tentatively agree to it subject to my going back to get it ratified by the students. It was John Calhoun, a big Republican.

John Calhoun pulled me aside and he said, "Lonnie, I'm 60-something years old now, and every day of my life I've been segregated. If we're going to be able to go anywhere we want to go downtown to eat by September," (and this is now March) he said, "I'm for doing it." He said, "Remember now I've been around for 60-something years and – and now you've made it possible for us to go down there in a little over 60-something days." He said, "So you've won the battle." I said, "But, John, we are being denied a victory lap." And so he, he didn't – he

didn't say any more.

But let me say something else to you, Bob. We did more than just integrate the lunch counters. We filed a lawsuit – a successful lawsuit – to integrate all the parks/recreation places. We also filed a lawsuit to integrate all the courthouses around here. Now that's not well-known, but we filed the lawsuit, won in federal court, and got all these things. So it was not just lunch counters; there were some other things too.

SHORT: Uh-huh.

[Break]

SHORT: Okay. So we've – we've integrated – well, we were talking about lawsuits.

KING: Yeah.

SHORT: And we can go back to, I guess, the *Baker* case in 1954, which was the first big civil rights case that was decided by the Supreme Court. It seemed to me at that time that that was an avenue to file other court cases to do other things. Do you agree?

KING: Well, I would go a little bit further than the *Baker* case. The Supreme Court began to more broadly interpret the 14th Amendment, in my view, as early as the 1930s when they began

to let blacks into professional schools.

Then in the 1940s, they, in *Sweatt v. Texas* where they told the Texas legislature that you have to build a school for blacks if you're not gonna let 'em come to -- you know. And, of course, they built Texas Southern Law School, but that case was won. It was a progression of cases and you had the restrictive covenant cases before then, so I think you saw a gradual expanding of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution using class actions as a means or as a vehicle for making it happen. And so, by the time of *Baker* and *Brown* and what have you, it was time to reverse *Plessy* of 1896.

SHORT: Let's tell people what *Plessy* was.

KING: Okay. Oh, that's *Plessy v. Ferguson*. A mulatto man in New Orleans got on the train, streetcar, whatever, and he was denied a seat based on his race, and he then took them to court. And the Supreme Court ruled in 1896 that the law of the land would be separate but equal in public transportation, but that -- but then that just kind of went to every other part of the society. It was later on, 58 years later, in *Brown*, that *Plessy* was reversed. But let me just say this to you. When they made that decision in '96 -- 1896 -- it was a culmination of a series of reversals that blacks had after the ending of the Civil War. That was the federal government putting its imprimatur on what a lot of state governments had already done. Plus, you had a Supreme Court justice by the name of Roger Taney (or "Tawny", depending upon how you want to pronounce it). This man had a disproportionate influence on the Supreme

Court and its direction for about 50 years. And he was a – he was a racist, segregationist man who was a slave owner up in Maryland, and he dictated how that court was gonna run. In fact, he's the one who wrote the – the majority opinion in the famous case in – in 1857; no, I'm sorry, 18 – 1857 – wherein he said in that case that the blacks or the negroes had no rights that a white man is bound to respect. And when you look at his history, you find that he controlled the federal court system like no other chief justice probably ever, and so even the district judges were pretty much under his umbrella.

But the law is a very, very deliberate, very slow mechanism. And when people have been subjected to inhuman treatments for centuries, it's very difficult to ask them to continue for a few more centuries in the same situation. And that – I mean, if you could just understand that, by 1960, the idea of freedom for blacks had come, not just in the South but in Africa and other parts of the Third World, if you just look at it, they were having battles all over the place. Colonialism kind of pretty much ended during that period of time.

SHORT: Let's talk further about *Plessy* for a moment. As late as 1962, most politicians in the South were relying on *Plessy* as the reason for separate but equal facilities. I think everyone knew that facilities were not equal, although they were separate.

KING: They knew that. John Hope Franklin, in his book, *Up From Slavery* – oh, no, I'm sorry, *From Slavery to Freedom* – talks about this, wherein he – he's able to show that when it came to allocation of public funds, you had allocation of public funds for education two to three or four

times, up to ten times, more than – for whites than for blacks. So the idea of separate and equal, there was never any equal. It was separate. The emphasis of separate but equal, it was on separate, not on equal.

