

Harry Belafonte, Oral History Interview – 5/20/2005
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Biographical Note

Belafonte (1927-2023) singer, actor, and civil rights activist, discusses the development of his political awareness, his friendship and work with the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and others in the civil rights movement, and collaboration and conflict with John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy, among other issues.

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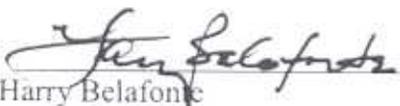
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Harry Belafonte

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Oral History Interview

with

Harry Belafonte

May 20, 2005

New York, New York

by Vicki Daitch

For the John F. Kennedy Library

DAITCH: I want to just set it up by saying that I'm Vicki Daitch, and I'm talking with Harry Belafonte. We're in New York at the Schomburg Library. Obviously we have questions about, I'm speaking for the Kennedy Library, and mostly, obviously, we have questions about your involvement with President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]. But before we get to that, can you just sort of describe for me how you became involved in politics in I guess the fifties, or before?

BELAFONTE: I'm always fascinated by that question. Because I don't think there are specific lines for many of us, no special day or period in which something started. I think in my circumstance, my parents were immigrants. They were here; they were, for a good part of their early life, illegal; they sought employment if and when and where opportunity presented itself. And there was always this constant struggle with the problems of immigration, the problems of being an immigrant community inside an outcast community. Because to be of the Caribbean or other parts of the world, living in the black community of Harlem meant that within this circle of black-ghetto existence it had its own social dynamic. We lived inside that. So we became aliens within aliens.

In the earliest memories I have, there was always some struggle against injustice or conflict with the law. My mother and many others in my family were always looking for ways to find relief. She was tenaciously committed to ending oppression against women and

slavery and color and race. And my earliest instructions came from a very feisty domestic worker who would not blur herself, blur her sense of purpose when it came to injustice. So from my earliest life, my earliest of memories, I can always remember her reading the newspapers or listening, in those days, to Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his "Fireside Chats," and talking back to the radio and agreeing with the President or not, as the case may be. And working for her Home Relief and WPA and federal welfare subsidy. Home Relief is what we called it then. And working to get food stamps, her rightful place in line, and looking for public health access.

In those years, especially with the rumblings of the Second World War because my parents came from a British colony -- Jamaica -- and when Hitler [Adolf Hitler] in Europe was aflame with the spread of fascism, England was under severe threat. And my mother said, "Well, if Germany seems to be moving with such impunity and such absence of major resistance, what will happen to England's colonies once...." It was a given that England would be easily conquered. So she started to do evaluations, and she started to look at who the Nazis were and what they did. And Italy and the invasion of Ethiopia. And her own commitment to Marcus Garvey, another fellow Jamaican here, who was born in the same district that she was. So she had a kind of personal pride in that this guy Marcus Garvey, who was this rebel with cause. And she would go to hear him speak every now and then. Haul her children off with her because there was no one to leave us with.

So from those earliest of exposures I always found myself somehow actively exposed or involved with listening to social challenge and social resistance to oppression. And I grew up with that. When life in its harsh reality forced me to do like thousands of us had done, I fell out of school very early, much to my mother's great anguish. I don't think anything anguished her as much as the fact that her children never finished high school. She saw that as the final cruel blow of poverty. And the last thing that she hoped for would be that her children would, through education, break the cycle of poverty and move on to better days. So when I didn't graduate because of a host of problems -- severe touches of dyslexia -- all of which was never identified in that tier. There were no scientific explanations for why those of us who apparently evidenced intelligence and capacity were just so much on the failing side of everything in academic formality and formal academic instruction. And leaving high school after the first term, in this semi-passionate place on the issues of oppression and what fascism meant and Hitler, my mother always instructing us that we had an investment in the defeat of Hitler. That as bad as things were in America, we needed to take a look at what the extremes of what we were experiencing in America could lead to. And nothing represented that more than Hitler. And that we should involve ourselves in the struggle against that reality.

So I volunteered for the Second World War and served in the United States Navy, I guess somewhat influenced by the fact that my father was a seaman and had himself served in the British Navy as a young boy, as the admiral's boy -- cabin boy. So I went into the United States Navy and served for almost two years. And then came out. And then I started to look for identity: Where do I go now? What do I do? Like hundreds of thousands of people who returned, without skill, without any real academic instruction, we were on the lower rung of the economic ladder. And when I lucked upon the idea of theater--right in this institution, the Schomburg. This building was not here. There's a library next door called the Schomburg.

DAITCH: No kidding!

BELAFONTE: And I came here. I was a janitor's assistant, and I was given two tickets as a gratuity to a small community theater that they had in the basement of the library. And I came to that library, and I think I must have been in my late – almost -- I think I was about 19 going on my early twenties. And I discovered this group of black folk in the basement of the Schomburg Library doing theater. And I was absolutely overwhelmed with that moment's experience, to see a play and people who seemed to have purpose and were talking of poetry or another writer. And I just absolutely -- I found my place in my life. I was just so intensely attracted to it. And then looking for what to do to get more deeply involved led me to a course of study at the New School of Social Research, although I was a high school dropout, I needed to have high school credentials to enter the program at the New School. But at my persistence, they gave me an entrance exam and accepted that I had a high IQ level. And they wanted me there as a young student of color and coming out of the United States Navy with resources.

