CLIFFORD ALEXANDER INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

CLIFFORD ALEXANDER
Chairman, U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
Interviewed by Trey Ellis
June 14, 2017
Total Running Time: 1 hour 41 minutes

00:00:02:00 TREY ELLIS:
Again, thank you so much for coming.

CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
You're more than welcome.

TREY ELLIS:
Can you tell me about the first time you met Doctor King and your impression of him?

00:00:10:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
The first time, I can't tell you a specific time, it was when I worked in the White House for President Johnson, and we would bring in the black leadership of the time, and that included Martin and Dorothy Height and Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young of the Urban League and John Lewis when he was with SNCC, and they would come in and I arranged these chats with black leadership, not just, those were the big timers, and most importantly was A. Phillip Randolph who ran, as you know, the Sleeping Car Porters here. And that would've been the very first time of many.

TREY ELLIS:

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Did it- how did he strike you, when you first met him as one of many, did you understand sort of...? When did you get a glimpse of how far he would go?

00:01:06:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
Never in any specific sense, I guess I'm old enough that I can make up a good story now but keep it to the truth if we can. When you saw them, saw a person with that group of people, you didn't focus on one person. I mean, if I were to focus on one person at that stage due to what he had accomplished, due to his age, it would've been A. Phillip Randolph who had a march, as you may know, back in the forties for jobs. And that was really in some senses the precursor to the march for jobs and freedom. So, all of these people that I mentioned, I had some connection with, not with Martin specifically, but the New York crowd. Mr. Randolph, Whitney Young, Dorothy Height who was a friend and worked with my late mother and my mother-in-law. And they were true activists in their own fields. And he was just, I do remember him being very pleasant, understated man, just that. And got to know him more and more as time passed and we had several times together. And then when I ran the White House Conference to Fulfill These Rights, which was the Johnson civil rights conference, he was on our board, if you want to call it that. And we had some meals together, and Coretta and Adele and I had a few together as well.

00:02:34:00 TREY ELLIS:
And tell us about those meals together, just similar to- what was the rapport? How was he in his private life, how was that different than maybe his public?

00:02:43:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
Well, in the private life I remember him as a very relaxed man. You had no self-importance. Preachers like most people can be self-important, they can overdo it particularly, but in his case, you never got any sense of that. You got a person who you got a sense he was thinking about you, was talking to you, listening when he talked to you, wanted to have a conversation with you, and not looking over his

shoulder when he was talking to you. Coretta was a lovely woman, just a very nice woman. She was a singer by training, wanted to be and loved doing it, and so that was very nice as well. I do have a picture, I think it's with... I know it's with Coretta alone too, it's just a nice happy smiling picture. She was a righteous lady and a great partner for him.

00:03:42:00 TREY ELLIS:
And so, personally, as your relationship grew and you became sort of an intermediary with him and the White House, how did that, how did your relationship evolve as he became more important in terms of the lead up to the Voting Rights Act?

00:03:58:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
We- in the White House, structure, it's not like today. Of course, nothing is like today, but if you think about the lawyer's office, the counsel's office to the White House, I hear there are twenty some of them now. There were three of us, and my- I was in charge of civil rights. And I thought from my own background and my own professional life that it was important for me with a president like Lyndon Johnson to see that he got exposed to as many thoughts and ideas as possible. Cliff's idea is fine, but that's not the point. The point really was that he get a full range. So, you had this leadership group that was helpful to him in terms of getting legislation across, in terms of thinking, but there was also the broader group of individuals that I would bring in. At one point, I knew from my father that a group from the junior high school in Harlem was coming to the White House for a tour. I arranged, I'm not quite sure how I did this, to get this group of junior high school students into the cabinet room. So, we have this picture of Lyndon Johnson with them in the cabinet room. And he got a chance to talk to some junior high school people at that point. We got the soros, we got many, many individuals who would be considered militant or conservative. The Reverend, I believe, Jackson of the Baptist Alliance Group that was a more conservative black group, Stanley Branch, a guy who also became a

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friend of mine who was a more radical from Philadelphia. These people got a chance to interact with Lyndon Johnson. I'm not talking about the conference where we did, but generally.

00:05:55:00 But with King, you had another kind of relationship. Part of a relationship that I didn't see, which was whatever he and 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 the top of the field in it.

00:07:23:00 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 four-eight-eight-two 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 nineteen sixty-four. And I think he did many other things in the relationship. President Johnson made me the head of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in nineteen sixty-seven, and Martin was good enough to send letters commending me to the senators who

were going to vote on that confirmation. He did those kinds of things as well. He also traveled a great deal with his messages, some of which were political, but not called political at the time. They were the messages for good.

00:08:46:00 I remember going with him once to Baltimore where we went to teach some churches with Ralph Abernathy who worked with him. Ralph Abernathy would work up the crowd, get them going for Doctor King, who would then- if you thought King was good, he was darn good, Abernathy was almost as good. So, when King came on, he didn't talk about Jesus Christ our lord. No, he talked about Jesus Christ and then he got on to your responsibility if you want to change for good is to vote to make sure you vote. So, we were running against- Johnson was running against Barry Goldwater, who had very little use for black people. And he would not say, "You," that is King would not say to the parishioners "You better go out there and vote for Lyndon Johnson." That's not what he did. He would go out and say why you have your responsibility to vote, what it is that the vote does, see what we've gotten as a result of showing our power at the ballot box, and reiterating this message which was then taken by the people who listened to it other places. So, he did those things which were very, very helpful.

00:09:58:00 Now, again, I know that the president entertained Doctor and Mrs. King, I think, when he won the Pulitzer prize, I think also he had other- we had other events where the Kings were there or particularly Martin Luther King was there. We also, when I was running the civil rights conference, we had lots of events where we had meals and we had a planning group that he was on as well where we planned the many sessions that would take place during the nineteen sixty-six conference. And during those, you saw some interaction. Once in a while, the group of leadership would come in to be with President Johnson. So, they interacted in that way. But was he- did he wake up in the morning with his fists balled and, you know, mad as hell at the president? No, that's just silliness, and it's been overdone and overdone improperly by some who have done movies and other things about it.

00:10:59:00 It's one thing to talk about the friction, which indeed there was, another thing to talk about how it was carried out. It's also important to realize that the ideas for many of

these things were not singular. They didn't come from President Johnson alone, they didn't come from Martin Luther King alone. Nor, when you look at the black leadership, was it just Martin Luther King. There's been a great tendency- you know, at that time, I remember saying at one point that this American society of ours can only follow one black person at a time. That's a very difficult matter to, you know, think that there are other people you ought to talk to. In addition, I thought, we don't need to follow just ministers. It would be good if we follow some people who were elected to office since we then had the black caucus, it would be good if we followed some physicians, it would be good if we followed some people you met trying to get a job, it would be good if you followed some people who were in school. In other words, treat the black society the way you do the white society. Talk to a range of people about the various things. That is still a hard message to come by. You know, when they- nowadays, once they get through with talking to the Reverend Sharpton about how the food is up in a Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street, they think they've covered the black community. Doesn't quite work that way.

00:12:15:00 So, our daughter who is a great poet has a line in one of her poems that talks about black people. It says, "We're not one, we're not ten, we're not ten thousand things. We are all these ideas and all these thoughts, and if you want to understand what are on the minds of black people, if you want to observe what it is that are the challenges they face, you need to talk to them. And you need to talk to not one, not ten, not ten thousand. You need to do as you would the rest of the society."

00:12:47:00 Now, Johnson had a specific proclivity to do that. He had a curiosity about it, and he did it. And I remember one time we had around Selma, they were protesting Johnson and people came from the tour and they actually sat in the White House residence area. And so then, president Johnson sent Bill Moyers and myself out to see the group and to bring them- he said, "Bring them into my office. I want to talk to them." So, Bill and I went out and we talked and did the very best we could, and they sat there and continued to sit there. So, we came back and then we told Johnson we were unable to do that. Well, he was mortified, and, you know, "I gave you this very simple task to go and bring some people into the Oval Office of the President of the

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United States, and the two of you are supposed to be... " *[unclear]* so he gave a good five-minute lecture on why we were stupid fools not to be able to bring these people in from sitting in.

