

MOVEMENT BUILDING

INTERVIEW THREAD ONE: MOVEMENT BUILDING, STRATEGIES, AND GOALS

CLIFFORD ALEXANDER

“But with King, you had another kind of relationship. Part of a relationship that I didn't see, which was whatever he and [President] Lyndon Johnson had to say to each other on the phone, and I think there was a fair amount of that. There were some things which will be transmitted -- were to be transmitted by me to Reverend King because this is what President Johnson wanted me to do. And in those days, unlike these days, we didn't keep from the general public what it was we were talking to people on behalf of the president for. He, I think, felt very comfortable with President Johnson. There've been some misrepresentations in the media about this hostility and so forth. Was Johnson unhappy with the fact that Martin Luther King opposed the war? Of course, he was. Was he unhappy with a lot of people for that? Of course, he was. Did this mean that he was hostile to him? Not a bit. What they both were, if one has to think about how they were with each other and how they acted because of how they were with each other, they both were very good at what they did. Martin Luther King was not a legislator, Lyndon Johnson was not a preacher. They both thought they knew a great deal about each subject, but they were neither one of them [were] the top of the field in it.

“Johnson knew that and said to King and to others within the civil rights leadership, ‘I have to be pushed by you. You have to help me. You have to get people excited by the injustice that you see. You are the best witnesses to all of this. And if you can do that, you could help me formulate the legislation, talk to the people who may be on the fence, get some new allies for us.”

“King, on the other hand, knew what his responsibilities were. He didn't, I hope, know what section 482 of the Voting Rights Act was, nor should he. But he did know that he would want that, or he did know that he would want the Civil Rights Act of 1964. And I think he did many other things in the relationship.”

CLEVELAND SELLERS

“Things were going very smoothly at the initial stage of that Selma to Montgomery kind of effort. John [Lewis] decided that he was going to be a part of that and ended up leading the first march with Hosea Williams. Hosea Williams was a fantastic organizer for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, one of the few organizers that they had, but he had a contingency of people who were pretty good organizers too that worked under his kind of leadership. SNCC had been in Selma from -- since about two years prior to the Selma to Montgomery march. Bernard Lafayette was there, [SNCC Alabama Project Director] Silas Norman was there and Silas Norman was the project director when that happened and so we agreed to share the space and on the assumption we were going to work out whatever kinds of strategies that, that we were supposed to put together and work on in unity.

“One of the things that we detected very early was, was that there was a working out of strategies along with the Justice Department and we were not notified about that. So, we were kind of left out of the loop and so on that Tuesday, I don't know the exact date, but Tuesday when the march started out, we assumed that the march was going to go straight on through and there was going to be another confrontation, but there was an agreement that you take the march from the church, Brown Chapel¹,

across the bridge to the highway patrol, then you would kneel and say a prayer and turn around. And that was called the “turn around march.” Well, that created a lot of anguish, not only on the part of SNCC, but on the part of the clergy and all who assumed that the march was ready to go forward and that they were going to in fact violate the injunction. The agreement on the injunction was, was the federal government was going to -- was going to work out through the courts some kind of system to allow the march to go forward, but we were not aware of that, and so people became very upset by that.

1. Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church in Selma, Alabama, was the starting point for the Selma to Montgomery marches.

JOAN BAEZ

"To try and have a movement without the music would have been ridiculous, plus it's there, I mean, it's just there. 'Ain't going to let nobody turn me around,' it's just like saying 'good morning,' you know. A picture of two kids, which I saw, they had to be 10 or 12, and marching with a -- it was Washington, I guess, with a sign saying 'freedom,' or the like, and a cop running at them. They got down on their knees, and went on singing, and the cop didn't know what to do with himself. It was too embarrassing to-- not always, but in this case, too embarrassing to, you know, hit them, knock them out, whatever his plan was. If they had just flipped him the bird, it would have been enough to do whatever he really had in his heart to do."

DOROTHY COTTON

"It wasn't about singing with Martin, it was about getting the church to sing-- getting a room full of people where he's getting ready to speak, and he often would get up to sing -- he would often get me to get that room singing before he even came out there. But when he came out there, he'd get them to sing one of his favorite songs, or get me to sing a song, but he loved to sing."

TREY ELLIS

"What kind of song- would you like to sing for us? What did you sing? What songs when you think of Martin do you...?"

DOROTHY COTTON

"Well, as I was just humming there- *[Singing] I'm gonna do what the spirit says do, I'm gonna do what the spirit says do, what the spirit says do, I'm gonna do, oh Lord, do what the spirit says do. [Talking] we used to sing [singing] I'll go to jail if the spirit says jail, I'll go to jail if the spirit says jail, if the spirit says jail, I'll go to jail, oh Lord, I'll go to jail if the spirit says ja- [talking] We sang a lot of different kinds of songs.*"