However, the Supreme Court, after '54, due to a number – after the Supreme Court decision of '54, a number of southern states began to build what they called “Supreme Court schools.” They began to build schools all over the place trying to catch up, you know.

So, all of a sudden, they were hoping to build these neighborhood schools so that they could have children going to schools in their neighborhood, and you know what? That theory worked because we now have, to a great extent, a white noose around a black inner city in so many cities in America.

And what's unfortunate in this, Bob, is that we have so many children who are still being denied a quality education to this day, but we cannot blame entirely white politicians because some of the people who are not doing what they should be doing look like me, who are running these school systems.

And they spend more time trying to make sure that they get good jobs for their cronies and not enough time trying to educate these children. I don't believe that these kids can't learn, but I think it requires commitment, whether it's a white teacher or a black teacher.

I am extremely pleased to look at the kids from “Teach for America”. Ninety-something percent of those kids are white, but you know what they're doing as they – as they go around America? They are turning the educational system upside down, quietly but it's happening everywhere they go. And they come in with commitment. Those kids can go anywhere, but they make a choice

to come in to help these kids, many of whom have never seen a daddy, and try to get those children on some track to stop them from going to prison. And I have to applaud them because it is a wonderful program that these young white kids have embarked on. It's another movement. And this movement, Bob, really is an old movement that has been renewed because there was a slave in Kentucky who was freed in 1865 as an anonymous – they don't know his name – and he said that, "Freedom without education is not freedom at all." And, if you look, it's when you have an uneducated mass, all kinds of problems flow from the miseducation or uneducation of these people, or any people for that matter. And so we've got to go back and get our hands dirty it seems to me and begin to try and teach these young black kids – especially these young black boys – how to read, how to write, and get them inspired to believe that they can be something other than a prisoner.

I was talking to my son a few years ago and – about this whole problem – and he said, "Dad, you know what? Young kids in the ghetto today don't see prison in the same way that you see prison." And I said, "Well, what are – what are you – what are you – what do you mean?" He said, "Well, they'll get three meals a day. They'll get – they can exercise, build their bodies up, etc., and see all their friends." I said, "I see." We have to change people's perception of what is a good thing and a bad thing, and that means then that, unfortunately, some old soldiers like me and some other folks coming along are gonna have to say, "Wait a minute. Let's go and try to see can we help these children." This is not about race now so much as it is about the fact that if we don't help these children and get them going in the right direction, we're gonna be paying for it seven, eight, nine years down the road by paying for their incarceration. So we have an

economic incentive, in my view, to try and make these children into better citizens.

SHORT: What role did SNCC play in some of Dr. King's programs?

KING: Well, I think SNCC and King had a positive relationship, but there were tensions at times because I think SNCC was a lot more aggressive than King. SNCC would be willing to go in and fight the lion head-on, bare-handed. King might not do it quite that way. But I'll tell you this though. It wasn't just SNCC, it was Malcolm X too. America had a choice, in my view, during that time of do you support a Malcolm or do you support a King? And if you have a choice between someone who is saying "whites are devils" and what have you and someone who's saying "we're all brothers" but each having the same goal, the guy who preaches nonviolence is gonna be the one to win it. And that's really what happened. King was not any more eloquent than Malcolm X, but his message was more palatable. He was – it was palatable to me too because we were taught not to be black racists when we were coming up in school. Now that may sound strange to you, but we were taught that we have to be adherent to an inclusive philosophy and that democracy denied to someone else because of their color is a bad thing.

SHORT: Did you participate in the Freedom Rides?