00:13:55:00 Now, then using the same group of people, he had a meeting at that time with the NNPA, which was the Black Publisher's Association. He went in and he said to that group, "This is the situation I have. I have this group of people who are criticizing me sitting in on behalf of the rights of negro people," we were Negroes, that's before we were black and African American, so at that point we were Negroes. He said, "Speaking for the rights of these negro people, and I think that it probably is important for the decorum of this place for me to see that they are escorted out of here." And then he had a vote. He had the black publishers vote unanimously that he, Lyndon Johnson, should see that these black and a few white people were removed from sitting on those rights. So, that's how good he was at his part of theater.
Well, we know many instances of how good Martin Luther King was at this. I think we know fewer about what he had to face on a day by day basis. What we don't know is how small SNCC was- not SNCC, SCLC, which was his organization.

00:15:11:00 Every black organization of prominence in civil rights is short of money. We do not have a major group of white and black people who have that big pocketed opportunity to help us not have to spend our time kissing ass to raise some money for the next meal. So, they were not very- not themselves very certainly filled with money, so he had to do a lot of things. He had to go beg money for them. He had to express thoughts that if you had eight or ten people who were on staff could use some of those, had to do some of that as well. I don't have any idea how many speeches and things that he gave during a year, but they were enormous numbers. So, he covered a full range of things that obviously I didn't see all his speeches and begging for money. And he was a scholar, he- the highly educated man, a curious man, and that took some of his time as well.

00:16:12:00 TREY ELLIS:

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Were you part of any of the discussions for the lead up to the Voting Rights Act, for example, you know Andrew Young talks about meeting with King and meeting with Johnson about the Voting Rights Act and King concluding "we need to give the president the power. We need to empower him to press this legislation." He talked about the symbiotic relationship they had to the lead up to the Voting Rights Act. Can you talk about that, and then the mood after the victory?

00:16:42:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
I think that it's very important and never been done to talk about how a bill becomes a law. A bill does not become a law by a conversation of two people with one person. Now, how did this happen? It happened through the pressure of people before Martin Luther King and Andy Young, people like A. Phillip Randolph, several white people who also did, and that affected the members of Congress to the extent that they saw that for their future, it would be important to get on the right side of this issue. So, before you had Johnson talking to King and Andy about the possibility of a Voting Rights Act, you had a lot of generation of energy, thoughts, visits, drafts done by people in the executive branch, over at the Justice Department, within the White House staff itself, outside forces, some lawyer groups or other groups giving what their thoughts were, other civil rights groups coming in with their thoughts. Then you also had in the Congress, 'cause they're the ones who vote on this by the way, so you can have all the goodwill in the world, but if you can't get the votes doesn't make a damn bit of difference. So, in the Congress, what you had to have was a pressure, specific kind of pressure on them that they saw to it or they felt about this pressure that their future was at stake.

00:18:13:00 Now, in many cases, unless, you know, they didn't see their future, saying, "What the hell do they care, they *[unclear]* some black folks some votes? To hell with that. I don't need that, only got ten in my district." So, maybe you don't get them. So, you had several forces at work. You had several, if you want to call them, clusters of people and forces that were affecting the people who were making the decisions. So, there was some would conclude that, you know, the great day that A and B sat down

together and talked for twenty minutes, that's what gave us the Voting Rights Act. That's bullshit. What gave us the Voting Rights Act was this composite of lots and lots of individuals working on various parts of it at a particular time in American history where the media played a singular role as well.

00:19:07:00 The media got off its blind horse and started to cover what indeed was happening to black people in America. The physical denials to them, the physical against them, the denials of opportunity, the lack of job opportunities, the insults of the segregated water fountains. All of these things were going on at the same time. Finally, you had a camera that was focused on these things. So, you wake up and you get up in the morning and you see your morning news, and you see the Bull Connors of the world with their outrageous behavior, or you see that people trying to go to school are taken on by the Wallaces of the world. So, it started to sink in to the people who had the vote that if we are going to stay in our positions, maybe some of those people who turned on their TV like I did, saw what I saw, and maybe it got to them as good Christians if that's what it's about, or got to them as good people or good Jews or good Muslims or whatever that might've been. But the fact is it was the presumption of the people in the Congress that something had gotten to them. Very few members of Congress, senators or members of Congress, do things just because it's right or we'd have a far better world than we have today. So, they do something because there's pressure on it. Now, the understanding of pressure, the understanding of how to execute pressure was something that both Martin and Lyndon understood. Now, Lyndon Johnson pressured you a very different way than Martin Luther King did, and images of Martin Luther King more than the specific words, what he was willing to do on behalf of people, what he was willing to take on behalf of people. But we have to remember that it ain't all about Martin. A. Phillip Randolph, Dorothy Height, Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins, all of these and hundreds and thousands of more who over the years had not only lobbied but helped draft or helped go for these things.

00:21:25:00 One of the things that I was proudest of my personal self, that members of the Harlem community and the city of New York that I knew when I was growing up wanted to see a black person in the cabinet and on the Supreme Court. I was a part of

doing that, getting Bob Weaver appointed to now head HUD, and the other was Thurgood Marshall to head- to be on the Supreme Court. Both splendid men, both men of great stature. Now, why is that important? Well, three or four obvious things. The first and most obvious is the presentation of a black face as a white face in a position of power. The second is that in their heads and in their eyes, they have seen from their own community how they live. A third is that somehow now, a group of people who didn't have to in the past had to react to them. I mean, if you're a member of the legal profession and you see that black face on the bench, you may think once or twice. He also, Johnson and another, he put the late Andy Brimmer on the Federal Reserve. And I was there when we appointed him, and Lyndon Johnson said to Andy Brimmer, "I love the idea of a banker coming up to you and you're in your rocker giving him a question or an answer about a yes or no on something that he needs and wants." So, that the general society could see that in the wealth of talent that is so ignored in this society of people of color that there is not only somebody who's smart as hell but can fix up your bank's problem or whatever else it is.

00:23:12:00 So, you had to understand that. Now, King understood that certainly as well. President Johnson didn't learn that from Martin Luther King. He probably learned it when- I certainly didn't know him when he was teacher and there was lots of Latinos that he was affiliated with when he was teaching. He saw their conditions, but more importantly unlike many a good Democrat, or think themselves as a good Democrat, he took it to heart that this is something that he wanted to do on behalf of his fellow citizens, those Latinos. He cared about it. Now, that's a different kind of care than Martin Luther King's care, which was driven by I think his religious feelings, about his background, his own education, his own exposure. It wasn't from Democrat and Republican. Martin's father was a prominent Republican minister in Atlanta. Now, Lyndon Johnson came from a democratic background. And it ain't about that today, and people ought to remember that the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act had a lot of Republican votes, probably close to a third of the votes for both of those. Now, again, could they get a third of the votes because Andy and Martin and Lyndon stood together and talked? No. It doesn't happen that way. You got to go talk to these

fools. You got to go talk to them and make them feel like they're great Americans, and sometimes you're unsuccessful.