So there I was in my very first moment in my formal entrance again into discipline and study. And my classmates were Marlon Brando and Walter Matthau and Rod Steiger and Tony Curtis and Bea Arthur, at the instruction of a great German force in theater. He was a refugee that had escaped from Nazism. He was part of the Maxwell Erhard Theater, which was considered the most *avant garde* theater in the world at that time in the thirties in Germany. And it was the home of Bertolt Brecht and all the Brechtian writers and students. And Erwin Piscator came to America, and he was very much sought-after as an instructor. And they gave him this special deal at the New School of Social Research, and he set up his.... It was the forerunner of the Actors' Studio and Lee Strasberg and all that stuff.

And here I was in this class, and it was a class that was filled with social theater, mostly about the analysis of great theater, what it meant, what social theater was about. So we were deeply immersed in the theater of Chekhov [Anton Chekhov] and the theater of George Bernard Shaw and the classics. And we read Shakespeare [William Shakespeare], who is the greatest social writer of all time. And even in this environment, much of my instruction was about how to use art and the power of art for social and human development and thinking. So art to me was always quite political in its application. That that was its principal purpose. And that, yes, entertainment was also a part of art. But art could entertain and instruct. So I saw no difference between entertainment and theater.

So in this background of childhood and then subsequent involvement in the Second World War and what motivated me. And then coming out and looking for where to go in America that was still quite racist, and our segregation laws were still quite extreme. As a matter of fact, they had even re-energized those laws because a lot of black men were experiencing violence at the behest of the Klu Klux Klan and others who said, "You've gone out and gotten this heady stuff about democracy and seeing European countries. Don't have any doubts about where you are. And we will exercise our rule over you, our power over you, by demonstrating brutalization of citizens." So lynchings went on and the Emmett Till, all those infamous days.

So this was the context. And I was very active in my youth here in this theater and in this library and the Harlem Center with intellectuals who.... As a matter of fact, in the

theater, we did a play by a great Irish playwright named Sean O'Casey. He was considered one of the best of the literary powers in the world. His play, *Juno and the Paycock*, is about the Irish rebellion against the British, and an Irish family, the Black and Tan Rebellion. And doing this play, a man by the name of Paul Robeson came to see us. And we were quite taken that this icon of our own community should come to our little humble offering. But he loved the play and stayed afterwards and talked to the actors. And that's when I first met him. And from that moment he became a mentor. I pursued him and watched him and studied his life, and went to his speeches and his concerts. And he had a huge influence on me. Then I met Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois and people in his own academic and intellectual circles, which was quite the elite of the day, Langston Hughes and others. So in this youthful period I was amongst these august thinkers and people who were driving forces and stimuli.

I involved myself in many campaigns and institutions that resisted segregation. In that context, we got involved in the election, we got involved with the labor movement. Labor leaders, a lot of labor unions had their headquarters here in New York. So New York and Harlem and our city and La Guardia [Fiorello H. La Guardia] and all the kinds of mayors and stuff here, it was a -- politics was fermented here. It was just everywhere you looked people were socially conscious. Eleanor Roosevelt [Eleanor R. Roosevelt] who came to our communities to talk and to lend her support to black leaders and our communities -- so all this stuff.

When I began to move into my own professional world through a series of obstructions and hurdles and things, I wound up in the world of singing and music and the musical arts, performing arts. And without much background to prepare me for that specific part of my performing, the craft of it. I approached music, especially my interest in American folk music, which has its own story, but in discovering Leadbelly [Huddie Ledbetter] and Woody Guthrie and that early young Pete Seeger and a whole world of folk art and folk music and what people with folk songs did, how impacting it was. When I heard Woody Guthrie's songs, I just went crazy with the canvas of possibility. And I went to the Library of Congress and looked up all the old black songs and workers' songs and songs of American workers and whatnot, and created this repertoire and started singing. And lo and behold, much to my delighted surprise, people began to take interest, began to show appreciation for what I did. And the even more amazing thing was the way in which I did it. I didn't have a banjo strung across my back. I wasn't with my sleeves rolled up and some migrant worker drifting across America following harvest time, pulling crops. I was a very urban New York black kid from the Caribbean. And not much world in labor and stuff like that. But I adopted the art of this social strata.

When I went to work in the Village Vanguard and the World of Jazz, the critical acclaim was almost instant. And the ascendancy was very swift on a comparative basis. And right away I got a contract with RCA, and my records began to do extremely well. Then Broadway took an interest, and I went on Broadway and in my first play was a Tony Award, and I got the award for best supporting performer in a musical.

DAITCH: And you were still then in your twenties.

BELAFONTE: Yes. Oh, yes, very early twenties. And then Hollywood knocked at the door, and here I was going off to do screen tests and whatnot. And it

was all in a mood that was very different for Black America than any period that had preceded it. Because of Sidney Poitier and myself and a young man by the name of James Edwards, and certainly with the success of people like Nat King Cole and Louis Armstrong, the black arc of visibility began to really ascend. And we were all over the place. People were looking at black culture, black art, black blues and rhythm were beginning to just really take off. Jazz was a big thing with Duke Ellington. I mean it had been a big thing from early on twentieth century American cultural growth, but it began to move itself out of just the black community. It began to cross over. And a lot of White American found a tremendous appreciation for Billy Eckstine and that stuff.

