

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

JOSEPH CALIFANO INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

JOSEPH CALIFANO
Special Assistant to Lyndon Johnson
Interviewed by Trey Ellis
March 22, 2017
Total Running Time: 43 minutes

00:00:06:00 CREW:
Joseph Califano, take one, marker.

00:00:09:00 TREY ELLIS:
So, you talk about this partnership between LBJ and Doctor King. Can you talk a little bit about that, that, you know, they really- their futures were entwined in this?

00:00:21:00 JOSEPH CALIFANO:
Well, I think they- they were- first of all, they were both committed to the same cause. Civil rights was the centerpiece along with poverty of Johnson's administration and civil rights was Doctor King's life. Secondly, they really knew what each other's job was. They had a real sense of that. People think of Doctor King as being a minister, a man of God, but he was also a very good politician in the sense that he understood politics. I think there are lots of examples of that. In nineteen sixty-four when Johnson went after the Civil Right Act, his own staff said, you know, "Don't do it, it- we're coming up to an election." And Johnson said, "What the hell's the presidency for?" And he worked with all the civil rights leaders including Doctor King. What Johnson knew was that he had to pass the sixty-four Civil Rights Act before the Great Society programs came in because those- the- the- because the Civil Rights Act required that anyone who received federal funds could not discriminate and had- had he not passed the civil rights act first in nineteen sixty-four before he went ahead with Medicare and elementary and secondary education,

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

JOSEPH CALIFANO INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

higher education, those bills would've all been bogged down on the issue of whether or not we're going to have to end discrimination. What are we going to have to do about what was then called the "negroes?" So, he got that done. I think Doctor King was one of the few people that understood that.

00:02:21:00 When we get to nineteen sixty-five, Johnson's been re-elected in a lands- a la- I should- Johnson's been elected in a landslide in sixty-five. Johnson's been elected in a landslide in 'sixty-four. Voting rights was high on his agenda. Indeed, the day after the election, he got a call from Everett Dirksen, the Republican minority leader who said, "I have to have an operation Mr. President, I- I don't want to have it if you're going to have a meeting of the leadership." And Johnson said, "Well, where are you having the operation, Everett?" And Everett said, "Well, I'm having it at Walter Reed." Johnson said, "Isn't that wonderful, you and I have all this medical care? We can do that for everybody over sixty-five." And Dirksen said, "Well, I don't know if I can do that." And then he said, "And you know, Everett, I'm coming up next year with a Voting Rights Act." Johnson said, "That's very important." And Dirksen said, "Well, I can't go with that." And Johnson said after a lot of conversation, he said, "Everett, you come with me on the Voting Rights Act, and a hundred years from now there'll only be two people from the state of Illinois anybody will ever remember: Abraham Lincoln and Everett Dirksen."

00:03:47:00 In December of sixty-five- sorry. In December of 'sixty-four, President Johnson met with Martin Luther King and Andrew Young, the civil rights leader from Georgia. And they talked about the Voting Rights Act. Neither of them knew anything about Selma, and then in January of sixty-five, in a long conversation that began with Doctor King saying, "You, know, we really- what about appointments? We really need to have some negroes in the top jobs." And Johnson said, "I understand that. I'm going to name Bob Weaver my Secretary of Housing and Urban Development." We didn't even have a department of Housing and Urban Development at that point. And they talked more about it and then Johnson said, "But of all the..." Then Doctor King said, "You know, Mr. President," as though he had to, "You know, Mr. President, in those southern states you lost, the five southern states, only forty percent of the registered negroes-" I'm sorry. "Only for- in the- you know Mr. Pre..."

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

JOSEPH CALIFANO INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

They were talking, John- Doctor King- in this phone conversation, Doctor King says to President Johnson, “You know, Mr. President, in the last election, just over when you lost those five southern states, less than forty percent of the negroes eligible to vote were registered.” As though he had to tell Johnson that, and Johnson said he knew that and then he said that the most important thing we can do is the Voting Rights Act. That’s even more important than the ’sixty-four Civil Rights Act. That can really change things. And that’s when he said to Doctor King, “You can help me.” He knew he couldn’t pass it on his own. He said, “You can find the worst place in the South where they make negroes recite the constitution, or do this or do that, they don’t do that for white voters and focus attention on it. Get the leaders down there, get it in the pulpits, get it on television, get it on the radio, so that a guy driving a tractor in the Mid-West will say, ‘It isn’t fair. It isn’t fair.’”

