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Biographical Note

Booker was a journalist for the *Washington Post* (1952-1954); correspondent for *Jet* magazine; chief of the Washington Bureau for the Johnson Publishing Co. (1955-); and author of several books, including *Black Man's America* (1964). In this interview, Booker discusses African Americans' initial disappointment with and distrust of John F. Kennedy (JFK) because of JFK's lack of action on civil rights issues while in Congress and lack of interactions with black people; Booker's experiences traveling with and covering the Kennedy-for-President campaign in 1960; and JFK and Robert F. Kennedy's growing awareness about and action on civil rights issues during the presidency, among other issues.

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Simeon Booker

Table of Contents

Oral History Interview

with

Simeon Booker

April 24, 1967
Washington, D.C.

By John Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: Why don't we start by my asking you what contacts you had with Senator Kennedy [John F. Kennedy] or members of his staff before 1960, if any.

BOOKER: I had no contact with the Kennedys. I had covered Washington, I guess, about ten years, and the Kennedys just never crossed those areas that I covered, civil rights, human rights. I think the first time I actually met Senator Kennedy was at a meeting of the Capital Press Club. The Capital Press Club is a Negro press club in Washington. And he invited the members out to his house and he spoke to them. This was a few months before the Convention. And I remember during the meeting they were very critical of Senator Kennedy because he had voted against Part III, and at one point—the Negro who had helped arrange the meeting was Belford Lawson [Belford V. Lawson]—who tried to intervene to keep the reporters from criticizing Kennedy too much, and Kennedy told him, "No, I can speak for myself." And he did. I think there was a lot of feeling from the reporters as to the sincerity of Kennedy because at that time Hubert Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] was by far the most popular person in the civil rights field. But he had little money. And the Kennedys had used Belford Lawson—Belford was a lawyer in Washington—and his wife [Marjorie M. Lawson], and they'd gone over the country and lined up sorority-fraternal

people, middle class Negroes. And they had done a pretty fair job.

STEWART: Was this generally considered a strategic or a tactical mistake in your opinion?

BOOKER: Well, I think the Kennedys had doped out the Negro position thusly, as one of the Kennedys told me later: "A man has first got to become president before he can help Negroes, and Negroes can't help a man become president, unless it is voting for him at an election." And so their whole strategy was geared to keeping a certain image among the Negro, making statements here and there, but realizing the Negro wasn't part of the technical machinery of the primary, the Convention—but a few Negro delegates in the long run. And by taking too strong a view early, they could lose the entire South, the Midwest, the far West. I think intentionally he just stayed away from making any overall approach toward Negroes. His strategy was to just keep in with Negroes he considered powerful or who could help him. For instance, one of the things that really amazed me was that he discovered that Jones [J. Raymond Jones], the Negro political leader of New York, was backing Lyndon [Lyndon Baines Johnson]. A few days before the convention he went up to New York to talk to Powell [Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.] and Jones and try to get them to come out for him. Powell didn't. Powell backed Lyndon. I think that was the situation. Kennedy, even before he was nominated, hadn't met A. Philip Randolph. He had no close relationship with any Negro so-called civil rights leaders. That was one area he just bad no contact with.

STEWART: Do you recall whether your impressions were at all changed after this first meeting, or the impressions of other people that you talked to who were at that meeting?

BOOKER: No, I don't think.... I think we began to think, but I don't think it changed anything. I don't think—I just considered him another candidate. Then I know we had a primary in Wisconsin where actually, the majority of the Negro vote went to Humphrey, and both Humphrey and Kennedy sent up a representative to campaign for him in the Negro areas. It seems to me one of the people that Kennedy sent up was Buddy Young from the Baltimore Colts. In other words, they were using that same stereotypical appeal, taking Negro athletes or stage people, to try to appeal to Negroes. There wasn't any emphasis on civil rights, but just the same, you know, he would at least speak to, talk to Negroes.

STEWART: Although the situation was somewhat reversed in West Virginia where they did win, I think, 70 percent…

BOOKER: Well, the reason they won in West Virginia after they lost in

Wisconsin, the amount of money they spent in West Virginia to win the Negro vote—they almost just bought the Negro vote there because they really concentrated on the Negro vote. But than that was an illustration to Negroes which created some effects in the Negro community. Here is a man like Humphrey who has been in civil rights all his life from a state with few Negroes. Are you going to allow Kennedy to buy into the Negro vote? And I think that created quite a feeling in the Negro community.

[-3-]

STEWART: Other than his vote on the civil rights bill in 1957, were there any other specific things that people were interested in at that meeting, do you recall?

BOOKER: I don't recall. I think early 1960 it was just his attitude and the fact that he wasn't conversant in civil rights, in all of the sectional sides of it. He wasn't familiar. He had to be briefed constantly. And that's what Negroes judge in a candidate—how articulate he is, how many of the dimensional factors he can bring up. Kennedy wasn't in that. He was more of a guy who would come in with a set speech, give it, and the questions were always sort of vague, open ended, sort of. He never got into any discussions of things specific.

STEWART: Did you feel that the choice of the Democratic Party would make a substantial difference as far as the long range impact of the civil rights movement was concerned? Did you see that much of a difference between...

BOOKER: I did because one of the things, Nixon [Richard Milhous Nixon] had a very good chance to win the Negro vote. Four years before Nixon, during the campaign, carried the civil rights aspect of Eisenhower's [Dwight D. Eisenhower]. He had joined the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]; he had gone around and spoke to Negro groups; he'd gone to Africa. And he was very close to my publisher. In fact, my publisher was very much pro-Nixon. He appeared on a panel in New York, a televised panel, with the publisher of *Look*, with the publisher of *Life*, and my publisher with these. There was a lot of feeling in the Negro community, even though the Negro community is Democratic. Nixon had won a lot of respect in the Negro community. He had gone to

[-4-]

Africa, he had done a lot of things with the contract compliance committee, he had invited Negroes into Washington on many occasions. And he was very sensitive to the Negro. He had gotten pictures—any time he came to meetings, conferences, he would get pictures made of Negroes with him and send them back to their papers, autographed. So he was very strong.

Kennedy didn't have that sort of feeling. What happened during the campaign, Nixon just gave up on the Negro vote which made it the Negro had no other way to go.

STEWART: Aside from the election itself, did you feel that the next administration, whether it was Humphrey or Johnson or Kennedy, did you feel they could make a substantial difference as far as legislation, as far as executive programs were concerned?

BOOKER: Well, as a reporter I did. I think it would be more of a direction than that they would accomplish any instant victories.

STEWART: Did you have any other contacts before the Convention? Were any further attempts made to explain Kennedy's position to you before the Convention?