So when Sidney Poitier and myself came along, we were like almost the first prototype of what they called a black romantic screen presence. Before that we were always servants or worked in some subhuman or substrata on the screen. Dumb servants and buggy-eyed people who were full of superstitions and less than worthy of any recognition as full beings. And in this climate, for us, it was an intense moment. First of all, we had no guidelines. We had to deal with the world as we saw it. And had to really, kind of, set standards for what kind of work we would and wouldn't do; and challenged Hollywood, and Hollywood challenged us and where we went. And in our rebellion and in our quest for certain things, we found ourselves thrown into all kinds of social clashes: McCarthyism [Joseph R. McCarthy] and what denoted "Reds" and "Pinkos" and Communist sympathizers and people who were considered terrorists and anti-American and all these things. It was just a time of great horror. And a lot of us got caught up in that net of our social and political experiences.

But the career and the public support was so intense, so very, very intense, and grew so rapidly, that even those who were adversarial to us found it very difficult to contain us or to marginalize us or to somehow put an imprint on us that the public would accept, because the public just rejected it and said: We don't see that in these men and women. So some of us became exceptions, while Robeson and others were being crucified and were in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee and stuff like that. And in the House Un-American Activities Committee, I remember Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy]. He was one of the legal counsels to McCarthy and stuff. So my earliest memories of the Kennedys was in this kind of place.

Now, also at that time we were beginning to break many racial, historical barriers. Jackie Robinson was on the scene to break the color bar in sports, and everybody was beginning to see this cracking of America's segregation, a lot of which was legal in this country by laws of the South. And in this activism, in this thing that I did in going with labor movements and singing at labor rallies and encouraging people to resist and to get fair employment in the workers' world, end discrimination in the workplace, fair employment practices, equal wages, etc., etc. -- pretty much the same things women fight for today and are successfully achieving. I prevailed and talked in many places to our plight. And a lot of people took notice.

Then came a moment when we became very much connected to and aware of how important electoral politics was and what it meant to our interests and why we should become involved. So we then found ourselves all of a sudden looking to the Democratic Party and what went on. And you have to understand that the Democratic Party to us was one of the great bastions of oppression because most of the senators and the congressmen came

from the South, they were racist, they were pushing legislation. So the Democratic Party wasn't our favorite place to run. As a matter of fact, Wilkie [Wendell Wilkie] and others who ran as Republicans against Roosevelt had tremendous profile with black people.

And one day, when 1948 came about, was the big tests for the progressive movement in America, they created the Progressive Party. They had Henry Wallace [Henry A. Wallace], who was a traditional Democrat and, as a matter of fact, had been Roosevelt's vice president at one time if I remember correctly, and here was now Wallace running for president against Truman [Harry S. Truman] and against Tom Dewey [Thomas E. Dewey]. And as a young activist I was very much for Wallace and the Progressive ticket. And sang at rallies and did fundraisers with the youth of the period. And gained some level of very, very minimal recognition as a voice around that people would listen to to raise money. So when 1948 came, that was then. And then of course the Truman years unfolded.

And then came the great period of Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower]. And by that time we were really on a march with the civil rights movement. *Brown vs. the Board of Education* in 1955. Eisenhower president, Nixon [Richard Milhous Nixon] vice president. Little Rock, Arkansas. The Democrats in the South and the great appeal and clash on the issue of segregation. Then came the big moment, Eisenhower sending the troops into Little Rock. Which evidenced for us that the Republicans were certainly open to and prone in their support of the Constitution and were acting upon things that were quite favorable to black hope and aspirations.

Parallel to that came Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson], who spoke very vibrantly for the Democratic cause. What we also found in the Eisenhower period was that he had put a man at the head of the Supreme Court who I think more than any other Supreme Court in previous history, had completely shocked the landscape of American justice. Earl Warren and the Warren Court brought rulings on *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, looking at laws. Men like Bill Douglas [William O. Douglas] and Justice Black [Hugo Lafayette Black] and Frankfurter [Felix Frankfurter], all those great jurists of the period.

Through Eleanor Roosevelt, whom I'd come to know in this period because I'd met her at a number of engagements and speaking, and she then overtured me directly to link up with her for cause. She was very interested in the development of people in the black community, particularly children. And was doing magnificent work for the very young. And she created a school called the Wiltwyck School for Boys. And what it was was a very special school in which children who were wards of the court, who at very, very tender ages of eight and nine and around there, had done violent crimes, had been psychologically deeply disturbed by violence and parental brutality and things like that, in some instances, and had either stabbed their parents in the middle of the night or had done things that were just so unruly. And the courts did not know what to do with these children. And they were beginning to become quite plentiful. And she created an environment with a bunch of other wonderful psychiatrists and doctors and sociologists -- a place called the Wiltwyck School for Boys. And she solicited and enlisted my support to help raise money for this school. And I took it on.

And the first album that I did at Carnegie Hall, which turned out to be one of the most successful albums in the history of the recording business then, was dedicated to this school as a benefit for Eleanor Roosevelt. And in this relationship with Mrs. Roosevelt and her mentoring and taking a very friendly -- embraced my kids and stuff -- I then began to meet a

lot of other people who were very visible in the world of politics and social development. And she had a huge international arena, a well of friends from England from her earliest days and her husband with Churchill [Winston Churchill] and others. So through Eleanor Roosevelt I began to have associations with and meet a lot of people. And she was very friendly with Paul Robeson and Dr. Du Bois as well as others. In this context I met Bill Douglas and became very friendly with him as a Supreme Court judge. And this is how my environment grew, it pollinated.

And then when the 1960 election came and there was this contest, I had been in the primary very committed to Stevenson. But there was a young man by the name of Frank Montero [Frank C. Montero]. And Frank Montero was an African-American. I think he lived around the Hamptons and around the Martha's Vineyard world, and lived, I think, either in Connecticut, suburban Connecticut, or Massachusetts somewhere. And he was frequently in New York. He was here with a lot of institutions and foundations and whatnot. And he called one day and said that he was working for candidates in the Democratic Party, and he would like to meet with me and have me meet one of the candidates, John Kennedy.