00:06:20:00 And Doctor King, ultimately, they chose Selma. He came back to the president in February and told him about it. Johnson said he hoped the march would be safe, as it turned out we all know it wasn’t. There were- it was terrible in the beginning. When that happened, Johnson called up George Wallace, angry segrega- segregationist, George Wallace, angry segregationist in Alabama, to the White House and Wallace ranted and raved and he said he couldn’t do anything about people voting, he didn’t have any control over that. And Johnson said that, “You had enough control to beat me in the election. And you know, George, it’s easier for someone to slip on bullshit than gravel and what you’re telling me is bullshit.” He let Wallace go out to the press because he knew Wallace would recite all that stuff and he did and that gave the lawyers a chance to go to court and get authority to enforce a- an injunction that required the Governor and the state to allow the march, gave Johnson the authority he needed to have the National Guard in Alabama federalized and put under his control and protect the marchers next time.

00:07:47:00 TREY ELLIS:
I’d like to pivot from- our documentary is really from sixty-five on so, like, just talk about the relationship- once- from the Riverside Chur- we have this great success of

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

JOSEPH CALIFANO INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

their partnership. If you could pivot from that to the call when- after the Riverside church speech and King coming against the war, the kind of strain in the relationship.

00:08:08:00 JOSEPH CALIFANO:

Oh, ok. When Doctor King came out against the war in Vietnam and at one point- and when he was after Riverside church he went to Harvard and he said he might run for president, then the very next day he didn't. And Johnson was worried. He wasn't worried about Doctor King and the war because he had much more trouble with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the war than he would with Doctor King. What he was worried about were two things. One, the FBI was constantly investigating King and constantly citing one or two of his associates who they said were communists. And he was afraid that that would build up- he was afraid that, that concern, the FBI would leak it and it would build up an enormous white backlash, because King coming out against the war, the soviets were on the other side of the war. That was his big concern. And so, he never really criticized King for what he did on the war. He wasn't happy about it, he's a human being.

00:09:26:00 They continued to deal. The issue they talked about was fair housing. Johnson had proposed fair housing in January of nineteen sixty-six. It precipitated more vitriolic mail than any other Great Society bill and he was under a lot of pressure from the civil rights leaders, including Doctor King to issue an executive order. And he said, you know, "An executive order anyone can change. We have to make this a national commitment." Incidentally, or actually, Doctor King understood that. Some of the other civil rights leaders did not understand that and they'd call me and say, "You know, you've got to get the president to do this, or you got to do that." But- and the conversation I had when I remember with Doctor King, he understood that and he hoped the president could get it done.

00:10:34:00 We got nowhere in sixty-six. We got nowhere in sixty-seven. In sixty-eight, we managed to get it out of the Senate committee, and that was March of sixty-eight. Johnson then pulled out of the race, Doctor King was assassinated. That night of King's assassination, Johnson told Hubert Humphrey who was at a Democratic fundraising dinner in Washington, shut the dinner down. We were having

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

JOSEPH CALIFANO INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

disturbances in Washington, Johnson knew there was going to be trouble all over the country, and he made a decision first to get the black leaders into the White House the next morning. He got them in with the congressional leadership. He had the National Cathedral do a prayer service, took them all over together to the prayer service, came back and he said to me, “You know, we’re going to get one thing out of this awful event. We’re going to get our Fair Housing bill. Give me a draft letter to the speaker,” John McCormick, Democrat in the House. I gave him a draft, he marked it all up, signed it, we sent it over. He sent a hand-written note to Jerry Ford, the minority leader, saying we have to do this.