KING: Well, peripherally, yes. Jim – let me just tell you, first of all (and I'm writing a book and

I'm going to have to put some of these things in the book) – the first Freedom Rides, of course, were back in I guess in the '40s by Jim Farmer. But, in December of 1960, we sent from Atlanta a bunch of students riding the buses into Memphis, Tennessee, Charleston, South Carolina, Jacksonville, Florida, Birmingham, Alabama, and it's all accounted for and there is a documentation of this in the newspapers. The *New York Times* wrote about what we had done and so Jim Farmer had called me in January after he saw the article (because it was done near the Christmas holidays) and he wanted to know from me, "Well, Lonnie, tell me about this. What is it that you all did?" And so I told him. He said, "Well, we're thinking about doing the same thing now coming out of New York to Washington and on down." And so, in fact, when they got here, I spoke to them over there at Clark College as they – as they were coming through. And one of the things I said to them was that, "You're gonna run into an entirely different reception when you get to Birmingham, Alabama." I said, "There are two – two guys named Adams who own the service station down there, and they are the most outrageous racists down there."

And so the next morning, they left for – going toward Montgomery, but going through Birmingham – and I got the word that night that they had attacked the buses and burned them. So a man named Frank Holloway and I got in the car and drove down to -- I guess it was Gadsden, Alabama, at the time -- and we went in there hoping that we could – we could help some of them get out or something. There was a dentist down there who was the head of NAACP, so we actually went to his house because he was someone that we'd known. But by the time we actually got there, they had already kind of quelled everything and they were on their

way. So we didn't go any further, but Frank Holloway and I did go down there to try to see could we get some of them out of there because I knew that those Adams boys were gonna ambush them. Which is what they did.

SHORT: Well, as time passed and battles won, it seems that SNCC began a slow demise and turned into a more of a Black Power organization.

KING: Yeah. What happened on that, Bob, is that you had some resentment being building up among some of the SNCC people over the fact that some of the whites were more talented as they saw it, and it, yeah, it kind of boiled over -- because I think John was the head of it at that time. It kind of boiled over and Stokely Carmichael seized upon this feeling and kind of pretty much brought forward this idea of Black Power. If there was a press release that needed to be written, somehow or another the whites could write the press releases faster than the blacks could, for whatever the reasons. I think a part of that hurt some of these folks and there were other -- there were other little reasons too that I think some of them got all involved, but Stokely's position was that blacks can do it too. Now I think he used a code word that did not serve the movement well, and I would not have used those -- those words, but I think that I understood why he did it but I don't -- but I would not agree with the way he did it because, to a great extent, the black movement lost an awful lot of goodwill as a result of that particular thing. And then -- and then Rap Brown did not help at all by furthering that. You see, Bob, I believe that the people who started SNCC probably would never have done that. The people who were

running SNCC by the time Stokely came along were the people who grabbed the mantle because many of us had gone on to school some other place. And you have to understand that the students who led this movement were transitory. We were not permanent residents *per se*. Well, I was permanently in Atlanta, but, by and large, students are, you know, four years, five years, six, depending how smart you are or what your major is. You know? And then you're gone. And so and SNCC was a student-led organization to a great extent. So a lot of the folks who conceived the idea were not there, but the baby was already born and so somebody else started nursing the baby because the other folks had gone.

SHORT: But it served its purpose.

KING: It served its purpose and --

SHORT: What's the status of SNCC today?

KING: I think it's -- well, I think -- I think that the spirit of SNCC is still around. We're having a 50th reunion up in Raleigh over the next Easter weekend, and we'll be all old folks going in there talking about what happened 50 years ago. You know? It's like a family reunion I guess.

SHORT: Religion played a big part in the Movement, didn't it?

KING: Yes. We -- yeah, because if you follow the Judeo-Christian principles, you are gonna

find yourself using religion as a lot of the bases of the songs you sing, some of the beliefs that you have, all flow from a religious orientation and, to a great extent, many of us were Protestant, you know. A lot of us were Baptists. There weren't that many Muslims around, and other people around. We had some other kind of ideologies. Not that I'm opposed to those sorts; I'm just saying though that the – that the bulk of us were Southern Baptists.

SHORT: Many ministers involved.

KING: Well, Bob, that's the myth. Most of your black ministers at that time were not in the Movement because it was unsafe to be in the Movement. But you did have some courageous ones. The most courageous minister of all was Fred Shuttlesworth down in Birmingham, who's still alive, by the way, only because he left Birmingham I think. But that was, to me, that was the most courageous preacher of all. And I'm happy to see he's in his 80's and he's still here. But ministers did play a major role, but their numbers were not great. There were – there must be 1,500 to 2,000 churches in the state of Georgia. I doubt that we had 50 churches that were actually Movement churches. It was unsafe, Bob. They would bomb your church. Look at 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. They might shoot people. And the one thing that people like to do is that they like to keep on living.

