



CLIFFORD ALEXANDER INTERVIEW
LIFE STORIES LEARNING
KING IN THE WILDERNESS COLLECTION

Clifford Alexander, Chairman, U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
June 14, 2017
Interviewed by: Trey Ellis
Total Running Time: 23 minutes and 11 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

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CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:

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.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Learning

King in The Wilderness Collection

Clifford Alexander

Adviser

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INTERVIEWER:

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

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CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:

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. 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.

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INTERVIEWER:

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?



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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.

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INTERVIEWER:

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?

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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. 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. 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. 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.



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INTERVIEWER:

Were you part of any of the discussions with the lead up to the Voting Rights Act? Can you talk about that? And then the mood after the victory?

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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? 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. 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.

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INTERVIEWER:

As long as we're talking about the Voting Rights Act, could you briefly explain sort of the broad parameters of what it did, what was so important about it?

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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. 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...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.

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INTERVIEWER:

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.

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CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:

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. 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, 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.



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. 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

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INTERVIEWER:

How did you navigate fitting in the White House sort of the rise of Black Power versus King and nonviolence?

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CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:

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. 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 from 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.

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INTERVIEWER:

Were you ever frustrated by King's... actions?

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CLIFFORD ALEXANDER:

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. 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.

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INTERVIEWER:

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?

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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 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? 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. 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. 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.

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