00:24:43:00 I remember one time with the late Everett Dirksen, who was a clown and a half by the way, that I was going to talk about the budget for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, I was there and running it at the time. I went to his office and he said "You've got ten minutes- ten seconds, rather. Ten seconds to tell me why this budget..." I said, "Well, if that's all you got, I ain't got no time for you either." And so, I left. Now, that probably didn't do the budget any good, but it did me a lot of good at the time. The fact is that if they're not going to pay any attention to you, it ain't going to be any good either. We're getting too many examples of people not being paid attention to in the present environment. But talking about that environment, why will somebody pay attention to you? They will pay attention to you if their future can be affected. They will be intent and pay attention to you if indeed they are worried about how somebody will regard them. Their own ego gets into the act. One has to think about how they see things. So, if you're above it all, it's unlikely that you're going to get much success. If you're self-promoting, they'll see through that one pretty quickly as well. But if you can show somebody why it is in their interest, they may do some things. Were there some people in Congress who voted for the Voting Rights Act or the Civil Rights Act because that was the right thing to do? Yes. Were there may who did it just for that? No.

00:26:16:00 There was a convalescing- or not convalescing- a coming together of lots and lots of reasons for people to come forward with their vote, which was a very precious thing to have. Now, how did Johnson play it, if you will? He played it by knowing who they were on the Hill who would be most susceptible to this or that entreaty. Now, did Martin King know all that? No, he didn't know that. Now, did Lyndon Johnson know what phone calls Martin Luther King was going to make on behalf of this? No. Lyndon Johnson didn't know that. But did King or Johnson say to one another, "Well, I'm going to do this to help you or not help you," yes. The late Adam Clayton Powell who was a congressman from Harlem once said at the time to a Democrat who was running for president, "Look, I will be for or against you, whatever helps you the

most." He understood the practicality of it all. And that's how good politicians operate. Now, if you want to make the definition- or not definition, but the modification of a person put before that politician, Martin Luther King was a politician. Lyndon Johnson was a politician. Is politician a bad word? No.

00:27:47:00 Is politician for a bad ending, a bad thing? Yes. That's said. I mean, if you're a politician like we're living through now where it is to denigrate people because of their race, religion, sex, or orientation, yeah. That's pretty bad. And you can say some politicians do that. But it is their own particular lack of heart that causes them to do that, it isn't that they are politicians. As I see it, a politician in this world works to achieve a particular political end, and did Johnson work for that? Yes. Did Martin work for that? Yes. But I think let's continue to remember that it goes well beyond those two people, well beyond it. Now, if you want to take again the black side, if you will, of this, the black leadership side, how did Roy Wilkins who was somewhat cold, not a sweet backslapper, he was though very highly regarded by Lyndon Johnson, so he had his ear, he had a chance to talk to him. Or you want to take Whitney Young, who had sort of a combination of both. He could slap you on the back but he also was a practical politician, and he and Margaret Young were vital entries into the whole world of moving things along. Or you want to take Dorothy Height, as few women as they had unfortunately in the movement, she until the day of her death in her late nineties, was sustaining an interest on behalf of black people and on behalf of women.

00:29:24:00 You know, to see today, and this is off subject, but I'll go off subject for a while- to see today the treatment of Senator Harris from California by these white pecker-woods who pretend to be senators, who when she speaks interrupts her, that is done by bigots. And it is not corrected by your progressive Democrats in the Congress. Any one of them who if they had any pair would get up in the middle of a hearing, take their fat asses out of their seats, leave until she's treated with the same kind of respect that they are treated. You know, here is a woman who has for two terms been the attorney general of the largest state in the damn country, and John McCain can open his rather flabby mouth and interrupt her because he didn't like the way she was

interrupting Quisling who sat there as Attorney General and did not answer questions. Democrats, you know the favorite race nowadays, Democrats need to act like they care about somebody. And when the least of us are having trouble, not that she's a least, but when those who are being picked on, that's when we need you. Now, Martin understood that. Lyndon Johnson understood that as well, and that's one of the reasons that they did very well together.

00:30:54:00 TREY ELLIS:
As long as we're talking about the Voting Rights Act, could you briefly just so we have it, explain sort of the broad parameters of what it did, what was so important about it?

00:31:05:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
What had grown up, and this was over decades, were various systems of, yes, you as a black person particularly in the South, you may vote. "Good, got my right to vote." But if you walk into registration, I've got a bowl full of jelly beans here and you need to guess within ten jelly beans how many jelly beans are in that bowl or you can't vote. Well, that's kind of hard to do. So, that- those kinds of idiotic barriers were set up for black people. Basically, what the law, to oversimplify it, did was require that if you set up those barriers that are artificial and unique unto a group of people, that the Justice Department could come and take over your system basically and make sure that you run it fairly for individuals. And that's what happened. We had a wonderful ceremony for... Johnson appointed more black people than anyone had. In one day, we appointed four black judges, which is more than had been appointed in the entire United States. But anyway, the black appointees had a party for Johnson who had a hundred and three-degree temperature at the time. And in that, to go back to the voting, we gave him, we presented him, I did, with a pen set. And on that pen set was a gold replica of the registration in Selma of someone to vote. This took on significant symbolic operations within the country.

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00:32:59:00 Now, that lasted for a long time, but then that legislation ran out and the Congress did not renew it. So, you're getting a replaying of some of the exact same techniques that were used to exclude black people before that are now being set up. Having to have a automobile license, well, if you don't have a car should that affect whether you can vote? No, of course not. But if you don't have a car, why would you have a driver's license? So- or other kinds of made up reasons. You have people talking about how if you now look at the state, we have so many violations, so many illegal voters. They looked through the entire United States, and you can't get it up to a hundred. There are just not that many that do that. But instead of going in the other direction, making it easier to vote by phone, by internet, by something that is easier for people who work...

00:34:00:00 I mean, in this world, most people work. I mean, in this world, most people get up in the morning and they have to be someplace from nine until. Most people in the meantime have to go have shopping for their children. Most people have to then perhaps go to a second job. Most people have to do a whole lot of things other than worry about standing on line for two or three hours to vote. So, if we want to have their participation, let's make it easy for most people, not for the people who have a leisurely afternoon, for most people to go out and vote or not have to go out and vote. And there's so many mechanical ways we can check on whether they're going to cheat us or not. We somehow are capable of not worrying about the Russians messing with our elections, but worried about the person living in Harlem messing with our elections.

00:34:54:00 TREY ELLIS:
Could you talk about the- after the signing of the Voting Rights Act, was there any kind of uncertainty, or what was the next step in the Johnson administration? What would the next big thing be? What would be the next, in terms of civil rights, what would be the next fight?

00:35:11:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:

Well, you had a housing bill that was passed in I believe in sixty-eight toward the end of his term. But the fight was continuous on lots of levels. One level was appointments where he continued to make appointment of judges, of people within the bureaucracy, again, some of it was symbolic. Another very important symbolic part of it was in social affairs. White House parties, White House special events, White House dinners for head of state. So, they became peppered with people of color. And they could then, that person of color, if he or she is running for Congress, I remember Yvonne Brathwaite Berg from California being at one of those events and she became a Congresswoman soon. That if you had that kind of exposure, that indeed that would be helpful. But with Bess Abell, I worked with her to see that we included not just people in the political world, but others. I did actually with- I'm a basketball fan, and one of the great players, I won't mention him, but I made sure he got on a list because when he went out with his pro team, he would not stay in segregated facilities. But people who had a symbolism that was important that when you go to the White House and you see them all dressed up, that somehow the world also gets a chance to see as well.

00:36:50:00 Now, back on the Voting Rights Act, what then you had to do is you had to get back to the Justice Department. Who are the people that are going to enforce this? What are they going to do to enforce it? How do you run this through the courts? What are the most efficient administrative ways to do this? This doesn't happen because may A. Phillip Randolph or Martin Luther King or Dorothy Height made a phone call. That happens because somebody who is trained to do those things figures out a correct way of doing it. Now, another thing that we did, which was in many ways as important, but didn't receive the attention, was we had a civil rights conference in nineteen sixty-six. It was called “To Fulfill These Rights,” and President Johnson had me coordinate it. We had twenty-six hundred people. What we had at that conference was first we had a planning session, and we had some leaders from the rights community and other communities engage in the planning session. Then we appointed A. Phillip Randolph and a man named Ben Heineman who was head of Chicago Northwestern Railways as the co-chairs, and Martin and George Meany

head of AFL-CIO and others were on sort of the support board. And we, that's where we had many a sandwich sitting at a table together, formulated the various areas and all of this is in print, with the recommendations, the various areas where you would have a discussion by people who knew what the issues were, those people doing it.