SHORT: You're right. Do you agree that the behavior of white racists was a plus in the Movement?

KING: In an indirect way it was because people of goodwill who had no dog in that race at all had a chance to see the contrast between the students or the people pushing for the rights and the people who were trying to deny rights.

And fair-minded people said, “Wait a minute now. It’s a no-brainer as to who’s right here.”

Especially when you realize that you have fair-minded people who have been taught in their public schools about democracy, about the 14th Amendment, about freedom, and so it ended up being a situation where I think the overwhelming majority of folks in the world, not just in America – thought that our cause was right.

SHORT: Uh-huh. Let’s talk for a minute about the FBI surveillance of the Movement.

KING: Okay.

SHORT: You got any examples of that?

KING: Well, yeah. The FBI – well, I had an FBI contact who talked to me about it once a month. We got to the point where he – he called me up and he said, “You know? Why don’t we just meet once a month and we just talk?” So, sure enough, once a month, he’d just sit down and we’d just have lunch and talk. It wasn’t – I did not view him as being someone who was trying to pump me *per se*, but I knew – I had enough sense to know – that he was trying to see if there

was any reason why he ought to tell J. Edgar Hoover that there was something adverse going on. You see, Hoover was – had this anti-Communist fixation about him. Any time you challenged the *status quo* in America under him, you were a Communist. I mean that-- and so we had to kind of outlive Hoover. Interestingly enough, when I left to go to Washington, DC, the same FBI agent ended up still talking to me once a month. You know? I mean, he'd just show up and talk to me. But I don't know how many other folks had those kinds of experiences, but that, I had a personal one who just talked to me once a month.

And I went to – and I, when I – and I asked for my files once here in the last few years, and everything is blacked out of my files but my name.

SHORT: Well, I think you'll agree that Dr. King was, without a doubt, the leader--

KING: Oh, no, uh-huh.

SHORT: -- of the Civil Rights Movement. And do you think that's known today among young black Americans?

KING: Some black Americans don't even know who Martin King was. But let me just quite – let me just give you my view, and I'm a little bit different from you on this, Bob. Martin King was the voice of the Movement. But there were many leaders. Because you cannot overlook the role of A. Philip Randolph, who inspired the first March on Washington in 1941 against Franklin

Delano Roosevelt; or Dorothy Height, who is still alive, by the way, at 90-whatever; or Whitney Young, or Roy Wilkins.

In their own way, these persons played a major role because each one of them had a constituency. But none of them had the voice of Martin King, trained preacher, son of a preacher, grandson of a preacher; so it was speaking was in his innards. But I would not say – there was a collective leadership, in my opinion. Martin, but, of the collective leadership, Martin King was the voice.

And that's his voice that you hear because that voice could articulate in such a way that if he was commenting on Shakespeare, he can make the average person in the street say, "Amen." Only once in a lifetime do you find someone who can take the words and turn them into something that is pliable that people can say, "You know, he's talking to me. He's inspiring me." King could do that.

**KING:** So I'm saying to you that I would not say he was the leader of the Movement, but I would say that he was the leading voice of the Movement. And I only say that because I cannot, having been so close to the Movement, dismiss the role of the NAACP, the Urban League and other folks who were also working just as aggressively but whose leaders did not have the voice that King had.

**SHORT:** Uh-huh. Is there a voice today?

KING: Not in my view, no. No. And that's a good thing and a bad thing. It's a good thing in the sense that maybe, if there was a voice, the person, he'd be on the hit list of these right-wingers.

SHORT: Right.

KING: You have a more localized or regionalized voice or voices today, and we are becoming more like white people. Okay? There is no white voice *per se*, unless it's the President, but now the President's black. So -- I think it's good to not have, see, because if you shoot down the leader or the voice, you kill the movement. That's what a lot of folks thought was gonna happen and, in fact, to a great extent it did happen. So you -- you need to diversify, and that's what we've done accidentally. I don't think it was on purpose.