00:12:12:00 He also, during that day and the next day, made a real- really conscious decision as the rioting started in the other cities, that he was going to do what he could to put Doctor King, you know, high on a pedestal above any of the black-white issues that were going on, any of the violence that was going on, so that no one could really attack him. The difficult personal issues that came up mostly concerned, at that point, should he go to Doctor King’s funeral, shouldn’t he go to Doctor King’s funeral? The FBI came in and said they have five or six- evidence or five or six attempts to assassinate him that would be made at the funeral. He sent Humphrey to the funeral.

00:13:11:00 To understand America and politics, before he made it clear that he wasn’t going to go and Humphrey would go, I get a call from Kendall who was the head of PepsiCo, a big Nixon supporter, saying it would be a great thing for the president to take Nixon, and Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy to the funeral. Of course, wouldn’t- wouldn’t have been done. They all went separately. The funeral was held, we got the bill out of the Senate and the question was, how do we get the bill passed in the house? The problem with the bill was, there were congressmen in all these districts, blacks were moving in. In Crown Heights in Brooklyn where I grew up was all Italians and Jews. Emanuel Celler was the Congressman, great Jewish congressman. He was chair of the House Judiciary committee. He didn’t want to have to report that bill out because he thought he’d lose the election. Johnson said, “We have to do this for King. We have to do this for the country.”

00:14:40:00 And when somebody would come in or when somebody would accuse him, “You’re doing this for Doctor King,” he said, “It would be a great tribute for Doctor King, but

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

JOSEPH CALIFANO INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

we're doing this for the country." He said, "We have to do it in a way where Emanuel Celler doesn't ever have to report it out, which means take the Senate bill, put it through the House Rules committee and right to the floor of the house, then Celler never has to do that." Celler didn't want to be the floor manager of the bill, so Johnson got Peter Rodino, who was a congressman from Newark, New Jersey to do it. Rodino did, the bill gets passed. Footnote to history, over the years Rodino's district became increasingly black in population and the democratic primaries he had a series of opponents who were black. He almost lost the election in nineteen sixty-eight because of what he did in nineteen sixty-eight, but eight, nine years later, he beat every opponent in the primary because what he did in nineteen. Rarely do you, do you get rewarded like that.

00:15:59:00 TREY ELLIS:

Can we pivot to the- the violent era of the Watts riots and the- and then later on the Newark and Detroit riots and dealing with King and the kind of turbulence?

00:16:14:00 JOSEPH CALIFANO:

Johnson's great fear was always that- you know, I call it "race against higher expectations," that what the oppressed accept as inevitable becomes intolerable when there's light at the end of the tunnel. And so, he said, "We got to pass it and we got to get it working and we got to do it faster, faster, faster." And he was always concerned that the people who we were trying to help, namely the African Americans would hurt themselves. To understand Watts, remember that Johnson, about three days before, flies out to Missouri to sign the Medicare bill, Medicare, Medicaid, give Harry Truman, the former president of the United States, the first Medicare card, enormous success. Comes back to Washington to sign the Voting Rights Act. Tells me, "Get a table for me to sign it on. I'm going to do it in the room that Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation and we'll put that table in my library. This is the most important piece of legislation I'll pass." Signs the Voting Rights Act, he's virtually carried out of the room on shoulders. Tells the black leaders, "Now, you got to move from protest to politics. Get out the vote, get people registered." We sent-