BOOKER: No, only through Belford Lawson, and Marjorie Lawson, when he would have.... For instance, I remember Kennedy brought in a group of Negro labor leaders from Detroit to his house. They set up this program to bring Negroes into Washington to meet Kennedy and talk to him. And it was only when a group would come that they would call me to see whether we'd cover it or we'd give them some publicity on it. But I had no contact at all with him. I'd never been to Kennedy's house, never met Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy] whatsoever. I didn't know any of them.

STEWART: At the Convention where did you spend most your time as a reporter?

BOOKER: Well, the busiest thing at those convention, they have committee hearings on civil rights beforehand. And with so few Negroes there, you make contact with each one of these Negroes to find how they're thinking or what they'll do because generally they're all in state delegations that are pledged to this or that candidate. Very rarely will one of them vote against.... Now though underneath he might say, "Well, this isn't my view." I thought the Convention's civil rights hearings, it seemed the Democratic party was coming through with a pretty good civil rights plank.

And then on that Sunday the NAACP sponsored this rally. That's the Sunday before the Convention opening. They had, I suppose, five thousand people in this thing. March, they had a big march. It was interesting to me to see the various candidates appear before this huge Negro audience. Some of them were booed. I remember Lyndon's man was really booed. I had to intervene to keep the people from booing him. And when Kennedy came on, he got a very cool reception. It wasn't anything like the reaction Humphrey got. It was sort of cool. After that hearing or mass meeting, you could begin to see that the Kennedy had control of the Convention, so there wasn't anything Negroes could do about that.

The biggest anecdote we have: Kennedy, prior to that time, had gotten rid of Belford Lawson, who had been his top Negro, recognized by the Negro community all over the country. He suddenly let Belford go, which became the number one item of gossip in the

Negro political world cause nobody could figure out how Belford, who had been with Kennedy for four years, suddenly, on the eve of the Convention, would be dismissed as his top Negro. And there had been many, many ideas or speculations as to why he left. One was because Belford had been on retainer for Hoffa [James Riddle Hoffa]. He had been a lawyer for Hoffa, and the Kennedys didn't want to get involved in it. But they brought in Frank Reeves [Frank D. Reeves], another Washington lawyer, which created kinds of problems in the Negro world because Lawson had made

[-6-]

the contacts for Kennedy in the middle class, the sorority-fraternity.

By putting Reeves in, who happened to be the Democratic committeeman at that time for Washington, he then was moving toward the political sides because Reeves had supported Humphrey. After Humphrey had given up, then Reeves went with Humphrey [Kennedy?]. In California, I remember Reeves took some Negroes to Kennedy's suite. While they were sitting there drinking, Kennedy's man came in and Reeves went to get the bags, and he said, "Well, we'll have to leave. They're getting ready to have a meeting." The Negroes there instantly realized Reeves was not on the inside of the Kennedys. He wouldn't have handled himself like he did. And it kind of threw everything into a sort of a turmoil there for a while.

STEWART: There was some real confusion over just who way his primary advisor.

BOOKER: Who was the closest, that's right. So then they began realizing Kennedy had no real close contacts with the Negro. And the when Kennedy named Lyndon to the vice president, that was just.... I was on the floor of the Convention near the Michigan group. I remember one of the UAW [United Auto Workers] Negroes who was a paid executives for the UAW jumped up and was raising all kind of hell. Somebody said to him, "Look, you sit down there. Reuther [Walter P. Reuther] will tell you what to do in the morning." Then you could see the Negro labor vote, why, there would be no protest from them. And the next morning after the Convention, Kennedy was so upset about the feeling of Negroes that he had Congressman Dawson [William L. Dawson] bring all the Negro delegates and had this early morning meeting where Kennedy in an off-the-record sort of thing promised that he would do this and that and the other thing.

[-7-]

STEWART: Did you have any discussions with Congressman Dawson, do you recall?

BOOKER: He doesn't talk. But in our world he's considered an ultraconservative sort of a….

STEWART: I know.

HOOKER: He has no.... They knew that he was very close with Lyndon, but it didn't do anything to really.... It almost caused—I remember many of the Negroes saying, "Well, we're going to sit on our hands. We're not going to campaign. We're just going to give up." And that's why they held this meeting because the Negroes were really ready to just walk out.

STEWART: Do you remember anything else as far as the Convention is concerned that was a particular surprise to you or particularly significant?

BOOKER: Well, the only thing is the first Convention—and I've been attending conventions; this was about the fifth or sixth—the mechanized, how everything was so controlled and just steamrolling. I remember when Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] came in. You know, even though he had a popular appeal and had people all outside and this, it just went right through him. It was just—and you could see that it was a very well arranged, well planned, well thought out campaign drive. And the Negro wasn't any part of it.

STEWART: Did you have any contact at the Convention with Kennedy's press setup, with Salinger [Pierre E.G. Salinger] or Hatcher [Andrew T. Hatcher] or any of those people?

BOOKER: Well, see, they weren't with Kennedy at that time. Let's see....

STEWART: Well, Salinger was. Maybe Hatcher wasn't.

BOOKER: Salinger was, but, you see, I didn't know Salinger. It was afterwards that they said, "Well, we've got to get a Negro to be able to communicate." And they had—the man who was supposed to be the top man was Louis Martin [Louis E. Martin] who had been a former Chicago publisher.

STEWART: Right.

BOOKER: But he had gone to Nigeria. So Pierre wanted Hatcher to be his assistant, and he brought on Hatcher. Louis then worked in the Democratic Committee writing releases. But they didn't have a link in the Negro community. At that time, they were very well down the path. They really had lost it. Kennedy was no name in the Negro community, and Lyndon wouldn't help him at all. So they had lost. And then when the Republicans elected Nixon and Lodge [Henry Cabot Lodge], then they were really in trouble.

STEWART: Lodge had a fairly good reputation.

BOOKER: Very close. Lodge was very well recognized in the Negro community.

He had appeal. Even in the Democratic areas where you have in the big cities these Democratic machines, Negroes still respected Lodge and they respected Nixon to a certain extent.

[-9-]

STEWART: You say you covered, you were with the Kennedy campaign for about four or five weeks, you traveled with them during the campaign.