00:38:31:00 Now how do you avoid, since you got to come to Washington to do this, just having people who can afford it? We also created a fund, I leaned on some friends I had, to pay for people who might not have the wherewithal to make it to DC so they could participate as well. Unfortunately, it never received the attention that it should. We had a very quixotic kind of thing that happened. At the same time, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who was then an assistant secretary of labor, came out with his theory that to be a good human being you must be black and come from a solid family with a man and a woman in the household. Well, the fact that he only had his mother in the household didn't affect his thinking. He saw that for black people. But the problem with that was that not only that the document, which was a twenty-four-page document that he did, was flawed, but it also attracted attention away from the substantive stuff about jobs, about health, about justice in the community. And it meant that you didn't pay attention to that, but if there had been a specific follow-up on many of those things, I think as of today, we'd be a heck of a lot better off than we are at the present time.

00:39:53:00 TREY ELLIS:
I'd like to sort of pivot to the violent era of the sixties, the riots in Harlem and Philadelphia and Watts, and the response of the White House and your own response and the kind of discussions you might've had with Johnson about that.

00:40:08:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
Right. I was… when Doctor King was assassinated, I was in Harlem at my father-in-law's house, and my father-in-law was a dear personal friend and also physician when Martin was in New York. I got a call from the president that he wanted me to go to Memphis and that he was sending a plane. The… at the time, my father lived

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where I had been raised part of my life, in a place called Riverton which was a MetLife development over on a Hundred Thirty-Fifth to a Hundred Thirty-Eighth, from Fifth to the river. And I was going to stay with *[unclear]* that night. Often, my father-in-law was on Eighty-Eighth street, and so I had a car, we had his car, and I drove through a riot to Riverton. Now, they didn't report the riot in New York, ‘cause somehow John Lindsey magically stopped the riot, well, no he really didn't ‘cause I saw the rocks with my own eyes.

00:41:28:00 So, I then got out to the airport where one of the president's planes took me down to Memphis, and when I went to Memphis there was the mayor of Memphis had, a man named Loeb, had decided to have a meeting. President Johnson had also sent Ramsey Clark, his Attorney General down for a meeting about all of this. And this is, again, two days after the killing of Doctor King. Loeb would not let me, because I'm black, sit in on the meeting. That's the state of affairs a few days after Doctor King was killed in Memphis. So, we did- I probably talked to Andy and Jesse and whoever else, the people I knew and liked, not just liked, but knew and respected about what had happened. It was just a whirlwind for me at the time, but the fact that the mayor of a city where this atrocity had taken place would exclude a person who came as a specific representative of the President of the United States told you volumes about what the mood was where Doctor King had come because of a garbage strike and the inequities of treatment of garbage workers in the city of Memphis.

00:43:09:00 So, when I came back to Washington, I remember so unhappily seeing the fires and seeing what I thought was an area where we lived. When I got there and they took us to the White House and we had meetings about this, and the president wanted me to go out and see what had happened in the H Street corridors, and, which I did, and it was frightening to see. It was up and down, it was in front of Gallaudet and that part of H Street, it was further over in the Fourteenth Street area, and then that was the principal part where the burnings were. When eventually after several meetings and going, observing this and reporting what I observed, I wanted to get home to my family and they said I couldn't do it. They had cars for everybody then, and I said "Well, you know, my family's there, we're going to do it." So, they put me in a car

and I went home, and so Adele and our two little ones at the time and hopefully put on a cleaner shirt and went back and continued with discussions with people.

00:44:31:00 The specifics are a blur to me. It was meeting after meeting, talking to people. It did, and I think this is important for particularly for young people of color to recognize today, the people I talked to mostly were white. The people who cared were mostly white. You do not have an exclusive chit to talk about, act on behalf of, seeing opportunities are full because you're black. If you've got some allies, grab them. Pull them to your chest and kiss and hug them. And in this case, this is what we did. We worked together. And Harry McPherson, who was my- he was general counsel, I was deputy general counsel of the White House staff, at that point however I was Johnson's chief civil rights advisor and I was running the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission- that's my paid job, he didn't pay me for the second job. But I think we realized on both sides of the color barrier that it was important for us to show respect to each other and to try and work for some good, some tangible good.

00:45:45:00 Now, for many years, Adele and the family and I lived in Washington. The progress to cleaning up the mess left on Fourteenth Street after the riot was as slow as watching honey drip. It just was awful to see how long it took. It's got gentrified now, but remember this was nineteen sixty-eight, and for years and decades little was taking place. So, you had this picture for all to see, particularly for people of color to see, about their environment. And it was not a picture of hope, it was a picture of the degradation of a neighborhood. Without making moral judgements about who did it, that was their neighborhood because one of their heroes had been unmercifully shot dead. And yet, we could worry about other things as we should, we could send troops off to Vietnam, we could build carriers to go in the water and pay millions of dollars for a tiny scope on a microscope, but we somehow couldn't come up with the amount of seed money to fix these neighborhoods. And in many ways, it is like today, symbolic today, of the fact that the net worth of black families in America today is seven thousand dollars. The net worth of white families is ninety-eight thousand dollars. So, you want to send your kid off to school- to go to school? Where's that

little nest egg to help them? You want to help them start their small business? Where's that little nest egg? It's not there.

00:47:49:00 Now, one of my issues with some of the civil rights leadership, mostly the ministers, was they didn't understand the economics of it. They didn't understand we have to push even harder for job opportunities and opportunities to move up so that we can take care of ourselves, not the Malcolm X idea of taking care of yourself that somehow you can regenerate everything within Harlem. You know, they don't produce Ford cars in Harlem, but we do buy Ford cars, so should we have jobs there? Yeah, we ought to have jobs there even though they don't do it in Harlem. And you don't think- it's not a cycle that takes place only in the ghetto. And we have to be far less sentimental about this stuff and far more practical about job opportunities and the training that goes with it. We don't press on those kinds of issues. And it isn't just about priorities, it's about how we think ourselves, what we ask for. We have a great problem now, I think, with media. The media used to be an ally to the extent that it is wasn't partisan, but at least it showed what was going on. It doesn't do that anymore. It shows the latest crisis, it shows the latest person that somehow is on the other side of an issue.

00:49:15:00 There are some issues where there are not two sides to it. And many of these issues are played as if there are two sides. When some bigot keeps you out of a job because you are a woman, there is no other side to that if you've got the qualifications. So, it is treated somehow by some clown getting on, and he or she can't rationalize why it is that that person doesn't have the full opportunity that they should. But does the media do this? No, it doesn't do this. And do members of Congress? Well, members of Congress are so busy under the financing laws raising money, that that's all they do. I mean, you run every two years if you're a member of the House, so what you do for probably a year and ten months is raise money. Even when you're a Senator for six years, what do you do for probably four of those is raise money. And its Citizen's United, it is other rules that give far too much strength to the money in the operation, so that a misleading or inaccurate representation of what the condition of people is, is presented.

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00:50:25:00 You know, if you don't get a good picture, an accurate picture of human beings, you don't treat them as human beings. I once did a paper on the projection of images, the ten top projections of images by the media of black people. All negative. They want to be on welfare, they don't get the job training, they get things they shouldn't, you know, on and on and on and on. That's what you saw. Criminality, that's what you saw. That's what was reinforced. Then you get politicians. The noble Trump is the best example of it whose daddy was arrested at a Klan rally before, many years ago. But, you know, those professional bigots, they present this stuff to the media and they whine when indeed the media doesn't give bigotry a second chance. And right now, media not only gives bigotry a second chance, it leads with bigotry. And what is being fed into the minds of young people, what is being reinforced in the minds of adult people, is the same kind of accurate unhappy stuff that is there.