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

JOSEPH CALIFANO INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

- 00:18:06:00 we filed the lawsuits, we sent- I said, “We have to get.” He said, “Get some, get the monitors down there at the voting booths.” I call. “We have no monitors,” Nick Katzenbach says. Johnson says, “We have employees everywhere. We have postal employees, just call them monitors, get ‘em at the voting booths.” We get them there. He has a- a day in Washington, that night of the day in Washington, a young man, black, drives into a liquor store, smashes it, cops arrest him for drunk driving. His mother shouts at the cops, crowd, a little disturbance, not much. Johnson flies to the ranch, still on this enormous high and the next night, we start the massive rioting in Watts, thousands, people killed. Eventually the- we have to get the governor back from Europe. Pat Brown was not there and the Watts authorities start asking for help. I call the president, the only time in the three and a half years, four years that he didn’t return the call. I called him again, didn’t return the call. On the- finally, under a lot of pressure from the state, I said, “Okay, you can provide transportation to get National Guard troops from Los Angeles- from- you can provide transportation, you get National Guard troops from San Francisco down to Los Angeles to get supplies, teargas, what have you.
- 00:19:37:00 And I reported that to Jack Valenti who was with the president. The president during these two or three days was just driving around the ranch with Ladybird. He clearly was just... depressed. And then he calls me, wanted to make sure we kept it in the hands of the local authorities. The Mayor of Los Angeles, Sam Yorty was anti-Johnson bitterly. He didn’t want our troops- our troops weren’t there, and he said, “Get the civil rights leaders, call Doctor King, call ‘em, get them to speak out. Get them.” And Doctor King immediately- he was the first one to speak out. He went to Los Angeles. Eventually we get everything tamped down there. That was nineteen sixty-five. I had been in the White House three weeks.
- 00:20:38:00 In nineteen sixty-seven- and Johnson said- well, let me just finish that because it’s important. Johnson said, “We have to do something, we have to get programs there.” So, what we did was, we secretly, quietly prepared more programs. He also said, “Tell Pat Brown, the governor, to appoint John McCone,” the head of the CIA, a very conservative republican, “to chair a commission to look at the cause of the Watts riots,” because Yorty, the mayor, had been saying it’s the communists. And he knew

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

JOSEPH CALIFANO INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

that McCone would look at it honestly and it wouldn't be communists. And they did. And they helped lay the groundwork for us. We put together programs in health and education and jobs programs. First thing Johnson did was say, and publicly, "A man with a Molotov cocktail," which had been used in the Watts Riots, "is no different than a man with a white sheet over his face. They're both violent." And Doctor King was the prince of nonviolence. And he came right in and said something in support of that. A week later, Johnson announces the program for Watts.

00:22:10:00 TREY ELLIS:

I was- I was just going to ask- the idea that- how they catalyzed this conversation on- on northern poverty.

00:22:16:00 JOSEPH CALIFANO:

The northern conversation began over housing. Doctor King went into Chicago to protest segregation in housing and what was called "red lining." So, you- and you put in mortgages that you won't sell to a black. And King said to Johnson he'd never seen hatred like that in the South. And this was one of the discussions they had when they were talking about whether an executive order or law and Johnson had kept saying, and as I said, King understood. A law, it has to be a national commitment that can't be changed. And then Johnson made some statements about the fact that there was segregation everywhere and housing was a major issue, and schools- and he started using the term "de facto segregation," which meant that there wasn't a law, it was just in fact there was a white school, there was a black school, there was a white neighborhood, there was a black neighborhood, there were white floors in the hospital, there were black floors in the hospital. And Doctor King was pressing on that and Johnson started pressing on that.

00:23:38:00

And we had first the riots in Detroit which broke out. They were difficult because Governor Romney was going to run for president and it was all full of politics. Eventually we had to send troops into Detroit. Governor Romney didn't want to ask for them, finally we got him too. Quite different in Newark where the governor of

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

JOSEPH CALIFANO INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

the state of New Jersey was Hughes, was- said, “Mr. President, I don’t need anything from you. I will deal with Newark. You- this is our problem, we’ll deal with it.” And he did deal with it. But I think that both King and Johnson understood what came to be known as de facto segregation. But the fuse that let that- the spark that really started to get that attention was when Doctor King went to Chicago to protest the segregated housing. I must say personally, I- I- I will never forget how vitriolic the mail was on the housing issue, for whatever reason, when Johnson proposed the fair housing bill. And you know, we’d have- people can’t really understand today, you know, we got into an issue with Mrs. Murphy’s Boarding House and the picture that was painted was well, this little old Irish lady has a boarding house and some negro that’s eight feet tall, comes in and wants a room. We can’t force that on her. We took care of all of that, but it- it got- it really was a raw issue. And it was rawer than the voting issue.