I told him that I really didn't have any such inclination. I was deeply committed to Stevenson and would campaign and raise funds for him. And what little I knew about the Kennedys, which was not very much at all, except that by the time he declared himself a candidate, a potential candidate, and to be in the primaries, some of us were exposed to some homework. And we found out that his record as a senator was not very impressive when it came to issues and black people. And found absolutely no traces of anyone of color had had anything to do with his life or his brother. So he was kind of like this Irish Catholic guy that was the classic stereotype for us of what Irish Catholics were, which were always drunk racists. So caught up in their religious dogma that nothing else breathed in the world. So his image being brought forcefully to my attention was not yielding very positive experiences.

But at one point Frank Montero became very persistent and very insistent that we meet. And it escalated at a very particular moment. And that was when Jackie Robinson, in a great expression of anguish and anger with the Democratic Party for some slight that had been put upon him, left the Democratic Party as a supporter and declared himself Republican. And came out and publicly supported Nixon. And that drove a great shock of horror throughout the Democratic Party and hierarchy. Not only because of what it would do to the black vote, but because of the impact it would have upon liberal white voting as well, which was, in many ways, strongly connected to black interests and black cause. Although black causes could be found in almost anything we did. If you had a health-care issue, black people were involved. If you had a gender issue, black people were involved. If you had labor issues.... So no matter what the issues were for America, black people had a place in all of it. So it clearly was of interest to make sure that black people were at least recognized and that some overture was made to black leadership, no matter how narrow that leadership was defined. Although they discovered it was far wider than many had suspected, upon closer scrutiny.

So Montero said, "Look, you know, Jackie Robinson has made this move. And John wants to talk to you. He's going to be in Jersey. He's going over for a little pre-Jersey primary politicking, outreach. And he would like very much to talk to you. And I tell you, it costs you nothing to hear what he's got to say." So I agreed. And John Kennedy came to

my home at 300 West End Avenue, 74th Street and West End, in New York, on the fifth floor. We prepared for his coming, and he came by himself. He had some security with him. I remember them sitting in the outer room. I think it was one or two guys, if I'm not mistaken. I think at that time the primary leaders.... And if they weren't security as we know it now, it was some kind of security. I don't think.... I think now they have much more security early on in primaries than they did before. Especially, I think since the advent of Kennedy's assassination.

But he came. And for quite a long time, several hours, three or four such, we sat and talked. And he told me of his hopes and aspirations for the presidency. I was quite forthright in telling him of my commitment to Stevenson. And what little I knew about him did not particularly.... Pleasant enough fellow, but nothing about him suggested that I would have such inclination, and that I would be sticking with Stevenson. Then he said something very interesting. He said, "If I were to win the primary, would you be willing to look at, would you look at supporting the Democratic ticket, whoever emerged?" And I said, "I need to hear much more from all the candidates. I'll tell you that as of this moment Stevenson says everything that one can expect a candidate to say in today's climate. He speaks with the richest sound and voice of commitment to us. But I'd certainly have to hear where Nixon goes, 'cause with, Eisenhower, and what their party has done that evidenced the black people, some of these things...." Although there were a lot of things we still didn't trust or like. And he said, "Well, if that's at the primary, I may look to you again."

And then I said to him, I don't know exactly where in the discussion, but it was a moment that opportuned itself, and I said, "I am somewhat fascinated that you have sought celebrity to be the answer to celebrity. And although Jackie Robinson may have some influence, and I may carry some as well, I think that all of you are really quite minuscule in your thinking. Black people are not monolithic. We give the appearance of being that because we have a solidarity in the spirit of our common struggle. But we are quite diverse in opinions. And what you need to do is to find the pulse of Black America not through celebrity who can mislead you, because we pretend to a life that is not anywhere near as complicated in its social conflict and the kind of choices we make as does the rest of the tribe. And that you should be listening to some of the most august leaders I can remember in a lifetime ever having had. And there's a man in particular by the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. The time you've spent with me would be better spent talking to him and listening to what he has to say because he is the future of our people. He is, and voices like his, will be the future where Black America goes. And to understand him and to understand what he stands for and what he is doing to black people -- to get his favor, it would behoove you to move swiftly and aggressively to that end." And I was somewhat taken with the ignorance that he displayed on the subject of Dr. King. He was somehow aware that he was around, but did not evidence much in-depth knowledge of him.

But there were other people within the Democratic camp, one in particular that I'd come to know and not too long after this period, a man by the name of Harris Wofford [Harris L. Wofford, Jr]. And Wofford was in the Kennedy camp, in the Kennedy inner circle. But he came from a background in Pennsylvania of Quaker. As a Quaker, he was very much exposed to the tenets of nonviolence. And by this time Dr. King and I had become very close, and I was already a champion of his and working in the civil rights movement as a supporter of Dr. King as well as an advisor and a strategist within the civil rights structure. And Harris

had brought some of the same thoughts to the table from a white perspective to the Kennedy Democratic hierarchy and began to talk about Dr. King.