BOOKER: Because of the closeness and because my publisher was closer to Nixon then he was to the Kennedys.... One reporter would cover the Kennedys and one would cover the Republicans. I started out with Kennedy. It was pretty—my first weeks with Kennedy were very, very dull. I had no news; there was no emphasis on Negroes here or there, and I really didn't have a story. I just thought it was a waste to cover. But after that first television debate, I think it was in Cleveland (it was in Chicago, one of those areas), the issues that they discussed on civil rights—I don't remember them now—I think it was the turning point. It was the turning point in the Negroes because Nixon didn't discuss—Kennedy did, he did step out. And even though he didn't say anything specific, it was the overlines, and it made an impression. I could begin to see a certain feeling shift, and I think that where I really saw... [Interruption]

The changing point that I saw with Kennedy, as far as the Negroes, he was in Indiana. We were going into Indianapolis. He'd gotten these reports that the conservatives were going to.... So they shifted the route of the parade so they would go through a Negro neighborhood. They had Negroes three deep all along there, and I think it did something to Kennedy, after that, to see the response he got from those Negroes. Now I saw definitely, after that, the campaign began to change a little. I then began to….

[-10-]

They had a routine where every so many days a reporter would fly on the Kennedy plane. So we were going into Chicago a few days later, and I was told, "Well, you fly on the Kennedy's plane from (whatever city we were in—we were in one city) to land in Chicago." I was a pool reporter for the combined press, which meant the pool men get off the plane first. As I came down the steps, you could just see the reaction of these whites, Mayor Daley [Richard J. Daley] and these guys, wondering what the hell I'm doing coming down this plane, see. I think he began to change and began to see a lot of things. And then he began to expand his campaign around the country, his campaign to reach the Negro, since it had been determined that Nixon wasn't going after the Negro vote.

So I worked I guess about three or four weeks with Kennedy. Then I had to shift back, or to Nixon. I worked with Nixon I guess three weeks. I just had to then tell my publisher I had to leave. I worked with him for three weeks, and there was no story, there was no interest. I remember when we got into Cincinnati, Lodge had this Negro woman from Chicago; they didn't even want us to be on the speakers' platform. So once we got in there, I told my publisher I wanted to go back to Kennedy's. So I went back to finish up the

campaign with Kennedy, and they sent another reporter to follow Nixon. So I stayed with Kennedy from then on.

And you could just see the build-up in Negro—when he would go into big cities, the advance men had been instructed to go in the Negro community and pick out the best areas for them to go through. In every city they started going through Negro communities. Another thing he did, when we'd go into all white sections, he would discuss civil rights, which he wasn't doing—he would have just discussed the things he thought the group would be interested in. But he began to discuss civil rights even in the Mohawk Valley in New York where there are very few Negroes; the Negro vote was nonexistent. Then he began to talk about it all the time.

[-11-]

STEWART: Were you and fellow reporters speculating as to why this change took place or who was responsible on the advisory side for it?

BOOKER: Well, there were many stories on speculation. They had a fellow, Harris Wofford [Harris L. Wofford, Jr.]; they had Frank Reeves involved; they had Sargent Shriver [R. Sargent Shriver, Jr.] involved; they had Hatcher involved; Pierre; they had quite a few people involved. Then another thing Kennedy did, he had a civil rights meeting in New York where he brought in all the Negroes from all over the country. And then they went back. They set up a civil rights coordinator in each state. Then they had a plane of Negro entertainers with Belafonte [Harry Belafonte] and this and that and the other. They then opened it to go after the maximum Negro vote.

STEWART: Did you feel that you were getting any kind of special treatment to try to get you really on their side as a reporter?

BOOKER: Well, I think in politics you always consider.... The problem they had with me is, I was the only Negro traveling in the press corps, and they were going in the South and in the North. It was always a problem. I mean, at that time you'd go in a hotel, they didn't know what would happen. So there was always an effort to have somebody tailing me or be near me so we would have no incidents because Adlai Stevenson, four years before, they took a Negro reporter to New Orleans. He got barred from somewhere, and it became a big row. They didn't want that at all. So I had that same treatment with both Kennedy and Nixon. I flew down to Florida with Nixon and, hell, I had to fly up with the family. When I found out what was going on, I just shifted seats from a fellow from California who wanted to sit up there. I just went back with the press. But they were always sensitive that the vote, something like that would…. So they didn't want anything to happen.

[-12-]

STEWART: Didn't they have a problem in Kansas City during the campaign, the

Kennedy campaign? There was a matter of hotels.

BOOKER: I don't remember. I stayed in Kansas City in a hotel though. The only hotel—three were two places, one place in Kentucky, and I don't remember the city. We went in. The police had it lined up so the reporters went all the way through the lobby, up to the elevators. They didn't stop anywhere. So I was saying, "Boy, there's enough police here." And the fellow said, "Well, you know why. You're the first Negro who even stayed in this hotel." I don't remember the city. But we went to Paducah—we were supposed to go to Paducah—we landed, and then the planes took off again. So Pierre said to me, "You guys you know why we're leaving?" I said, "No." He said, "That won't let you stay at the hotel." They called down to the Marriott and our whole, some three or four press planes and the other staff plane and Kennedy's plane all came back here and stayed at the Marriott. That was the first time a Negro ever stayed at the Marriott.

STEWART: Is that right?

BOOKER: That's right. Then we flew down the next day to Roanoke.

STEWART: Really? 1960?

BOOKER: That's right. The first time a Negro had ever stayed in the Marriott. So they had problems on the highway. It was a real problem.

STEWART: Did you do any traveling with anyone else? For example, Adam Clayton Powell went on an extensive speaking tour during the campaign which was….

BOOKER: Well, we ran into Adam in Pittsburgh. It seems to me there was some.... But his crowds were not—he didn't draw any huge crowds in Pittsburgh. They were very small crowds. I think Kennedy.... We met in Pittsburgh. But, really, I didn't think any momentum was coming too much from Adam. I don't think his crowds were up to anything. But I think it was Kennedy who was beginning to get the message across, and Nixon completely giving up the vote.

Nixon had a Negro who had been at the White House, E. Frederic Morrow. When I would go with Nixon, he would be my seat companion or he would be the only one that—he was just lost. He had no job, no function. And they would go in an area where there would be a lot of Negroes, Nixon would bring him up. You know, he would just walk off and just stand around there, and that's about all there was. You could see through it.

It wasn't like that with Kennedy. With Andy being there—and he traveled with them—they had, I would say, a cosmopolitan attitude. But the thing I remembered: we were going up to somewhere in New England, and Murray Kempton to me said, one time he said, "You know the tragedy of Kennedy, he's not close to any Negroes. He has no Negro

advisors." And it turned out he was right. The Kennedys, they had brought in, I would think, whites who were very sensitive to the race relations field, and they did more in masterminding the policies. And they did it in relationship to the white community—how much they could take, the best way to make penetration, the best impact. Because anything they did was far above anything Nixon did because Nixon didn't do anything.