00:25:31:00 And the other thing I think- one thing I would mention when, you know, the very day the Voting Rights Act was passed, Johnson talked to John Lewis, Walter Fauntroy, who was King’s- he was- he was a minister, a preacher in Washington, he was a big King supporter, and a couple of other young black activists, and he said, “Get people registered, get people registered.” And King understood that too, because if you look at his speeches after the Voting Rights Act was passed, even when they’re on other subjects, he always takes time to mention something about voting. And look at what voting has done and look at what it’s done. When Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in nineteen sixty-four, he said they’ll be returning the Republican party- returning the South over to the Republican party for your lifetime and mine. But now, the Democratic party is coming back, and why is it coming back? It’s coming back because of the Voting Rights Act.

00:26:50:00 TREY ELLIS:
Is there anything- you talked about the- as a personal relationship- that he- LBJ had a- President Johnson had a deeper relationship with, like, Whitney Young and some

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

JOSEPH CALIFANO INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

other leaders. Was there any kind of personal interactions that were not political you can remember with Doctor King?

00:27:08:00 JOSEPH CALIFANO:

No. I- I- I do remember- well, it wasn't with Martin Luther King. You know, the day- I'll tell you, the day King was assassinated, that night when I was calling the black leaders and asked them to come to Washington the next day, I called his father and said we'd send a plane to pick him up and bring him back. And he said he wasn't well and couldn't do it, couldn't do it. And I said, "Well, the president says, you know, he wanted me to tell you, God bless you." And he said, "Tell the president, God bless him, he needs God's blessing." Something like that, it was really incredible, really incredible. I think before that- yeah, you know, I- I tell you, I think- I think there was- there was a personal relationship. I don't- I don't remember jokes or anything like that, but, you know, just the fact that the conversation, and you can probably get it from the library- the first conversation when right after the election in 'sixty-four when I think King calls the president to congratulate him and they chat a little bit.

00:28:42:00

Andrew Young said that meeting in December of 'sixty-four was really a nice meeting. I mean, but you know, I think both of them, I think you have to remember something about both of them. If you listen to the Johnson tapes, there's almost no small talk. He's always trying to get somebody to do something or not do something or vote for something or help him with something and I think if you look at King, King was as consumed as President Johnson was on the issues he cared about, and he was always trying to get people to do something. You know, whether it was the demonstrations he'd go to, to help workers, whether it was trying to get legislation passed, and in that sense, I think you'll find their conversations are just- they're both- they're both so absorbed and determined and committed to change this country on this issue and they both saw it. Remember, it was an American issue. Johnson said it publicly in that voting rights speech, this is an American problem, this is not a negro problem. And I think Martin Luther King saw that too. I- why- you know, you remember in the- in the conver- one of the conversations about the Voting Rights

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

JOSEPH CALIFANO INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Act, he says to Doctor King, “Martin, don’t refer to this as the negro problem.” No, “Don’t refer to this as getting the negro vote. It’s getting the vote for everybody.” Okay? And that’s the way King talked about it after that. They knew each other, I mean, they- they really- they knew each other.

00:30:31:00 I’ll tell you the other thing, I think of all the ups and downs and the tragedies that occurred in those years and all the turmoil, I think I never saw Johnson more kind of depressed on an issue than he was after Watts when he had done so much and he said, you know, and what he was so worried about had happened, but I never saw him sadder, sadder about an event than he was at the assassination of King. It wasn’t just the concern about disturbances, which he knew would come. He cancelled a trip to the Far East on Vietnam, he did all kinds of things. But there was a genuine sadness and I think that’s part of what sparked his determination to make sure that King was going to be set aside, he was going to be special.

00:31:35:00 TREY ELLIS:
I was going to ask you about the relationship between, you know, with Hoover and- and sort of- obviously Hoover’s witch hunt.