I then left the country, went away, because I was on a tour of the world. One of the first I had done at that time. And I'd gotten word. I remember having an absentee ballot for the New York Primary. And when I came back, of course by this time Kennedy had taken the nomination. And lo and behold, here comes Frank Montero again. And he said, "Would you, will you, won't you, why not?" And looking at a number of men and women who made up the Democratic leadership, starting with Eleanor Roosevelt, who was very pro-Kennedy, as my instructor, and then reaching out to people and other people reached out to me; like Arthur Krim [Arthur B. Krim], a high-profile, American businessman, a lawyer, who at that time was the head of the United Artists, a major film company, who had a huge record of standing strong against any attack on our Bill of Rights. Who protected our Constitution, who was part of the Democratic Committee, National Committee. Jewish men of that ilk, Bob Benjamin [Robert Benjamin], Arnold Picker [Arnold M. Picker], Sidney Davis. And listening to people Justice William O. Douglas. And even our own leaders, Paul Robeson and others. It became quite evident that I would have to be a Kennedy supporter.

So I went out and started campaigning for him. And as a matter of fact, we did a short film of his visit to Harlem, in which I interviewed him and took him to an apartment among a, if I remember correctly, it was a welfare family. And interviewed young John Kennedy, with his pregnant wife [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] with us then. And in this interview, it was, I thought, a great moment and certainly one that we knew would have great impact on the black vote. Near the end of the campaign this commercial was run. And it had such an impact adversely because when the white southerners saw this running in the South...

[END SIDE1, TAPE 1; BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

BELAFONTE: ...and saw that I was coupled with it. It was such a hoopla that the Democratic Party, the Kennedys pulled it. Which was to me the first evidence of how fragile the politics of our time was. Because if just a slight sneeze from white reactionary racist Democrats could cause this kind of capitulation or this early yield, the greater question was to what would happen on a more serious confrontation? Was it just the strategy of "let's pick our fight"? Instead of having a fight around this issue, this commercial, it wasn't worth it. We have bigger fish to fry. I don't know what it was. But I was aware of the fact that it was withdrawn and saw in it not the kind of courage that I had hoped and expected would be the case. But we stayed the course. I continued to campaign and went on several trips around the country. One or two with him, but mostly without him. Fundraisers for all kinds of candidates running on the Democratic ticket.

And when he won, we had already come to a place of very precise calculations and strategy. I think the most, to leap to the most significant, at least from my memory, and I think it'll stand the test of time. Certainly historians would say the same -- there came a moment in our movement when Dr. King had clearly evidenced himself as *the* force to deal with. In the recognition of this power the South moved vigorously against him. Attempts had been made on his life. Even here in the North he'd been stabbed here in Harlem by an irate

black woman. So things were not in the best of circumstance as far as Dr. King's welfare was concerned. So we were very sensitive to his vulnerability and therefore ours.

On one occasion he was arrested in the South on a traffic violation and put on the chain gang, which was about as an extreme a sentence as anybody had ever heard. And in the chain gang incarceration, we were not only frighteningly alarmed at what happened, but were very concerned about the fact that in this Southern environment, in this prison system, any number of things could have happened that would have put Dr. King's life in jeopardy, and in fact take his life under the guise of some irate, demented prisoner in some attack and this, that, and the other. And that there would have to be an intervention of some important, significant dimension here. And so powerful appeals were made to get Dr. King out of the chain gang, get this silly charge squashed, and let's get on with it. And because of the nature of the sensitivity of the issue, we not only appealed to the Kennedys, but then at a meeting we had appealed also to the Republicans, directly to Nixon. And we were across a large grouping of people who signed letters and petitions and whatnot to that goal, to that conclusion. Nixon never replied at all, but the Kennedys did. And through Bobby intervention took place with the governor of Georgia [S. Ernest Vandiver, Jr.], who then reached down the ladder, and Dr. King was released.

The next time I came to the Kennedys' attention, as I recall.... The expectation of the Democrats, and certainly of the Kennedy camp, was that for this effort they would be rewarded with an endorsement by Dr. King, a public endorsement of his candidacy. And pretty much the same voices that had made the petition for his release met again to talk about the consequence of such an endorsement. And I led the commitment to the strategy that such an endorsement was not to our best interests. That if we saw Dr. King's role correctly, that he should have really no part in electoral politics in any overt support of any candidate. That he could speak to issues, that he could speak to a platform, he could speak to the conditions; but that to endorse a candidate would in future years or future months even have consequences that we might not be able to retreat from. But if your endorsement endorses someone who has at moments given evidence of being anti-left, not quite rushing to get to the progressive agenda of our cause, and he turns out to do things that are not to the best interests of black people, it is going to be more difficult for you to extricate yourself from that endorsement and to backtrack, and therefore have your judgment appear to be quite vulnerable. And how quickly you can change thought or commitment or some such. And that we must find other ways in which to show support for the Kennedys, but that endorsement was off the table.

And when the Kennedys heard that this was the conclusion of this group and, in fact, Kennedy himself -- Dr. King himself -- agreed. It caused quite a backlash of anger that we were not being very generous in our response after all that they had done for us. We took the position that there was no such an animal as insensitivity to what they had done. And that many of us, who had even given and had already declared ourselves, who were openly campaigning. And that Dr. King would write a letter, a public letter, about the incarceration and his thanks for those who intervened and maybe some special notice that Kennedy himself had done this. But no endorsement. But such a letter and such public utterance was tantamount to an endorsement, and that they should be thankful that our wisdom was such that led to this. They soon settled for it. But it carried some consequence, I think, with how they viewed me, which already had conflict because with the blacklist with my political

activity and black causes and signing on to petitions and stuff that McCarthy and the witch hunt yielded, for so many of us. There was this eye of caution.