00:51:45:00 I mean, people talk about white privilege. Bill Bradley, the great senator from New Jersey talked about that. We got to get a little beyond even talking about white privilege and just seeing how is it possible for us to present where people are in this society? When black women are thirteen percent of female population and thirty-seven percent in the incarcerated world, there's something wrong there isn't there? When marijuana users are mostly white percentage wise, but the black and brown people are in jail for that much more. That has to do with it. If you haven't got any money for bail, you are really stuck. So, there's so many parts of society that are affected that way. Well, when I was Secretary of the Army, that's- I increased from a handful the number of generals to thirty that were black of the four thirty-two. By the way, the same time in the navy, there was one black general in the Marines, at the end of four years there was one black general in the Marines. Somebody's got to do something and say something to make something happen in this world. But that too can decline as it has over the years, those kinds of opportunities. If they have *[unclear]*, if they see in the Army that there are black generals, there will be black colonels as there were. There will be black sergeants, there will be that sense of opportunity created.

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00:53:28:00 TREY ELLIS:
You know, there's such a, it felt like at least, tidal wave of support for the- in the North especially for the Voting Rights Act and a sort of a feel of good, a lot of people in the country felt there was this positive change, ‘cause it was a southern issue. But soon after that, there was this backlash around the country, there were the Watts riots for example. There were things happening, sort of urban unrest, and Black Power arising. Did you see that white public opinion was turning, that there was some kind of turn against or it was harder to enact some change for black people?

00:54:10:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
No, I think it's a little romantic to think of white- some surge or wave of white opinion. White opinion had always been there, skeptical about opportunities for this minority. Now, the fact of the Voting Rights Act didn't make them all of a sudden change nor did it change that much the pattern of voting. I mean, in certain areas, yes, black influence became much greater than it had before, but we still, you know, as a country we vote- less than fifty percent of us vote. I run for office, I ran for mayor of the District of Colombia, first election in a hundred and four years, we had just under fifty percent of the vote.

00:54:52:00 By the way, unhappily, the people saved me. I lost. But the point wasn't that, it's with all the publicity that attended that campaign, still only half ended up voting. So, we didn't educate, and still don't, people to the importance, importance of it. And the political parties have been, you know, they’ve been sidelined basically, so you don't get it. The people who have the jobs, they don't educate anymore because they've got the jobs. So, they don't want anything that shakes that up. But no, there wasn't a, you know, lightning bolt or a beautiful sunshine one day that said "Now, gosh, we're not, you know, we’re not doing as well because- or better because of the Voting Rights Act." It doesn't happen like that. And we, you know, we live on our little universe about those things that we're interested in, but it didn't change that way.

00:55:51:00 TREY ELLIS:

Yeah, I just wondered was there any kind of, in terms of, you know, affirmative action was just beginning, or antipoverty programs or housing desegregation, were those fights harder than, you know… in the late sixties than the early sixties.

00:56:06:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
Well, I think the- the affirmative action is a particularly interesting one. Eleven-two-four-six and three-seven-five are executive orders of the labor department that affect creating a plan to be inclusive of women and minorities. That actually came during the Johnson administration. So, they've been going on for quite some time. There has been an erosion and a misinterpretation, mostly by lawyers, to create an impression that these executive orders create a bias on behalf of these various affected classes, which they do not. And one has to only read them to know that. So, I think that you have a continuing resentment however that has been built up mostly by scholars who wrote about affirmative action particularly in the world of academia.

00:57:02:00 Now, I just heard- I went to Yale Law School. Yale Law School today has one full time black tenured faculty member. Today. Now, are there any other lawyers who have taught- my son's dean of the Villanova Law School, I mean, and he knows, could name four hundred people for us who could be on the Yale faculty. But by their own perniciousness, they continue to stick to their own kind. And their own kind is a kind that does not include us. Now, if you had a conversation with any of the white members of the administration, they would spend the entire effing afternoon with you explaining how that if they only had taught such and such, if they had only taken such and such a course when they were three years old, they would be qualified to be. You know, it's a lie. And it's a lie that perpetuates the truth, which is, the truth, which is they exclude because the people are black and they continue to.

00:58:15:00 TREY ELLIS:
We're going to go back in time to King and SCLC's pivot to the Northern, to going to Chicago and what was your feeling about it personally, what was the White House's

position on taking this, ongoing from the fight from legal segregation to De facto segregation in the North?

00:58:39:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
I don't know of any, but I'm sure there was no official White House response to his doing that. I do remember some of what he went through physically as I remember there, as well. And I guess that's where Jesse started PUSH. And the one thing about PUSH that I've thought was very useful, he figured out that you do start to focus on jobs and he did a great deal of that, and I do think that was extraordinarily helpful. He suffered from, again, what I mentioned about black organizations, money. So, you know when you're poor *[unclear]* with your hand out trying to raise some money, you're trying to say to somebody "Hire some of my people," it gets a little awkward at times. So, that deficiency has always been a problem. But to my knowledge, and I haven't talked to Jesse in some time, I think he has stuck to the message about jobs. He's done it in different forms and I think that's useful. I think he recognizes... He put his preacher hat in the closet for a while and started to talk more like a business person or someone involved with understanding the economics as well. But I wasn't a part of the specific time, and it may have been... What time was that?

01:00:02:00 TREY ELLIS:
When King- I'm sorry, talking about he moves north and he's living in the projects and he's marching, talking about marching on Cicero, he's talking about fair housing in the North, it feels like that the movement- that the media, for example, watching the coverage of the Bull Connor and of fire hoses was very pro-King, then after the Voting Rights Act when King was less popular with the media and less a media darling and had to, but it was still pushing a message that was less universally popular.

01:00:36:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:

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Well, I think that's absolutely true, it does go back to the earlier point I made that there shouldn't be just one person you talk to. I mean, if that was King's particular emphasis at the time, you don't have to like all of it. You might talk to somebody else and see what's going on. The condition of black people had not changed to any dramatic event. To point out what was going on in the ghettos of this country is always a useful thing, I think. One can see that, then. King certainly tried to do it in Washington and to a certain extent in New York. But I think the fact is that, again, this is a reliance on one person to define what the black leadership quote, unquote should be talking about. I mean, did they talk to anybody who was an elected representative there who might be able to give you some idea? I mean, if you talk to them now, it's a very complicated city and in that stage, it was Daley's city, and that made it very unique in American history, A city that was under the complete control of that machinery.

01:01:53:00 Now, it was a nice touch for the cameras for Martin to march through Cicero, and probably nice for him to be beat on the head a few times, but that is not the substance of the issue. The substance of the issue is whether that neighborhood was as restricted as they are in Chicago, I think to this day, by ethnicity. There are a lot of enclaves of various and sundry groups of people in that city than in many others. It's a funny place, I don't pretend to be an expert, my daughter did go to school there, but because you see some great successes there certainly and politically, and they did obviously have Washington as their mayor and they were capable obviously of having a number of business people as well, but right now if you looked at the suffering that goes on there, I think to the negligence of a mayor who was out of his league when he was in the White House and further out of his league as mayor of Chicago, that you'd be better off looking at what Rahm Emanuel didn't do and the priorities that he didn't set rather than trying to put it on King. I mean, I think it is not the job- I don't think it is the job of the media to set King's priorities.

01:03:16:00 TREY ELLIS:

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Clearly for King, the rise of Black Power put pressure on King, but how about from the White House's point of view, how did you navigate fitting in the White House sort of the rise of Black Power versus King and nonviolence?