00:31:43:00 JOSEPH CALIFANO:
Robert Kennedy started bugging Doctor King’s phones and whatever they did to listen in rooms largely because of a guy named Levison who was very left wing, was regarded as possibly a communist, and his influence on King, what would it do to King. Johnson was worried about that too, Johnson stopped the bugging in May of nineteen sixty-five, ended it. But they also picked up his sexual activity. And- but Johnson’s concern with Hoover was, one, he made that wonderful crack about Hoover. When somebody asked him why did you keep Hoover, and he said, “I’d rather have him inside the tent pissing out than outside the tent pissing in.” But he was concerned that Hoover would really damage King. Johnson wasn’t worried about the sexual stuff, I mean, gossip maybe, no, but he was worried that Hoover would somehow get King branded as a communist or a neo-communist or in line with the communists, which would really spark an unbelievable assault from

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

JOSEPH CALIFANO INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

conservatives in the country. That he- you know, and, you know, when I was in the Pentagon working for Secretary McNamara before I went to the White House, you know, Hoover would send these memos out to all the cabinet officers and McNamara would say to me, "Send it back." You know, I mean he was obsessed. But-

00:33:31:00 TREY ELLIS:
Tell us about the memos, what would the memos say?

00:33:33:00 JOSEPH CALIFANO:
Well, the memos would be all about King's life, I mean, the Levison, the communist, and the sexual activity. I mean, they were obviously designed to, you know, destroy this guy or certainly put plenty of dust all over him. They didn't succeed. And when King died, one of the reasons why Johnson did so many things that was utterly unrelated to the riots in the streets and the disturbances, one of the reasons he did so many things was he wanted to make sure that King would be set up so strongly and with such respect and so high that anything Hoover tried to do after his death wouldn't have any impact. And it hasn't, and we know Hoover didn't stop.

00:34:35:00 TREY ELLIS:
You talked about a little- you've talked about the riots already, but was there a sense, besides the betrayal of the riots that the- the radicalization of like, Stokely Carmichael and the black power movement, you know, that must have been some kind of impediment to his- to LBJ's plans.

00:34:38:00 JOSEPH CALIFANO:
00:00:00:00 Well, the- he- he always- he always said, "We've got to keep moving faster and we've got to keep moving faster because you give people hope and then they want something delivered. And these are people who have really been oppressed." He must've seen that in depth when he was in Texas, in Cotulla, Texas or his- his driver and his driver's wife who was his cook, Zephyr, he used to talk about- they'd have- they'd drive from Washington to the ranch in Texas and they couldn't find any place

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

JOSEPH CALIFANO INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

to eat. They weren't allowed at any lunch counters, they had to go to the bathroom on the side of the road. And that was always in him, I mean, he must have mentioned that fifty times. But I think that, and what was the other point you mentioned some-

00:35:37:00 TREY ELLIS:
So, from black power and the black power movement.

00:35:39:00 JOSEPH CALIFANO:
Oh, okay. The- the- he was very worried about that, and he was worried about the young black power guys. Stokely Carmichael was, you know, constantly stirring it up. When we set the meeting with the black leaders for the day after King's assassination, Floyd McKissick came to the- I had invited Floyd McKissick, McKissick came with two young radical activists and I told the guard not to- McKissick said, "If they didn't come into the meeting with him, he wouldn't come." I told the guard no, Johnson wouldn't have it. There was- I will say, this is not related to King but, you know, even in the worst- if you're in situations like that and even the worst situations, Johnson had some humor, even about Carmichael in Washington. But it was- it was- it made him sad. What worried him- you know, what worried him, remember, the Great Society was, you know, a couple of hundred bills, laws, we're not- you know, it was health, it was education, it was the environment, it was disabled kids, it was housing, it was all kinds of things, head start, and he was worried that, you know, this would affect those programs.

00:37:09:00 And he was very sensitive about it. You know, we- we couldn't- the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which provided federal funds for elementary schools and high schools in areas of high poverty, and Johnson said to Adam Clayton Powell, who was the chair of the House Education Committee, "Adam, you got to get out of this. Everybody's going to think it's a bill for blacks," and it's hard enough because the Catholics could block any bill that didn't provide support for Catholic schools and the evangelicals and secular Jews would oppose any bill that did. So, it was an almost impossible problem. And he got Powell to go on a trip and he got Hugh Carey, Congressman from Brooklyn who had in his district, a lot of Catholic schools,

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

JOSEPH CALIFANO INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

a big Jewish Synagogue, the only Muslim place in Brooklyn at that time in Clinton Hill, and Carey came up with the idea of leasing books and we got- we got the bill passed. We got the Catholics and the others to join. Powell came back and managed the bill on the floor. By that time, we had the votes, but that- that- you have to understand how deep those concerns were.