But as I moved aggressively to support. And as Dr. King escalated in his image as an important leader, the Kennedys had a shift and I found more and more outreach, "Come to our party." Certainly when I get a letter from them asking for me to participate in the inaugural ceremonies, to be guided by Frank Sinatra, who at that time was a friend, and we had warm exchanges. I worked with Frank in recruiting a lot of black -- not that he needed much support. He had a large constituency of very loving and faithful followers. I was one of them. But we put things together in a very, very wonderful way for what was, I think, the greatest inaugural presence of artists and celebration ever in the history of this country. And the delight of the Kennedys when we sang and did our thing and went to the White House and the parties and whatnot, from that moment on there was now a rhythm of favorable encounters.

Then came the appointment of Bobby Kennedy as attorney general. And although we didn't know much about Bobby because in our circle he was not that visible, he was in a lot of other places working for his brother, but in the black liberal world there was not that much evidence of a Bobby Kennedy. And what we had lingering memories of was the fact that he supported this rather villainous body of legislators and had tenaciously been committed to the persecution and the interrogation of a lot of citizens that were not worthy of that kind of treatment by our government. And if he was now the head of the Justice Department, our plight would be even more difficult and our journey. Because we so needed the federal government to be on our side. And certainly if there's anybody who had this kind of anti-left, anti-progressive politics now the head of the Justice Department, where and what would we do?

And after been listening to a couple of days of this debate and analysis back and forth. Dr. King in his conclusion told us, "Well, much if not all that has been said here I can find no criticism of and complaint with. These are the facts and our journey does not promise to be an easy one. But nobody said this was going to be easy. And the truth of the matter is that the President of the United States of America happens to be an Irish Catholic named John Kennedy. And the person he has put in charge of the justice mechanisms of this country is his brother, Robert Kennedy. And as the head of the Justice Department, he's our No. 1 target for all the things we will have to do in our quest for freedom in this country. And your task from this moment on is to find his soul. You find his soul, find his moral center, and win him to our course. Anything less would be unacceptable." And there seemed to be a great sound of finality in that declaration. You got the sense that it couldn't be negotiated from Dr. King's point of view. And we challenged it, we talked and dah dah dah. But in the end what a lot of people don't recognize--well, there's always this chaos and the people and stuff. There was a certain hierarchy within Dr. King's circle that was extremely loyal and fiercely disciplined to fulfilling the mandates that were issued to us. And when this became Dr. King's declaration and we saw wisdom in it and accepted it as our own, from that moment on I began to move in the first instance with the agenda and with purpose to find this place in which Bobby Kennedy existed, and to become more intimately involved with who he was. And each time an invitation was extended where there was someplace he would be and I could hear what he had to say, I would make it my business to be there.

Then as things began to unfold, I became much more involved with the students and the youth arm of our movement. Do you need me to stop because you have questions to ask or something, or should I just continue this free flow of...?

DAITCH: I love this free flowing. And when you're done, we can backtrack and talk about things.

BELAFONTE: Are you okay with this?

DAITCH: I love this narrative. It's wonderful.

BELAFONTE: Alright. There are times when in this kind of exchange or pursuit.... I one day got a call, and it came from the White House, and a letter eventually accompanied it, which was to come to a very special meeting at the White House, and it would be a meeting of high-profile citizens across all disciplines, professional and gender and stuff -- race -- to the White House to discuss an idea that had found itself in the campaign earlier with some suggestion for what would be expected as part of the foreign policy program of the Kennedy Administration. And it was to become involved in an idea called the Peace Corps. The voice of authority and the leader of that program would be a man by the name of Sargent Shriver [Robert Sargent Shriver, Jr.], who was an in-law of John Kennedy and of the Kennedy Family. And with Lew Wasserman and a number of others, I went to Washington and met in this first meeting of this body of citizens.

And out of that meeting I was asked to not only serve on the board of the Peace Corps, but to take on specific assignments: to become a recruiter of volunteers, going to campuses and universities and speaking. But to also become a cultural advisor, which meant looking at ways in which we could use culture in America and the culture of the developing nations we were seeking to have invitations extended from, to look and to examine these. And since there'd already been some profile of evidence among Third World leaders that they were inclined in very friendly ways towards what I said and what I represented, that I would be a good instrument for that kind of liaison.

So I became involved with the Peace Corps, served on the board, became a cultural advisor to the Corps and to Kennedy. The letter came from Kennedy giving me this, soliciting this commitment. And so I had that front on which I was working, going to Africa, several countries, going to universities around America, dealing with leaders and heads of state of African countries and leaders in government; as well as talking to universities and professors and others. Recruiting in the Peace Corps while working with the civil rights movement, SNCC and Dr. King and others, negotiating our domestic agenda.

On several occasions, dealing with these issues led me to Bobby Kennedy and the Justice Department, and speaking with him about issues, voting rights and civil rights and whatnot. And this communication became quite intense as time went by. As we planned our campaigns in different parts of the nation, part of my task was to keep the Kennedys personally informed about what we were doing. To say on such-and-such a date we're going into such-and-such a place. Here's what we are doing. Here are the numbers of people we

expect to be able to attract. And here are the objectives of this campaign. We tell you this because we alert you to the fact that we are building in these various federal obligations. We were doing things that would attract the right of the federal government to intervene on the side of citizens. So we tried to look at each thing we did: Where is the federal line here? What would be the automatic catalyst for engagement of the federal government from the Justice Department perspective? Marshals and the like and subpoenas and writs on our behalf.