01:03:31:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
The violence-nonviolence, I've tried to, for my own life, come to my own conclusions, and neither Stokely nor Martin would decide which way I would go. I'd just as soon be nonviolent, there are some points when you should be violent. There was some really unwieldy absurd advice that was given by Carmichael that we ought to as black people arm if we want to take on as thirteen percent of the population the rest of the population. We can go arm and get killed, and that's stupid. That was just plain stupid. Makes for good, you know, good cover. And then he goes off to Africa, so he didn't have to worry about things after that. So, I, as personalities, I never knew him. I did once as a lawyer advocate for them being able to use the armory in Washington, which was successful. I believe in their rights, but I don't believe in much that he had to say and certainly not his advice. I thought it was glib and mostly senseless.

01:04:46:00 Now, you know it's relatively easy to state the problem, and they're particularly good at that. Again, this is a generality. But after you state the problem, if you don't have a solution, don't state it, you don't have it, you don't have it. You do not have to be a prayer like Martin or, I don't know quite how to project Stokely, be like Stokely. You can come to whatever trace or view of the world or *[unclear]* view of the world, that's fine, whichever. But I think it requires, if you're giving advice to people, if you want to talk about the great black nation, don't give them advice that's going to leave them bloodied in the streets. And telling black people to go arm is going to end up leaving us bloodied in the streets. That's about what it is. Now, should we be the only ones without arms? I guess not. Should all Americans have fewer arms? Of course, I guess so.

01:05:45:00 But I think the trouble with much of what was said by the quote, unquote "Black Power group" was that they were stating the problem, which is by far the easiest

thing to do. I can state as I did some of the statistics, I can take you and show you what the condition is. It is a lot harder, and they didn't contribute to this, to come up with, "What is it that we specifically can do? How do we form alliances with others to help us do it?" We didn't get that much form them. Again, my emphasis has generally been on getting us in a position where we have some economic power in this society. And more important than the quote unquote power is that people have a ability to really control their own destiny by being able to raise their children, have enough to go out to dinner once in a while, have enough maybe to support some extra education for one member of the family, have enough to start off a small business. Those are the things that happen that make people successful in this country. Now, for there to be a full success, there's another player in this. And the other player is the broader wide world that hasn't quite learned the lesson that you should give full opportunity to people of color. You need to continue to work on that. Am I optimistic about that? Well, in the eighty-three years I've been on this earth, I think we could do a lot god damn better than we are now.

01:07:23:00 TREY ELLIS:
Was there ever a time where there was any kind of a more radical Black Power person visiting the White House and meeting in any of those conference years?

01:07:32:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
Yeah, I think Stanley Branch would fit that category, he was from the- it's a suburban town of Philadelphia, I forget exactly which one it was. And I'm not sure of others, it may have been. I didn't specifically go try and find one.

TREY ELLIS:
I wonder if they ever met the president, and LBJ was ever kind of- any, I can imagine that would be an awkward...

01:07:59:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:

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I think it less than an awkward thing it would be a question of whether he participates, that is the Black Power person participates. I mean, they boycotted King a good deal. I mean, they had to have meetings to have them work on similar situated things. Now, it is not a requirement that they agree with King or that they support a certain kind of issue. If they want to do that, you got to get in the house to play in the house. If you want to play in the street, keep playing in the street. They chose to keep playing in the street. And again, I do think pragmatism is an important part of life, and you can be quite romantic, make your t-shirts good and write your good books and do all, so all those things.

01:08:50:00 I remember Alex Haley who wrote Malcolm's book, how he put the book together. And I represented Malcolm's widow for a while, Betty, who was a nice, but troubled lady. I mean, you would be too if you had gone through it. I don't consider him, who I never met, to be my ideal person. I do consider him to be a man who was more than capable of raising the issues and stating them well. I remember my impressions of Carmichael at the time were negative. I'd just say you know, "Where is the brother going?" And there just seemed to be a lack of conclusory sentences to his tirades. And, you know, he excited, the dashiki was the exciting thing at the time, he excited a lot of white cocktail parties. Those same cocktail parties didn't do anything about hiring people.

01:10:00:00 I remember full well that you had many a person who had jobs in Washington, I remember Jake Javits was thought of as a great progressive member of the Senate, he didn't have any black people on his staff. That seemed kind of odd, didn't it? I think there are better tests than whether you can say, "uh huh" when somebody tells you about infant mortality in the black community or say, "uh huh" when you see that black people aren't hired. But you might want to say to yourself, "I run this business over here, and I don't have any vice presidents who are black. I don't have any mid-level people who are black. I don't have any people who are in this position who are black." And then you can say "uh huh." But the “uh huh” crowd, which I'm now, I want to have that certified as mine, the “uh huh crowd,” who are people who like to agree with those who can best state the problem, are not part of the solution. And

again, the solution, if I am sitting here, if I'm Lloyd Blankfein and I'm running Goldman Sachs, and I'm running Goldman Sachs, but somehow, I don't hire people at Goldman Sachs, but I give a million dollars at the Waldorf, that doesn't quite cut it when I could make myself five hundred black millionaires who might do something with their money that would be of assistance to the general black community.

01:11:34:00 TREY ELLIS:
We're going to pivot to Vietnam and those discussions. You wrote in a memo to Johnson, "The most difficult part of the equation is what Martin Luther King will do next." Trying to figure out what his next move would be. Can you tell us about- once SNCC in sixty-six comes out against the war and there's this drumbeat as it builds up against the war, what were the discussions like between you and the president about how to handle this before, then the reaction to the Riverside speech?

01:12:09:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
I think what the discussions were few and far between. My own position at the time was a questioning position of why we were there. I do think at the time that there was rightfully raised the issue of does this very overt support of the Vietnam- anti-Vietnam feelings, does that affect those of us who are trying to raise money for programs that would affect positively minorities. What actually took place, I think, was that the status of whether or not one should be in Vietnam was misapplied to how this or that particular position was taken. I think one of the great tragedies was that- and here Westmoreland was the sinner and McNamara was the sinner, was what was reported to Johnson.

01:13:21:00 Now, one can properly say that Johnson didn't take what was in his gut, which from the little bit I've heard of the tapes that would indicate that he was more skeptical than he acted about our position in Vietnam. That he didn't unfortunately follow more his gut rather than reports of coming success. I mean, what he should've done is take the advice of Malcolm X about you don't beat people running around in sneakers in the jungle with the way we would fight a war. Now, I think that,

remember, which I don't particularly remember all my questions that I asked there, I'm sure it was true because Martin had Levison and other advisors who were strongly on behalf of an anti-Vietnam position and did not see this as in any way denigrating his, that is Martin Luther King's support of the domestic program. I think there can be an argument, I don't think it's a very good one, that you can't do this at the same time.

01:14:32:00 I do think that, again, as it was played that it gave far too much attention, and I think Martin was sucked into it a little bit, to his position and the amount of time spent covering that as opposed to what I'm sure would've been his good questions, answers on the same kinds of issues that we faced, bad education, bad economic opportunity, bad health opportunities, if the questions had been asked. So, I think it was there, but I really do think that the military leadership, having met Westmoreland later when I was Secretary of the Army, and he was a blockhead, a pure blockhead. McNamara I met, but I didn't know that well, but he was a different kind of blockhead, an all knowing type. And I think, again, it is to the discredit of Johnson that he did not follow or follow more- I know there was Clark Clifford or others who were giving him advice. I was not of the giving of advice or asked for advice during that time.

01:15:41:00 TREY ELLIS:
But when you heard the Riverside speech did you have a feeling right then that that was going to negatively impact the work you were trying to do?