00:38:36:00 And most of our bills, even a bill like Head Start, which was really just directed at needy kids all over the country, the reason we had trouble getting the funds for Head Start was because people said, “Ugh, it’s a black bill.” And if you go and look at the pictures of Ladybird and Head Start programs, most of them are with white kids. I mean, that was intentional. That- that’s what we were dealing with. And the other- that was the other thing that Johnson saw in King, which was very important. You mentioned Stokely Carmichael and the others- there was a lot of dignity about King. You know, King had a lot of dignity. Whitney Young had a lot of respect in the business community, a couple of the labor leaders- you know, he wanted that. That was an enormous help.

00:39:33:00 And remember, this is a president that- and with- in his conversations with King when they talked about making appointments of “negroes,” the term then, to the higher positions, Johnson understood that. I mean, he put the first black on the Supreme Court, Thurgood Marshall, a bitter, angry hearing. He put the first black on the Federal Reserve Board, people don’t remember that, but it was Andrew Brimmer. And he put the first black in his cabinet, Bob Weaver. I didn’t know until I read the tapes that Johnson had decided on Robert Weaver to be- had told King in January of nineteen sixty-five that Bob Weaver would be the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. We didn’t have a department- Johnson tells King in January nineteen sixty-five, he’s going to name Bob Weaver the first black secretary in the Cabinet, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. We didn’t even have a department then.

00:40:43:00 I didn’t know, working like hell in the summer and the fall to get the department passed, and the president says to me, “I don’t know who we’re going to appoint.” And he had me call leaders all over, black leaders all around the country and asked them who they wanted, because most of them suggested Weaver because he knew a

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

JOSEPH CALIFANO INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

lot about housing. And what Johnson was really doing was saying, “Alright, then we can tell them we did what they wanted.” But he and Doctor King had decided in January and Doctor King never mentioned it. He understood that world, they understood each other, they trusted each other, you know? They trusted each other, which is why I think in good part Johnson wasn’t that disturbed about the speech on Vietnam, his worry about that speech was, as I said, would this give Hoover more information or would he start going back on this communist thing and that would hurt.

00:41:52:00 TREY ELLIS:

Just pivoting to today, the legacy today, obviously the, you know, the new Trump budget is, for example, is very different from all the things from the Great Society that you personally put through, do you see hope or-?

00:42:06:00 JOSEPH CALIFANO:

Oh, no, they’ll- I think they’ll survive. I think the Great Society will survive. How much money will be put into, it I don’t know. But isn’t- doesn’t this make it so clear? Let’s just take the Fair Housing Act, how important it was to get a law passed. That’s a permanent tribute. If that had been an executive order and it was still been on the books, Trump would’ve wiped it out in ten minutes. It would’ve been wiped out before then. I think those laws will survive. You know, they’ve become part of America. People forget- you know, I say- I always say, we’re living in Lyndon Johnson’s America. In some respects, you could say we’re living in Lyndon Johnson’s and Martin Luther King’s America, because the one thing they both knew, the one thing Lyndon Johnson and Martin Luther King knew was that he couldn’t have gotten the Voting Rights Act passed without King, that he couldn’t have gotten the Civil Rights of ’sixty-four passed without King, and we never would have fair housing.

00:43:16:00 Unfortunately, it was King’s life that gave the opportunity for Johnson to finally get it passed. But think about that, what a partnership. Can you imagine two guys saying, “Well, what did we do? We, we passed a law ending discrimination for anybody that

KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

JOSEPH CALIFANO INTERVIEW
KING IN THE WILDERNESS
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

uses federal funds, we passed a law to give everybody in this country the right to vote, especially including these negroes who have been denied it for so many years, and we passed a law saying you can live wherever you got enough money to buy a house.” Pretty good tribute for those two guys.

00:43:53:00 END OF INTERVIEW