[-14-]

STEWART: What about this whole incident of them, as you discuss in your book, trying to buy your column?

BOOKER: I think that was—I don't know whether it was them, but that was the Democratic Committee. Because *Jet* is the largest Negro publication on the weekly field and because it goes from coast to coast, they felt that they could get a message through faster and with less problems than using any other publications or series of publications. In the Democratic field.... One of the strange stereotypes is during election period the parties pay huge sums to the editors all across the country and then they write their own stuff. So they make an effort to pay us. One of their propositions was that they would take over my column, use my name, and everything would be.... Of course, my publisher just wouldn't go for anything like that. So they wound up with a similar column in the back of the book in the same, more or less, format, and they ran it where they put in little items about people across the country to show a side of Kennedy that wasn't getting through on daily press coverage.

STEWART: But it was run, of course, as an advertisement?

BOOKER: That's right. It was run as an ad. Before they weren't going to run it, they were just going to run it, you know, as a straight.... Of course, I objected to the publisher. "Now," I said, "Now, this isn't the way you want to do this. You would lose your independence and everything else." Since he was more pro-Nixon then he was pro-Kennedy, he didn't do it anyhow.

STEWART: Perhaps I should talk to Mr. Johnson [John H. Johnson] later. I'm sure he would some other...

BOOKER: He would. He could tell you something else. One of the things I remember that probably maybe fifty years later you talk about—when I was with him, Kennedy was coming into Chicago, he wanted to stop by our publishing firm. You know, the *Ebony*, with a circulation of over a million and.... But for some reason, after I had made the arrangements, with my managing editor and they

[-15-]

had set it up. Mr. J. wasn't in Chicago. He got out and he never.... And the it was a real embarrassing thing to have to explain. Actually they'd said one day, well, he'd be there,

come by, and they announced it in the papers. And then he went to Chicago and my boss just wasn't there. That was typical of the feeling in our community about the Kennedys.

STEWART: Did you have any contacts with Louis Martin during the campaign?

BOOKER: With who?

STEWART: Louis Martin.

BOOKER: No, you see, he was is Washington. He stayed in Washington. I was always with the press corps, the traveling groups. I had very little contact with any of the people who worked in Washington.

STEWART: I see. A very general question. Would you generally gives the same importance to the famous call to Mrs. King [Coretta Scott King] that most people have given it? I have heard, for whatever the reasons, that people say that for people to conclude that this call totally made the difference in the election is assume that the majority of Negro voters were pretty unsophisticated about things, that they would, you know, completely be swayed by such an emotional thing like that.

BOOKER: Well, I think what you have to realize is this was a very listless campaign for Negroes. Actually, when we talk about our vote, we're not talking about intellectual vote; we're talking about the worker vote. And there was nothing that would make a real impact. I mean, he'd go and he'd get a lot of attention here. But because of Nixon's attitude, of backing off completely, because of his own cautious view, when that happened, and with very shrewd releasing of it to the press and how it would be released so as not to offend the white majority, I think it did have a real impact.

But it wasn't the only thing because I think there were many other things that the Kennedys did—by servicing every week the Negro press. They had a big staff in Washington. They had civil rights coordinators in each state. They had rallies going all over, without the candidate being there, but which was gradually changing this indifference. Many of the people who announced they wouldn't support the candidate after he named Lyndon shifted over.

Of course, I thought the strangest thing was that Lyndon Johnson was not allowed to come North, any area. I was with the Kennedys in New York, and Lyndon had a press conference, and I asked Lyndon whether he was going to Harlem, you know. He looked at me. "Where are you going?" He just, oh, he almost blew his cork. But they kept him out of the North. He didn't go in these big cities because they just feared that he would just turn them over; the Negroes just would not accept Lyndon. They took Kennedy, but as far as Lyndon was concerned, they were not interested in him. And so the Kennedys just blocked him out, just kept him out and let him work the South.

STEWART: Well, vice versa. I think Kennedy really was on a trip to Florida and perhaps...

BOOKER: Texas. I went into Texas one time with him. He went into Texas. And the thing that I'll always remember about the campaign—we went into Oklahoma and they had this Frank Reeves, and we... [tape skips]

STEWART: ...about their understanding of the whole split in the civil rights movement. Do you think people in the administration saw the direction the whole thing was taking and felt that....

[-17-]

BOOKER: I think they did. I think the Kennedys, more than any other administration, brought in top people, trained people. But I think the Kennedys were the scholars and the brilliant people, and they brought it in from the university level down. And they were really keen fellows with great ideals. I think the disappointment was that they could never achieve what they actually wanted to do because of the personality problems, the human frailties, the racial feelings, even among Negroes, the differences between us. The fact is I had really no contact at all with the President. I'd go to press conferences, and every time I'd get up, he would—many times he'd just, you know, figure it would be a civil rights question and he'd go over this and that and the other.

STEWART: I meant during the campaign.

BOOKER: Just to say hello. It wasn't any—he didn't have any.... I interviewed him once, and outside of that I had no real contact. I would know what he would do. During the campaign, I think the emphasis was on the press daily, and we've been a weekly. He would be more interested in things and ideas to suit this wider market. And he divided them as I would imagine the Negro press, the Negro this, and just overall.

STEWART: Moving on then to the Kennedy Administration. You discuss in your book the attempts that, presumably, or at least you implied, that the Administration made to recruit many Negro leaders to, again presumably, break the back of the civil rights movement by taking so many people out of these organizations. Could you discuss some of the reasoning for this conclusion if that was a conclusion, of yours?

[-18-]

BOOKER: Well, I think Kennedy shifted. On the day before Inauguration Day I got a call that I had been named one of the eight to come over to

Kennedy's house in the morning and to go all the way through it. To me, as being a Negro, when I first came here, I couldn't even get a White House press pass. I had just been denied everything because.... I was sort of amazed. And so I went. I went with him all day. I saw great changes come over Kennedy in trying to do something. He had been committed to a certain point. The old prevailing way to deal with it would be to name one or two Negroes to key spots. Then you figure out what kind of program you can do to end, to get publicity on ending discrimination, and to develop into some kind of programs that would be useful. And the only people trained would be the people with a civil rights background.