SHORT: Uh-huh. Looking back, Lonnie, what do you think was the Movement's greatest triumph?

KING: In the long run, the greatest triumph I think was really the Voting Rights Act. When you start talking about triggering people's vote into representative government. But it's going to take a while for us to really experience that particular benefit of the Movement.

The most immediate impact of the Movement was the physical changes in terms of where people could sit, what you could -- where you could go, or where you could buy houses, those kind of

things. But that was almost immediate. But the long-range thing that's gonna play a much, much more significant role as we go forward and into the future is going to be the impact of the Voting Rights Act. We're gonna find in what, 20 – what is it, 20 – is it? I've forgotten the year now, but it was renewed for 25 more years. You're gonna have a battle when it comes up for renewal next time because there are gonna be people who are gonna still realize that, "You know, we need to keep these folks from voting because they might vote us out of office."

SHORT: What about the biggest failure or disappointment?

KING: In my view, the biggest failure – and I have to say this is Monday morning quarterbacking – we did not figure out a way to pass the baton on to other young college students who were coming along. I remind you I said early on that it's the – it's the young folks who are the soldiers, and we weren't able to pass that on. And I don't want to unfairly criticize us, but I'm telling you that that's what I think happened. Had we passed it on, we should have talked about the next step which is economic development. And, see, you want to go buy a hamburger, but you need to make enough money to be able to afford the hamburger, and I don't think that we really found a way to take us to public accommodation, then take us to voting rights, then take us to economic development. Somehow or another, we haven't gotten there yet.

And one of the tragedies, Bob, in my view of the Movement, is that those of us, myself included, went to sleep when we gained these unprecedented rights. And a lot of us have been asleep for almost 50 years. Rip Van Winkle only slept 20 but we've been asleep for a long time. But while

we were asleep, the people who were opposed to us getting rights in the first place have been wide awake and they have been slowly but surely stacking the Supreme Court, stacking the district courts, stacking the Court of Appeals. They realized that they could not, from a public policy point of view, change the Civil Rights Acts, change the Voting Rights Act, change the Housing Act, but what they did do was they worked on a considered strategy that's changed the people who are interpreting the laws.

That's what they've done. So, therefore, you look out here now and you see people who are sitting on these benches making decisions. They don't overrule the Civil Rights Acts; they just rule against you on summary judgment. And if you lose a case on summary judgment, you've got a 99 chance out of 100 of not succeeding on the appellate level.

So you've been denied access through these appointments. And, to an extent, you have a repeat of what happened after Reconstruction. You had the Klan then going around killing people, trying to make sure that we keep separate but equal. You now have, through the last 40 years of Republican control, you have white collar criminals who go in and become a federal judge and they tend to interpret the law against you.

Let me give you a case in point. George Bush, the last George Bush, wanted to appoint a person to the Court of Appeals in the Fourth Circuit up in South Carolina/Virginia. So the Democrats opposed the gentleman, along with many other civil rights organizations. But when they got down to the man's record, they found out that there had been several hundred civil rights cases that had come before him as a district judge. He ruled against every last one of those persons who had filed a complaint of discrimination – and it was hundreds of them – at summary

judgment, which meant that they didn't even get into court. They filed and he ruled against them on the papers that were there. He's saying basically, "There's not enough of a case here for you to go forward for full trial."

He did that for several hundred, but one case he did agree that you've met the threshold for probable cause and that was a case of a white man in South Carolina who alleged reverse discrimination based on the Civil Rights Act. Now he didn't get the appointment because that was just so blatant, but he's just a poster boy, in my view, of the kind of behind-the-scenes machinations that Republicans, especially those from the South, were involved in trying to roll back behind the scenes in the dead of night the gains of people who fought to try to become a part of the American democracy.