01:15:49:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
No, I don't remember, you know, the one event during that. I do think that it seemed to me that what of the work I was trying to do, that it affected it, would dramatically affect it because of where the attention was going to be spent. That is different than don't spend any time doing this. I think- I don't think there was a proper way, but maybe if it had been a little less attention to that there would've been more done about the other. But there was one thing that really affected all of this that we aren't mentioning. Johnson knew, and I know this firsthand from him, that when you lose

in the Congress for the first time, a big one, it's downhill ever since. He lost after I think it was less than two years, something related to the District of Colombia. And what he knew as a skilled legislator that he was, that this was downhill ever since. So, getting the kinds of concessions and progressive legislations that I would call progressive from the Congress was going to be a hard road to home, and indeed it was ever since that. And it doesn't- you don't then all of a sudden have an upturn. There was nothing that would turn it otherwise. So, I think some of the downward spiral had to do with Vietnam, but more of it had to do with he had now lost, and he would be the first to say that.

01:17:28:00 TREY ELLIS:
Right. And the relationship, you've talked a little about the relationship between them, the strife, the coming of that. I don't know if you've heard some of the recordings you can actually hear from the LBJ, online, you can go to the LBJ library and listen to the recordings. But did you have a feeling that the civil rights movement, that some- that sort of this momentum of it was going to be usurped by this antiwar movement?

01:17:54:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
I don't, I don't think so. I think at the time I was consumed with doing whatever I had to do, either with- 'cause when I was at the White House, I had- took responsibilities for getting blacks in particular, but other minorities into jobs. When I was at the EOC, I was running an agency that when I got there was two hundred and forty-seven people. When I left there, got fired from there, it was seven hundred people in less than two years. And setting up offices and so forth. So maybe I should've spent more time cogitating and thinking about what these trends were, but I did have kind of other things to do and tried to do them. I did, I'm sure, worry about what effect this was going to have. I couldn't come to an absolute position certainly, that would be anti-Martin on "How could this man do this?" Sort of the Roy Wilkins position. I think that was wrong. I think in a sense some of the leadership, and maybe

they did, but it was misinterpreted, should have talked about what they wanted to be considered and not talked negatively about how this is stopping it. You can walk and chew gum, and I think that's possible. But I do think if you really look at legislation, and a lot of this depended on legislation, and appropriations and authorizations, to get that you have to be able to win on the Hill. And I do remember Johnson saying specifically to me and *[unclear]* that, you know, once you lose, that's it, you know. And it was something related to that, I forget what it was, you know, and it was downhill ever since.

01:19:46:00 TREY ELLIS:
I'm just going to pivot to the FBI and COINTELPRO, is there any sense that you, like, was there gossip, was there feeling, was it a surprise to you later how aggressive Hoover was against these black organizations and sort of…?

01:20:03:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
Not a bit. My father for some reason, who was not in politics, had this extraordinarily negative opinion of Hoover. And I think it was just generally known in black communities that this was the enemy, and he was indeed, indeed the enemy. His stuff, you know, the personal stuff was awful and... But he used that, not as much but he used that on white politicians the way he did on King. But the extent to which at least that I've read that he did on King was horrifyingly offensive. Which he is just a horrible human being with an extraordinary amount of power, which he chose to exercise in that fashion. And I remember one incident when I ran the White House Conference to Fulfill These Rights, everybody who was coming had to have a, not a full feel, but a "okay" by the FBI. And since I was in charge, I remember Marvin Watson coming to me and telling me that Bayard Rustin who was gay and known to be gay and had been arrested for it and convicted, really shouldn't be on the list. And I remember saying to Marvin, "If you don't have him you won't have a conference because you've got Martin Luther King and A. Phillip Randolph here." So, they had him.

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01:21:30:00 But, you know, that kind of stuff, if it isn't run by somebody like me who knew the underlying facts were, God knows how many people didn't make it through his sieve of whatever it might be. And there is a long tradition of no black agents, certainly. And to me there was nothing to recommend him. I was once on a panel, the Webster Commission that looked into the man Hanssen, who was a spy, and we were listening to what the FBI had done right and wrong in uncovering this guy. And they asked for our recommendations at the end of the report, and mine never made it. I said they should take that son of a bitch's name off the building, J. Edgar Hoover, because he was the antithesis of what you wanted in a democracy. You know, he used information improperly, he was singularly arrogant about his position. Antidemocratic in every thought that he had.

01:22:39:00 TREY ELLIS:
Thinking about the legacy that some people- even going to the King holiday, were trying to use the legacy of those tapes and COINTELPRO's accounts against him to denigrate the man, King the man and the movement. You have any thoughts on that?

01:22:57:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
Well, I mean, the stuff I've read about what they did with material against him was horrifying and was something that we should not do in a democracy. And yet, they did it, and you have people sitting in a closed room with no light on them and no projection of what they're doing making decisions as to what's good information and bad information. Making it about those decisions, what it is they're going to show the public or show the family of the people involved. And there's nothing to recommend it, is there something that could be done about it, yes, but nobody dare do it. Now, it was said, probably true, that he had stuff on Johnson and Kennedy and, you know, many of their *[unclear]*, sort of shortened up their punches because of what they had, it was the truth of the politicians as well. And the fact that he would use it that way, they knew that, because they saw information that was given to them about people not themselves, and it was similar to the kinds of activities they had engaged in. So,

Hoover just was one of these people with an immense amount of power who abused that power, and underlying it had this feeling of superiority to people of color.

01:24:27:00 TREY ELLIS:
I was going to shift to the Poor People's Campaign and how that compared with Johnson's, you know, War on Poverty and the same kind of clash. If you could just talk the first little bit about that, that was there friction?

01:24:43:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
I think you're better looking at it in separate ways. One, let's look at the legislation, the setting it up, which he accomplished and got a bureaucracy involved in the process. And some of the programs still exist today. I think the denigration of it came with the Reagans of the world and welfare queens and creating straw men and women that were really fictitious. It is specifically when he came at his- Martin came to Washington and was, you know, running his show on the mall. It was not a very well-done show, I didn't… and Abernathy got arrested and the stories were he would get a lot of ice cream desserts in jail, and it was, in other words, a lot of fun was made of his effort. And there was very little attention given to it in terms of support. So, he didn't, it's not as if he had a, you know, he didn't have a quarter million people standing with him. Things were sparse and the message wasn't coming through very well.

01:26:07:00 Now, whether that was his fault, it might well have been. He may have been tired or... The thing about him is that, I hadn't thought about 'til you asked the question is, he's doing so many things. I mean, he does not have what all of us have today, a phone that interacts with the universe and faxes and internet. So, he's going to make a speech here and then he's going to get off and make another one there, and then he's going to have to meet in such and such a place. And there isn't much time to think, nor is there much time to evaluate how your program's doing. And the program, at least from my view of it, was not doing well at all in Washington. And I don't know that they were there very long, but it just wasn't. I imagine that the people

who were then his leadership were obviously energetic about it and happy about it and glad to see the message, and the message was fine, but it isn't about the message. It's about whether you get a reaction to the message, and he certainly didn't get it to that one.

01:27:15:00 TREY ELLIS:
Through all the- were you ever frustrated by King's… actions in the…?

01:27:21:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
No. No, no, no, no, no. I might've- did disagree with some of the things, but he to me, he never frustrated me. This was a man who took his position, stated his positions, he was not an in-your-face kind of person. This is not John McCain in blackface, you know, this is not somebody who just comes at you and thinks you're the wrongheaded or whatever. I think again, I certainly did disagree with him on things, but as a person, he was, he was a nice man. This was a very- nice to be with, knew how to laugh. And just- even in the way he is presented publicly, think people discovered only after his death that many of his positions were more "radical," quote, unquote, than they actually knew. I mean, those of us who had some conversations knew about it, this was not an apologist for anybody. Again, you know, whether you... I'm not of the nonviolent school, I am not of a school except Cliff school, whatever it happened to be at the time. But, you know, he didn't say, "You got to be with me or you're against me." That was not the way he did things.

01:28:51:00 TREY ELLIS:
Can you talk a little bit more about how he's been misunderstood and how he was more radical than- especially the sort of sanitized version of him from the holiday?