So once the word got out around the country that he was interested in this and that and the other, people were interested in coming to Washington. And he brought in a lot of people. Because he was beginning to see a collapse of the civil rights movement, he then figured, well, you can take leadership and you can jockey and you can work around them because he'd seen, I think he very wisely had seen, that the civil rights leader had a limited ability to reach the Negro down here in the metropolitan areas. He went around them to keep that image with the little Negro. He didn't give them the same respect that you see when Lyndon became President. He invited each one to the White House and he worked through them to get. Kennedy went around them, you see. And he did it because, I think, many of the dissidents in civil rights, many of the ones who had had difficulties, who had reached the point of no return in civil rights, were looking like they were experts in the field. They knew the weaknesses and strengths and they used to sit and meet and work out ways to handle a different crisis that would come up. And the people he had around him were very clever, brilliant ducks.

STEWART: Who in particular would you….

BOOKER: Well, I thought the most unusual guy for the Kennedys was Louis Martin because Louis is, I would say, a millionaire. He's quiet, but he's a very wealthy man. His family, they've got a big insurance company in Georgia. He came in as a tiny fellow, writing press releases, and he came all the way up. So he developed for the first time a recruiting program where they could get top people, trained, to come into jobs. He then went systematically to departments to bring in specialists here, there, and the other. I thought the Carl Rowan [Carl T. Rowan] assignment was unusual. But, you see, Carl represents the middle class. I think Kennedy wanted to appeal to the lower group.

And I think Hatcher, by being on television every week with the President, did something with people who don't read or write, but they see this black face. It did something all the time. I mean, that message was getting through. And then Hatcher being at the White House when there were problems that would happen, he could instantly bring this to the attention of the President without going through a lot of, you know, machinery of government.

STEWART: You also mention in your book the effective, as you call it, G-2 service that the Kennedy Administration used to head off projected

plans of civil rights groups. You say there was a main nerve cell. Who was this main nerve cell?

BOOKER: Oh, I think they had... You see, in the Negro community, you'd say 80 percent of the people are Democratic. So their volume would be very strong in relation to civil rights groups. Then you take the NAACP has always been Democratic; Reverend King [Martin Luther King, Jr.] has been Democratic; A. Philip Randolph is in labor, he's Democratic. However, A. Philip Randolph didn't support Kennedy. You get a setup where you have to start off with Louis, who handles the political side. You bring in specialists like they did in social work, the Urban League people like Lester Granger—I mean Shelton Granger [Shelton B. Granger]—Lisle Carter [Lisle C. Carter], who was at HEW. Labor, you had George L-P. Weaver, a very brilliant fellow. He was

in a job in the field when it comps to labor, brilliant fellow, who was very close to Kennedy. Take Weaver [Robert C. Weaver], who they brought in, who was not only scholar, but he has the ability to know.... Then they brought in—I'm just trying to think whether Thurgood [Thurgood Marshall] came in before or after. But he came in. They had many of the second rung people they brought in for jobs. And they brought in trained people. To take guy like Brimmer [Andrew F. Brimmer] who was a Harvard Ph.D. They brought in keen fellows. Then they also brought in guys that had a political savvy. And they brought in all kinds of press people here.

STEWART: And you really felt that they did have these insights into these inside….

BOOKER: They did, they did, they did. I thought the Administration, they did a tremendous—even with the problems in the South. I remember when they had the Birmingham—they named this group to investigate Birmingham. One of them was a former football coach. But there was no real overwhelming protest from the Negro community. It had been blunted.

STEWART: Moving on to the freedom rides. You said before we started that you didn't speak to the Attorney General or anyone in the administration before you went. That's correct?

BOOKER: No, I didn't speak to—generally, when I'd go down, the only people that I ever speak to is the FBI. For the last ten years that I've been going to the South, I would always say where I'm going because a lot of times I've been caught in situations where…. And I did tell the FBI I was going in. Now whether the FBI told somebody that, I don't know.

STEWART: But you didn't have any...

BOOKER: I didn't tell anybody in the Administration. They had no idea I was down there until they saw the stories that I started writing.

STEWART: And then you did talk to the Attorney General from Birmingham?

BOOKER: He called me. He called me when I was in Birmingham just after the buses were burned, and these people went over to the Shuttlesworth house. He called me, and I said, "Look, this integrating is dangerous. These peoples lives are in danger. This is going to blow up into.... They have no protection at all down here." Then they started working on trying to get them out of there by bus. And that having failed, they then had to go to the airport. I don't know what else they did, but that was a hectic Sunday.

STEWART: Throughout the whole thing, looking back on it, is there anything specific that you would criticize the Administration for doing or not doing during that whole bus situation?

BOOKER: Well, I don't know. I think the Administration—certainly the only way they could have had a peaceful trip was to have the Army go all the way down. I think what they were trying to do was to hold down the Negro enthusiasm and determination. It seemed to me any time they would say don't do something, they just made five people where one had been before. I think a lot of times by their being so close to it and trying to mother it and keep it in a—they did more to aggravate the extreme elements who didn't want any kind of government involvement in it at all.

STEWART: Do you remember at all seeing Barry Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater] in New Orleans? This is something I hadn't realized until...

BOOKER: No, I didn't.

STEWART: When, I guess it was on the plane that went from Birmingham to New Orleans with Seigenthaler [John Seigenthaler] and…

BOOKER: He was on that plane?

STEWART: No. When they got off at the airport in New Orleans, Barry Goldwater was there. I guess he had just been in New Orleans.

BOOKER: I don't remember. Well, the reason I wouldn't remember, we got off the plane, we had been frightened for the whole day. I played poker

that whole time from the flight into New Orleans. When we got off, there were some crowds there and I think somebody pushed or swung at Seigenthaler there, going through the airport. Then I remember somebody was following us. It was sort of—I wasn't watching anybody. All I wanted to do was go somewhere and go to bed.

STEWART: Did you have any further contact…

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

STEWART: …with the Attorney General from New Orleans?

[-23-]

BOOKER: Once I got to New Orleans, I stayed there for the final meeting, and then I came back to Washington. Then the next day, or several days later, John Lewis [John R. Lewis], who later went to SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee]—but he had gone to Philadelphia to be interviewed for a job in India and so he had missed that—he then decided he was going to start a new group and go into Mississippi. And that started the second one, but I didn't cover the second one. Mine was just the first one.

STEWART: What further contact, then, did you have with the Attorney General over other situations?

BOOKER: Well, I had many contacts with the Attorney General because I was close to the Attorney. Every week or two weeks I would call up on stories. The thing I remember was when they had that Lincoln's [Abraham Lincoln] birthday reception at the White House, Sammy Davis [Sammy Davis, Jr.] and May Britt was due to come down, and we were supposed to take pictures. But as soon as they found out that May Britt was coming, they barred all photographers. They had the White House release the pictures. They didn't want any pictures of the inter racial couple at the White House. And I just thought, you know, I said, "They're still very sensitive about this racial issue, the integrated issue." And I suppose it was more for the South than anything else.