Now you have to understand that a lot of these things, not a lot but enough -- or maybe they really were a lot. I'd be down in Washington right away talking to Bobby Kennedy: "This is dumb. You can't do this. Here are the consequences of this." "Well, come on out to Maryland. Let's have dinner and talk this over." And in the middle of a game of touch football, and in the middle of some lunch, and in the middle of a cocktail party meeting Ted [Edward Moore Kennedy] and some of the circle of friends that were the Kennedy circle, I got the sense that there was this closeness beginning to take place, that was now in direct contrast to the kind of energy, cautious energy, that had been the most prevalent characteristic of our early encounter.

And in this context I got to know Ethel [Ethel Skakel Kennedy] and got to meet the children. And although I was not an intimate of the family in the sense that I was some kind of very frequent visitor, whenever I was there the kids kind of knew who I was. And since on occasion I brought a new CD or something for the kids to listen to, I knew that once in a while my records were being played in the Kennedy household. As is, I did a lot of things that Bobby -- not Bobby but John Kennedy -- did as president where I had to entertain at dinners and stuff where he was, there was this synergy, this ambience developing.

I think the severest moment came at a special meeting that was held in New York, called by Bobby Kennedy through James Baldwin, the black American writer. And at a meeting he had with Bobby Kennedy, he called me on the phone, as a matter of fact, while he was at the Kennedy estate in Virginia. I said Maryland before, I think. It was their home in Virginia. That made me have a question and that was: He'd invited some high-profile black folk to a special meeting with Kennedy to discuss civil rights and what we thought on certain objectives that the civil rights had set for itself. And I was hugely cautious about that meeting because first of all these people had profile. Why would Bobby Kennedy be asking for a meeting with these citizens? What was he looking for? And what would be the questions raised at the meeting? And so on Central Park South in an apartment that he had -- Bobby Kennedy, we met. And that meeting was quite contentious.

DAITCH: Who else was there?

BELAFONTE: Harris Wofford was there. Bobby was there. Dr. Kenneth Clark was there, Lena Horne was there, some others. I can get the list of exact names for you. Also from Kennedy's side there was the man who was the head of the Justice Department, Civil Rights Division.

DAITCH: Burke Marshall?

BELAFONTE: Burke Marshall was there. And some of the other Kennedy folk. And

it's been amply notated in some chronicles that have been written.

Varying opinions about what happened. But at this meeting it was the first time that I had sensed that in this new development of friend -- of relationships -- that Bobby took an exception to that moment, that he had not heard evidenced at the gathering enough support and recognition for what he and his brother were doing, and the kind of price they were paying politically for their commitment. We were very severe in our critique of what was not being done. And therefore gave the impression of disregarding or paying no regard or not regarding what they were doing. That wrinkle, however, did not linger very long. What replaced it, which opened up a whole new vista of possibilities, was that I think, and I don't want to over-endow this, but I think the opinions of others are really necessary to give this *Rashomon*, so to speak, dimension, especially for our title purposes.

But what happened, was I think this might have been the straw or some kind of tiny pivotal but important moment when Kennedy could not get away from what was said and the passion of it and how clear we were in our common critique, or commonality of critique. Clearly his conscience was struck in a way that he had to just wrestle and wrestle and wrestle. And the more I saw him after this, the more he no longer had questions that were just about the specifics of federal government intervention, civil rights strategy of the moment. He began to move to broader philosophical areas, began to know more about cause and effect and why. And what is really the cause of this? Because obviously I've missed something here, and I don't like missing anything. I need to know. And I seek instruction, or at least thoughts from those of you whom I have not been in the habit of going to or being this way.

I think it might be one of the earliest barometers by which one can measure what became what I consider to be one of the most profound transformations I have ever met in any human being I have known in the kind of journey that I have been on. And Dr. King's instruction became so profound and so.... It was almost mystical. And for that kind of spiritual and intellectual insight, to say find his soul and win it to our cause, find his moral center; there is redemption, and things can be had here. Do not ignore that fact. And said in a way that you could tell it wasn't negotiable. And if you believe in me, you believe in my voice, and I give you this instruction.

And I'm looking at Bobby Kennedy, and I'm saying, Wow! What troubles you? And he was moving towards a new moral horizon, a new political thought. And more and more he began to evidence his relationship to the poor: Appalachian white folks, going on down. Coming around to listen to black people. Not being so distant from photos being taken, seeing you shaking the hands of.... And as time evolved -- I know this gets away from John -- but as time evolved, what happened was that the Bobby Kennedy that emerged became a man in whom I was developing a sense of belonging and a commitment to and the willingness to serve. Almost in the same dimension to which I had found willingness to serve Dr. King. I found in Bobby Kennedy a man wrestling with profound moral questions and always coming down on the right side of the answer.

And found in him as a politician, when he ran for the state. I worked tenaciously for his campaign as senator. And then when he decided to.... As a matter of fact, I did a program, I think it might have been the first week in which the *Tonight Show* ever gave a guest host one whole week in which to, while Johnny Carson went off on his vacation, to run the program for a week. And I was the host. And in a special agreement drawn with NBC and with Johnny, I didn't do jokes. I didn't do monologues. I sang a song. And I submitted to

them that I could only host if I were permitted to have a guest list of my choice. They agreed to that with the understanding that they had veto rights to any guest I may pick. I said, "okay. Let's be reciprocal. You may name any guest you like if I have the same rights." And the reason for this was because I said, "Look, I have no capacity to.... I don't have Johnny Carson's gift. It is important for me to talk to people with whom I share some common interests and therefore I can talk intelligently to issues, whether they're humorous or whatever. So let me give you a list." And I gave people like Paul Newman and Sidney Poitier and Lena Horne and Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy and whatnot.