01:29:00:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
Well, if you think about the risks that he took to state his positions. If you think about even the failures, what- the Poor People's drive was obviously to see to it that people

had opportunities that really were forgotten in this society by ninety-eight percent of the politicians. These were the people who don't even vote, don't have the money to do that, but he stood with them. It was considered radical to be against the war, but that was a position, to me that wasn't the definition of his radicalness, if you will. To me it was how he stood on race, and he was unflinching. He didn't say- there ain't no Booker T in him, to be street about it. This is a man, you know, not Douglass either. Nobody is anybody but Martin if it's Martin. But you didn't get a sense that "Well, what you ought to do is get trained to work out in the tobacco fields because you won't have the other opportunities. You're better off taking the little that they give you."

01:30:16:00 I don't think he wanted us to take anything other than all that we deserve, and I think I've never seen anything that he wrote or heard anything that he said that was less than that. He was gentle about it, he worked the lord into it a fair amount, but he didn't say "Now, if things don't work out this way, do a little bit of what the devil tells you to do," or "accept your place in society." Never that, and that's what radicalism in the best sense is about, that you're willing to take on the society, that you're willing to use the power that you've made. I think that in many ways as I say that, that radicalism is using the power that you have, which he accumulated a lot of, but not for his material self. But use that to help transform the society for the better. And he did use it to transform the society for the better.

01:31:18:00 TREY ELLIS:
Finally, I was just going to talk about the… King's, the legacy and the... You know, you talked about the assassination already and the week after the rioting. What about its impact on the sixty-eight election and the country as a whole from the aftermath of how we got here today?

01:31:48:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
Well, the sixty-eight election, I remember at the very end of the election being on a piece of dirt near the monuments with I think ten other people trying to rouse

information and support for Hubert Humphrey. The election was a slow slide downhill for Humphrey, principally Humphrey's fault. People blame Johnson some and he deserves some, but Humphrey didn't stick to a position and people just as soon have you be for or against something, he tried to have it both ways. Tried to support his president, as vice presidents do, and also carve out a new more progressive position on being against the war. What happened after that was quite tragic in many ways because you had the Lilliputians come in, they were the littlest of people in mind and matter, and they came in and they transformed the government with their approach to things, and they had it continue and it continues to a certain extent to this day, and it's become sort of , I don't know, sort of a march that says, "Let us increase the military spending and therefore we can forget everything else because my responsibility is to keep you strong."

01:33:20:00 Well, if you look at the military spending today, and it's been this way for some time, our spending is as much as the next ten nations combined. What we don't do is an appropriate evaluation of what the military threat is and then assess the kinds of assets that ought to be put to it. But by revving up people's enthusiasm for their country, by singing loud hosannas, they somehow have managed to take the attention away from lack of healthcare, lack of job opportunities, lack of educational opportunities. Those are the things that really have suffered, and it's been a continuum, principally by the republicans, but there's been sort of either a give up stage for Democrats or a stage where Democrats don't call it for what it is, just a way to appeal to human beings, the least common denominator.

01:34:24:00 Because if you think about today how many soldiers and sailors we have in the Koreas, probably half- probably fifty thousand all there. What in the world is that all about? Why have they been in the certain parts of Germany in the numbers that they've been in? You know, it's not like the Second World War, that people are coming through the Fulda Gap. We're fighting or preparing for what sometimes was fifty years ago rather than what we have now, which is again, delineate threats, it's easier to say terrorism and different things, but what people should be paid to do at the Pentagon is evaluate what it is that threatens us and then put money to that. But

by saying "We're going to make you safe, we're going to make you safer than those other people did," that they somehow manage to divert significant resources to that and also make people think unaware of what the real problems are, that they're okay.

01:35:32:00 Another great sin is the great sin of what I do too, that's watching television. You know, we are happily entertained seven hours a day, and people can sit there and they can watch their HBO and Netflix and all the networks, and, you know, we can see anything from smut to god and get it anytime of day anyplace, and we can sit there and eat our nachos and do whatever else we want to do. And somehow, we made it through that day and we go back the next day to a job that's less fulfilling than it should be. So, something that keeps our mind off what our society hasn't been providing us, has been, I think, a great, great inhibitor of the progress that this country of riches should have. And until we, you know, stop playing with ourselves, we ain't going to get there.

01:36:28:00 TREY ELLIS:
To that point, what, you know, you've talked a little bit about Trump and the present political climate. What do you say, like, if people are watching this documentary about the more radical King fighting for poor people, all these kind of fights, what do you say to your grandchildren today? What fight should they be doing and what kind of lessons would they learn from the past?

01:37:00:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
The most important I think is being realistic. If they want to go to a protest, be careful because as black males they might get their heads knocked when they shouldn't, so that's the first practical advice they get from a grandfather. After that, it is not to be too positive in your outlook or too negative in it. And, you know, I don't have to worry about their moral foundation, it's there. They'll be nice to people. That isn't a concern. But don't get... You know, there are a lot of people who are very comfortable in, particularly in this New York area, you know, they got the wealth and the this, and they say "Well, gosh, this is terrible," but in the meantime they've got

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the Hamptons and wherever else they go. Those things are fine in their life, and then they go to ask you, the impoverished, what it is that we should be doing. Well, I don't know what you should be doing. Why don't you give it some thought yourself?

01:38:00:00 Many people used to talk to me about race and have over the years, I said "You know, you're white, you think, went to school. Use some of your good sense to figure out the things that ought to be done. What is it that you ought to be doing? What is it that you should tell those in your sphere of influence to undertake? Don't expect me because I woke up this morning as a black man to somehow solve the race problem for you. If you want some ideas, fine. I'm happy to discuss it with you. But I'm not happy to educate you. I think you should engage in your own education. And we don't have much of that now. We have a hell of a lot of folks who want you to tell them about the problem, want to wring their hands about the problem, want to see if they can get away with giving five hundred dollars to the Urban League, as their success quotient on behalf of changing opportunities.

01:39:02:00 Let's go back, as I continually do, to educational opportunities. Let's go back to work opportunities. Let's go back to being helpful to one another. Let's go back to understanding when you have a bias, what the hell it is you need to do about that bias. And it's “you” need to do, not me. I can't change your outlook that gives you an advantage. Understand that it is an advantage and try and equalize it if you can. If I'm looking for a job and I'm coming in from the suburbs and I've got my car and it's all white and there's a job posted, but I saw it, I'm going to tell the other three people in the car about it. But you coming from another place don't get a chance to see it. So, you really don't have the same opportunity. Make it so. Have a real understanding of a word called affirmative action. None of them do.

01:39:56:00 Affirmative action doesn't mean anything extra, it means the same, that you get the same kind of opportunity. The executive orders eleven-two-four-six and three-seven-five for women, those create the same opportunities, the same opportunities. But again, perverted by the phony scholarship, an awful lot of phony scholarship. Perverted by people who want to say, "That's giving them something extra and now they actually have more than we do. "Perverted by, “Do they really get into college

in that great a number?" Perverted by all of those things helps slow stuff down. And that's generally what's happening now.

01:40:37:00 TREY ELLIS:
One last question, just if you happen to have any kind of personal story or memory of Doctor King, I don't know, having- eating with him at the, you know, the White House or anything that you haven't said before, something just personal, but not political, but just maybe that talks a little bit about the character.

01:40:55:00 CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:
Well, when I ran the White House Conference to Fulfill These Rights, we had a dinner for all the people and Thurgood was going to be speaking and Lyndon Johnson was going to be speaking. And Martin came up to me and asked for a favor. Said, "Could Coretta sing the national anthem?" So, Coretta sang the national anthem. But that's the kind of man he was, his wife was an opera singer and she sang quite effectively the national anthem. But again, he didn't say "Cliff, this is what I want. This is what I've done for you up here." That's not the way he was and never was that way.

01:41:47:00 END OF INTERVIEW