STEWART: Did you ever talk to Salinger or anyone about this?

[-24-]

BOOKER: No, they'd never talk to me because they'd always be afraid I would print it, you see. They never.... That was the thing, I guess one of the unfortunate parts, when in a business like this, I would have to learn mine secondhand because they wouldn't talk to me. They'd talk to another reporter, and he would tell me. Generally when issues came up involving Negroes, they would never say

anything to me why this or that. I'd always have to get it through a Negro close in the administration or another reporter.

STEWART: Did you attend many background briefings, either by the President or anyone else in the White House?

BOOKER: Well, the President invited me to the Palm Beach briefing. That's the first time I'd ever been to a presidential briefing. Bobby, I went over to his house several times for dinner with my wife; I went to a swimming pool party he had once. They were the only two. The others in the administration I never was invited to…. McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] in Defense, I had little or no relationship with. The other members of the Cabinet, it was just like any other administration. I mean, I had no close relationship. Orville Freeman [Orville L. Freeman], I had criticized him for the policy in the South and I had no.... He had called my publisher and this and that and the other. But I would say that the feelings of the Kennedys didn't go no far into his cabinet area. Dean Rusk, State Department, I never had any—I mean, relationships were very, very slim. It was just Kennedy and Bobby. And they were the only ones that I can think of.

STEWART: Did you ever have any articles that the President criticized or did he ever let you know personally?

BOOKER: They wouldn't let.... I would know through Hatcher or Pierre. They just regarded me as a critic anyhow. But it was a friendly way. I could go over to the White House, and they were saying, "Oh well, hell, he's going to criticize." But they were in, it really didn't make any difference. But the President,

he.... The thing that always helped me, *Ebony* is a positive magazine where you talk about progress and caution and *Jet* is a weekly so all the critical would be in *Jet*, you see, not *Ebony*. So you could balance it off, you know. I was always regarded as a critic.

The first question I asked at a press conference—we have a photographer who had been a White House photographer for years, and he's never been allowed to join the White House photographers. They carry the little pins and they can go anywhere in the White House without being stopped. I tried everywhere. I tried under Hagerty [James C. Hagerty] to say this isn't right, you know. He said, "Well, it's not a function of the White House." I said, "But it is a function. You accredit them." They refused to do anything. So I said, "Well, I'm going to ask the President about it." So I stood up, he was due to speak at the next Friday to this White House dinner, photographers dinner. And I asked him whether he thought an organization accredited to the White House should bar a man because of color. I thought every TV camera—everything just leveled off. And I read his answer. He had one sentance ending with period. Everything was just all fudged up. But as a result of that the photographer got in. They broke the barriers on it. And they also opened it up where you've got Negro security people at the White House for the first time. A lot of things happened as a result of this. But I think, looking back, they just figured, "Well, this Booker's going to do

what he wants to anyhow. The easiest way is to go around him or bend it over as long as he's fair." They always said I was fair. At least I didn't criticize and grab them by the jugular vein. It was always needling them more than anything else.

STEWART: Did you ever get an indication that the President was personally really upset about your column or did you….

[-26-]

BOOKER: Well, I don't figure it really made that much difference. I don't think we were big enough. It got to the place after a year or so that he knew Negroes were so in love with him, so to speak, that occasional criticism wouldn't hurt him. They would understand it. And he had developed an affection that I had never seen in any other public official of the United States—I've just never seen it. I've never seen a man that Negroes actually thought of as the Kennedys. I'm doing a survey right now of the Kennedys and Lyndon and Bobby, and it amazes me that people say their affection for JFK, they translate to Bobby and the family. They really did that. They are very much loved in the Negro community.

STEWART: On the other side of the coin, of course, by 1963 people in the South were beginning to talk about "the Kennedys" as the big enemy. They weren't even distinguishing between the President and the Attorney General.

BOOKER: That's right. Well, I think because of what he did, whites in many areas.... You do have that feeling in the South in a great degree. But, you see, you would expect it more or less because I think his pronouncements had a great impact. He lifted the hopes and aspirations of the Negroes even though there might not have been appropriations there. He did something to them. He reached them. Very few people, politicians, reach them. And he did it from a background of no interest in the field. That's what I understand sometimes about Humphrey. With all of his training and knowing of people he just never got it off the ground. They don't have the same feeling.

STEWART: What was your general tack or your general feel on the whole matter of legislation? How did you for example, continually criticize against the argument that no legislation could have been passed or that the votes just weren't there?

[-27-]

BOOKER: Well, I think as a reporter you keep certain areas of action going. I found the Kennedys were one, if you didn't keep pressure on them, they in turn would keep pressure on you by using different methods, inviting you to the house, sending you little gifts at Christmastime and this and that and the

other. But if you constantly kept things going or pointing out what they could do or suggesting this or recommending this or playing up what this organization is doing, it constantly kept them working on new things to do. They never began to float. They always were paddling. And that was one of the strategies I always used on the Kennedys. Every time everything would get complacent I would come out with something new—no judge, a Negro in the Cabinet, Supreme Court, no Negroes in this department. I always kept things going because more and more I think what happened—before we had twenty Negro reporters here who represented all the national papers, and over a period of time, it just got down to I was the only Negro reporter, chief of bureau here. Right now we're the only ones here with a national of all the Negro publications. We're the only Washington bureau. It was going that way then, so people were looking for us to be the translator for everything in Washington.

STEWART: What do you mean? A lot of them had left during these years or...

BOOKER: Well, that's right. They just dropped back. Our magazines went in the market on a national basis. All the national papers began to lose circulation, they gave up their Washington bureaus. They began to, I suppose, cut off and become local papers so we have no White House correspondents for the other Negro papers. NNPA [National Negro Press Association], which is a combination of Negro papers, had an office here and a personnel man. They gave up their office. So there was no more national Negro press. And to offset this—and the Kennedys were very smart—they hired many Negro reporters and put them in the information offices in agencies and—departments all over Washington sending out stuff just for the Negro press. Right now we've got almost fifty Negroes in information offices sending out material all over the country to Negro publications. But you don't have any

Negro reporters.

STEWART: Do you consider this a dangerous situation?

BOOKER: Very dangerous. Very dangerous. But the thing that saves us, many of us... [Interruption] ...the differences between people and organizations. Whereas they thought things would go this way, they'd suddenly discover this Negro doesn't like this Negro or they've got to do this or that, and the whole thing would go out the window. But I thought they had a keen insight into—not them particularly, but the people they brought around. I was just thinking, they had a fellow, Lee White [Lee C. White], and before him they had another expert in. They had this young fellow, Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin], who I considered a dream fellow, who had ideas. But what they failed to see is that the Negro community is very small intellectually, and when you deal with Negro intellectuals, you're not dealing with the people at the bottom. But I thought his plan for a poverty program was a beautiful idea, but they misjudged one thing. When you develop leadership in the bottom, you've got to respect leadership in the bottom.