**SHORT:** What do you think are the most important issues facing African-Americans today?

**KING:** Well, there's so many, but most important I think would be education again, trying to find a way to get more of these young black folks educated so that they can become more productive in society for themselves. And if they're productive themselves, then overall society is more productive. Tied into that, of course, would be to work on the dropout rate. It's a crime for one out of two children to be dropping out of school for, for whatever the reasons; and we've got to look at it. And we don't need to keep waiting for white people to come and save us. We have to, as African-Americans, begin to try to save ourselves. We've got to call a spade a spade. We've got to say to black people who are not doing their job, "You've gotta do your job." Just

like we call out white people, we've got to call out black people.

So it's education. Then I think that education would, if you get enough education, then people would learn how to be businesspeople, how to be professors or how to be whatever, and you begin to create a whole different kind of society. But right now, we have a society wherein a lot of people who are under 20 think that they might be dead before they're 25 and so, "Let me get it all now." And what that means is that I'm gonna go and rob Bob's house and get some of what he has. I'm going to go and rob your house and get some of what you have. The way we stop that is not only through public safety – increasing public safety – but you've got to also be able to get people to understand that there are some choices that you are – that you should be making that you're not making.

SHORT: Isn't that what Bill Cosby has been saying?

KING: Bill Cosby was 100 percent right and he was – he was attacked by people that are ne'er-do-wells. You see, if you tell people the truth sometimes, it's very, very disconcerting. The easiest thing in the world, Bob, is to say, "You know, the devil made me do it," or, "You know, these white racists did it to me." If they break into my – if some black folks break into my house with a gun to my head and they want to shoot my wife, I can't blame somebody who's not even in the neighborhood. We've got to deal with reality and not have racism – reverse racism – as the scapegoat. And my – Cosby's – message is not popular. I'm sure mine won't be popular either. But I don't think that the best tenets of America are couched in this kind of language that

these people are involved in. Bill Cosby was right 100 percent.

SHORT: Well, what has life been like for Lonnie King after your Civil Rights career, or are you still a Civil Rights activist?

KING: Well, I think I'm gonna probably always be that for the rest of my life or – I had a chance to go off to get a Ph.D. in Economics and become a college professor under Dr. E. B. Williams years ago when I was at Morehouse. I turned that down and went on into this area and, as life would have it, I'm back into the college. I'm teaching, you know, at Georgia State. You know, so, in a way, I'm doing what I was slated to be doing in the late '50s and early '60s, and I'm doing it at the end of my life as opposed to at the first part of my life. But I've had a very, very good opportunity here. I've been a senior manager in the federal government. I've run my own company. I've been a real estate developer. So I've done a lot of stuff and I've learned a lot about how you can get things done, and especially about how to organize. So I'm happy.

SHORT: Tell us about your family.

KING: I have a wife and three kids. They're all doing very well. My grandkids are doing well too. I have a grandkid – one grandkid – who's the oldest who is, his name is Drew Ford. This – this kid is a renaissance man. He lives out in Fayette County and he has made one B in school. He's got an offer from over a hundred and something colleges to come, one of them, of course,

being Harvard, and I think he's gonna do well. He's a – he plays for the junior symphony here of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. He's in the first chair as a viola this year. He's a champion debater and I'm just proud of him. I mean, he's really quite a fellow. And his younger brother coming behind him is even better – he's even smarter than he is. So – so I've tried my best to get my children and my grandchildren going in a certain direction. I don't want them to be victims, and I want – they should not be victimizing anybody else either. Get your education and move forward. Now my – my daughter was trying to say to me, "Well, Dad, he has a chance to go to Harvard, but you know he can go to Georgia Tech too." I said, "Let me tell you something. Georgia Tech is a great school. No question about it. But there's only one Harvard and if your – and if Harvard wants your son to come, they need to go."

SHORT: Well, Lonnie King, you've been a very interesting and informative guests – guest – and I want to thank you for being on our program today.

KING: Well, thank you very much for inviting me, and I'm looking forward to viewing this and so forth and so on. It's good to see you again.

SHORT: Good to see you.

KING: Yeah.

SHORT: It really is.

KING: No hair and you still have yours!

SHORT: Yeah. A lot of old memories.

KING: Yes. Well, thank you very much for the interview. Okay?

SHORT: Really enjoyed it. Thank you.

KING: Yeah.

[END OF RECORDING]

**University of Georgia  
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