You can't then do what has happened now where you've got people at the top who can't communicate with the bottom.

STEWART: But you feel they at least recognized…

BOOKER: I think they recognized it, and I think they went about trying to improve. I think they realized the enormity of it. I think they realized the real deep feelings of the Southerners. I think they understood the hatred against them in many ways; I think they had an idea of being Irish, being a minority themselves, they figured Negroes should do more to lift themselves, which is true. And they tried to set up things to do it, but the Negro just didn't react like they thought they should react.

[-29-]

A lot of times—I remember so many of the little sit-ins and things started during their time. They were baffled by it many times. They would say, "Why the hell do they want to go…. They ought to be trying to go to a university." But to the Negro, he's looking at the pride, the fact that he could go even though he didn't have any money to go. It wouldn't make much difference, but it would build pride to do something later.

Plus, they never understood the civil rights movement in the way that it has to be a separate entity. It can't ever be an appendage to government. If it's to remain virile and dynamic, it's got to have people who can compete in that field and not rely on being close to the President. Then they get lazy and this and that and the other. Those are the things that they began to see as they got more involved in it.

STEWART: Do you know anything more about the relationship between Congressman Dawson and the President than is already a matter of public knowledge? This is a….

BOOKER: Well, I….

STEWART: …somewhat of a mysterious area that a lot of people haven't been able to figure out.

BOOKER: The only thing I would say about Dawson—he's a very mysterious person who at one time was a powerful man, but he's lost his power to react the Negroes except holding that little area together. He has no more power nationally. I think what made Dawson stand out in the Kennedy line—he was the one man who kept Negroes together even though they opposed Lyndon. The Kennedys respected him for that, and they began to see that he did have value. And so his relation with them was more, I guess, honorary. I don't think he was a member of their team in any way, but he respected them, and they respected him because no other Negro could have done that.

[-30-]

STEWART: There was a story out at the beginning that he had been offered the job of Postmaster General and…

BOOKER: That wasn't true. You see that was the worst thing. That wasn't true. I knew that story very well, but that wasn't true. You see, there were many people in this political game—after Dawson held them together for the campaign and they won, there were many of the bright fellows who had no political way of pressuring anybody for jobs. And so it would be easy—at that time Dawson was under a lot of trouble for his links with the racketeers and this and that and the other. To focus Dawson out at that particular time, would just open up the Chicago papers to hammer him and knock him out. It seemed to me more of a plot in that direction because, first, Dawson is old, not in good health, didn't want in the Administration—he wouldn't even consider it if they gave him the job. He wouldn't even have been interested in it; but by doing it they opened him up in Chicago. [Interruption]

But I think there was another case, similar, where a Negro had been projected into a job. For instance, one is Ted Berry [Theodore M. Berry] who was a former vice mayor of Cincinnati. He had come out for the Kennedys, so they worked this arrangement where he'd go to Africa for a month and after he returned, he would give a report on Africa, which everybody knew was just.... Then he came up for employment, and he was up for Ambassador to the Netherlands. The Netherlands turned him down because they felt it would be embarrassing to them to have colonial possessions and have a Negro. Well, I broke that story on the Kennedys and, oh, they got so—they were furious. The papers picked it up, but nobody ever said that the Administration actually had offered, you know, made arrangements with the Netherlands to see whether he would be acceptable.

STEWART: Did you have anything to do with—you didn't break the story on Frank Reeves and the D.C. Commissioner's position, did you?

BOOKER: Well, I knew there were two Negroes the Kennedys said they would give jobs. Frank was to be a commissioner; that was already agreed. Marjorie Lawson would be a district judge. But the point is they wanted more than that. Marjorie came up for a register of the Treasury, for ambassadorship. They never got them. Finally Marjorie went over to Lyndon. But Frank, I don't know what went wrong, but they named him the first commissioner, they nominated him for the first. Well, the first commissioner would control the police and fire department. Of course, when they did that, that blew it. For a Negro to control the Washington Police Department, all the racial problems, the Southern domination, it just created too much. So Frank was always in. His rear was exposed. And, of course, being natural and being a human—he had a little banged up house here on the street—he suddenly bought a house that cost sixty or seventy thousand dollars, his law firm moved downtown. He went berserk, so to speak. The next thing you know, he admitted that he probably didn't pay his income tax; then he *was* in trouble. People would know that in front before that would happen. But you've got all these

other human factors involved. Plus his wife was pushing him, "Let's live now. We have prestige now in the administration." That all complicated the situation.

STEWART: It's unfortunate that they get into these situations, and the Administration really wasn't able to handle it as well as they probably could have.

[-32-]

BOOKER: And then, see, the Administration has so many different factions. When you consider how the Kennedys had to deal, you first had the NAIRO [National Association of Intergroup Relations Officials] element, and that was mostly a white grouping that were experts in municipal and they had a national organization. They wielded a lot of influence in this racial issue. Then you had the Jewish groups involved in that, and they have the technical know-how. However, they wouldn't have the following. Then you have the Negro groups, and the only way the Negro groups could claim any kind of recognition was that they were representing these other Negroes. And, so they had all of this going, all of this power struggle between all these different groupings in this field which really made it complicated.

STEWART: Were you at all involved, or did you ever write on the problems of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity? That finally broke in, oh, I guess in mid 1962 or late 1962, when John Feild [John G. Field] left, and Hobart Taylor came in and quite a few...

BOOKER: You see, that was the Nixon Committee.

STEWART: Right

BOOKER: Formerly the Nixon Committee. When the Kennedy, took it over, they—and that's a very long and complicated…. I knew John Feild from Toledo, Ohio, and I knew the power struggle behind him. I knew when he came up for a job before, he was blackballed for employment. I think that role was in Lyndon's area, and Lyndon brought in Hobart. Then Hobart and Feild got in this face to face confrontation, and Lyndon backed Hobart and so.... But the better people on that would be Marjorie Lawson….

[-33-]

STEWART: Yes, yes. Did the administration get involved at all in that 1962 Thanksgiving Day game and the riot and the report that came out after it?

BOOKER: I don't think so. The nearest, I think—after we had written the report, and McCarthy [Eugene J. McCarthy] wanted to add this extra page on

there, which he eventually did anyhow, without Committee approval, he said to me, "Well, now, I want to take this to President Eisenhower." And he shook the living hell out of me. I said to myself, I said, "Well, what do you mean taking it up to—this report has got to go to the Defense Department, to the...." The lawyer for the Committee was with the Defense Department. But I couldn't figure out why McCarthy wanted to take it to the President. So they stopped him from doing that. But it didn't become any issue for the Administration.

STEWART: There was no real involvement then. You went on a trip in '61 to the Ivory Coast, to the independence ceremony, didn't you?

BOOKER: Yes.

STEWART: With your publisher?

BOOKER: Bobby.

STEWART: And Bobby?

BOOKER: And Bobby, that's right.

STEWART: Do you remember anything unusual or outstanding about that trip that hasn't been written or discussed?

BOOKER: I don't think....It's not clear in my mind, but I didn't see anything of any political—just the regular puff sort of trip. Nothing would come to mind. I don't remember it too well. Bobby had an encounter with the Ambassador [R. Bordon Reams]. That was the only….

STEWART: The American…

BOOKER: Yes. He was, of course, very incompetent.

STEWART: That wasn't Wine [James W. Wine]? Wine hadn't gone there.

BOOKER: I don't know who it was.

STEWART: No, Wine went later I think.

BOOKER: I think Bobby was very distressed at the Ambassador, and I think the Ambassador left as a result, but I don't remember what the issues were.

STEWART: Did you go around the country much during that stay? Did you talk to many people there?

BOOKER: No. You see, my handicap was that I don't speak French. I couldn't communicate hardly at all in the Ivory Coast. I didn't have an interpreter so I really didn't make too much—I was in a foreign land completely.

[-35-]

STEWART: What about the whole effort that I think you discuss in your book by the Administration to make a connection between the civil rights movement in this country and African independence movements? Do you feel this was a conscious attempt to tone down the civil rights movement in this country?

BOOKER: No, I think the Kennedys were idealistic in certain ways. I started a chapter off about a meeting in the beginning of '63, the year of…

STEWART: Right.

BOOKER: And they met at the White House on Africa. But I think they were—I don't think the Kennedys at that time were particularly knowledgeable about race relations to think of diluting one side of it. I think what they wanted to do was expand it so they could do more for Africa and they thought that by developing Negro support, it would give them the necessary pressure to move into that field. But as it happened, I think it lost its purpose because it did appear to many others that it was a way of getting them interested in Africa and sort of giving them time here in the States. But I don't think there was any plot, although I mentioned in the book that there was an element because I think the feeling of the Negro community that it was a sort of railroading of....

But I think what the Kennedys wanted to do was expand the Negroes' interests in a lot of ways and help the U.S. image in Africa, Asia, and some of these other countries. It was just unfortunate that it was timed when it was, when they had the meeting, when it could have been on domestic affairs, it could have meant much more to Negroes. But at the same time it would have damn near infuriated the Southerners.

[-36-]

STEWART: Did you have any involvement in the March on Washington other than as a reporter?

BOOKER: Well, the only thing—when the first hints of the March came up, I could tell just from the idea, there was people in the Administration that the word had gone out, no March. There were efforts then to postpone it, to cancel it, to shift it into other projects. At one time, Roy Wilkins was opposed to the March, Whitney Young [Whitney M. Young, Jr.] was opposed to the March, and it

took King to come out for it strongly and to hold meetings, and then the others gradually got in line for it. But I think the Administration was scared stiff, because they just feared there would violence, there would be too many people here. They were just frightened by it. I think there was an effort made—that the Administration had no part of it, that they were doing nothing to encourage it, and they weren't participating. Even when they met with the President, I think he toned down any statements to the press because I just think he was afraid of it, that it might erupt into violence.

STEWART: Well, that's about all the questions I have. Is there anything else that you feel….

BOOKER: No, I don't know. It's been so long. The thing that I always remember is I was in Cleveland when the word flashed—I was at a NAIRO convention, covering a NAIRO convention and then had the next day a group of Negro Republicans who were meeting in Cleveland, a two day meeting, to begin developing plans on how they were going to throw Kennedy out of the presidency. Then the word flashed about his death. And I came back and I was a—the family had me one of the press to attend the funeral. But I was just almost amazed at the reaction of Negroes across the country at his death. It was just something that was unbelievable to me to see, when I went down to the Capitol, to see the people in line, Negroes coming from distant places in America just to walk by the body. You could than see what the legacy of the Kennedys was on the Negro, how he had really reached them.

STEWART: Have you ever tried to really analyze this relationship in depth, you know, from a human point of view, as to exactly what particular aspects of Kennedy's personality were so likeable as far as the Negro people were concerned?

BOOKER: Well, I think he came at a time when everything was beginning to go downhill, and he gave them a shot in the arm. And it wasn't through programs necessarily, but it was through a sense of freshness, a sense of new life, a hope, and he did it not only at our middle class, but he did it at the area of people in the ghettos, slums. He was a man, for instance, when Bobby…. And I remember he went up to New York to talk to this group of Negroes—it included James Baldwin, and lots of these fellows—just for a direct confrontation. He was like that. A skilled politician wouldn't have exposed himself like that. But Bobby did. He went up there, and they cussed him out, and they told him he didn't know what the hell it was all about. I think it made him say, "Well, we're not going in the right direction. There's some other things that we've got to explore and find." I think it was that sort of feeling.

Even though they say the Kennedys were pressed and they went one way, they also had the ability once they found disagreement, or once they found opposition, they always examined it. They always had people go in to see why they're thinking, why they think, make studies of them. And they kept ahead of a lot of things because they had a staff that was

competent and sensitive. They never got in a position—even though they didn't agree, they always knew what the other side was thinking and why. And they could break it down into components of power and then figure out in their estimate how it would be best to handle it.

[-38-]

They didn't do like Lyndon, just forget it, close your eyes to it. I think that was one quality that they had, that brought them as along the road as they come. It was a turbulent time that they handled in the presidency and to find that even during that time the fruits of their labor—the poverty program, all these new programs—they conceived during this period.

Before this time, they realized that the civil rights on legislation was over, that wasn't the issue. The issue was the poverty, to improve the standards of employment, health care: those were the major issues. It was during this time when this other was at its height that they weren't sitting back with these task forces working on all these other things which they got very little credit for. But when they were under all this pressure from these sit-ins and the freedom rides, these were these things that they were working on, which is an indication of how far ahead they were all the time.

STEWART: Okay, is there anything....

BOOKER: No. I think.... Unless you have something?

STEWART: No, no, that's it. Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-39-]

Simeon S. Booker Oral History Transcript
Name Index

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