And in 1968, when Bobby Kennedy came on the *Tonight Show* in February, and I questioned him, it was on that show that I raised the question of his candidacy. I said, "You've been taking us around the horn quite a bit here. Would you use this moment on the *Tonight Show* and tell me you're going to run or you're not going to run?" And he looked at me. I knew he was a little pissed off at the fact that I dare raise that question in this platform in this way. But listen, I had the nation and a chance to get him to say yes. And he shied away from it. But he, a few months later, declared himself. So there is that document you can get and take a look at.

But the relationship with the Kennedys evolved. Where it specifically applied to John were in far more social ways and not quite as dramatic as the moments that I had with Bobby. And when I did give them instruction, two or three times, it was always because of things that I did, where I went, he just casually had a reason to say, "How are you doing?" and "What's going on? And how did Africa look?" And this, that, and the other. And I began to tell him of some of the things I thought. And he began to question me a little bit about some of the leaders in the Caribbean region: Michael Manley [Michael Norman Manley] and who was on the horizon? Who was this guy in _____, and what's going on in Africa? Etc., etc. And I could give him some thoughts. What impact they may have had I have no way of measuring, except that we seem to have been, during his administration, Bobby more than John, I think, began to express a very enlightened appreciation for what was around and what was going on in the ways that were very different than the day that they entered office. That's about it.

DAITCH: I probably.... People think that interviews should be me asking questions and you answering, and me asking questions and you answering. But I love that beautiful narrative style that you have. There was no reason for me to intrude. But now can we back up and....

BELAFONTE: Absolutely.

DAITCH: What I'd like to do is just sort of ask you, I guess, some impressionistic things. I mean that first meeting with John Kennedy that went on for several hours at your apartment, it just strikes me as such a unique kind of situation, an opportunity for you to have evaluated him as a person. You commented on his vast ignorance of civil rights issues. But what about him as a person? Can you remember what you thought about, aside from the fact that he wasn't as aware as you had hoped about civil rights issues, what are your recollections about him as a person?

BELFAFONTE: My very first impression of him was hugely favorable.

DAITCH: Was it?

BELAFONTE: Yes. I mean in the sense that he was strikingly good looking, had a style about him that was just brimming with confidence. A guy who looked like he knew how to be in charge and could take control. That on issues of democracy, he certainly was very favorably instructed with people like Eleanor Roosevelt behind him and in his cause. He had a reference list that was quite impressive. He spoke with tremendous respect of Stevenson and said how many of the same issues they had in common. So my impression of him was not that he didn't evidence goodness, but that he evidenced a striking style in conversation and obviously an in-depth intelligence capacity. He didn't stumble. He appeared to me to be very clear in his mission. And when he said, "If the primary turns out to be different than you think...." He almost said it in a way that gave me to understand that he knew he was going to win and that I would have to consider that possibility. And if I had not considered that possibility, now was as good a time as any to start. And that there may come a time down the line when he'd be coming back. I think that that was clear in the way in which he talked.

He got a lot into my own value system, who I thought.... What I thought of Jackie Robinson. What I thought of the politics of the day and black people. And one of the things that we discussed, which was to raise itself again later, was in our own analysis and in the common thinking among that inner group of leaders with Dr. King, was the following: John Kennedy represented a new horizon on the American political landscape. His youth, his declared liberal view of life was going to be our first frontier outside of the civil rights movement. His presidency would become the first frontier for serious challenge in the electoral political arena on the Southern Dixiecrat stronghold on American political life on the governance of this nation, through the committees and the Senate seats and the representatives, all the power that they held. And to challenge that power, to challenge the unconstitutionality of how they gained office, that citizens that couldn't vote, etc., etc., would be clearly a part of not only our mission; but whoever came into office would have to grapple with the fact that that in part was where we were headed. And that if the Democratic Party and its hierarchy would understand that with a liberated black community we could evidence a voting bloc of such enormous power, and numerically so large, that we could necessarily and consciously change the voting balances, of the South in particular.

This stimulus would have an impact upon what may have appeared to some as being a lethargic North among voters and certainly among black voters. That the amalgam of such a successful thrust would be a profound bloc of votes, and that that group should feel this loyalty to whoever it was and to whatever party it was that helped us to extricate ourselves from this constitutional anguish we found ourselves in. And that this argument being made was evoked several times during the course of the debate on the South. And when Bobby called and instructed me on what to do to get bail to get Dr. King out, he could not be caught playing such a game as it would be a conflict of interest and a misuse of power, and we're giving the enemy too much fodder. His brother was too vulnerable for these things to be --

“Here’s what you do, and go talk to so-and-so.” And clearly making the commitment, but showing me ways in which I was to do it that there would be no “paper trail.” We weren’t doing anything underhanded. It was just politically sensitive.

And John Kennedy, in this discussion in my home--this was part of the analysis that was raised which caused him to think. He gave pause, and we talked on that subject for a few minutes. I said, “You know, I know a conclusion can be drawn based upon how the scrolls of voting are counted.” Not just so much whether you believe in the political idea or not. But do you have the constituency to deliver the votes to make such a thing law or to require inclusion of your opinion into any solutions you choose to make, or come to? So in that context we discussed issues, we discussed the Third World. We discussed the contest between communism and democracy. We discussed the struggle for the minds and hearts of billions of people in the world, the ideology. How could American democracy seek to gain international favor when it was so cruel to its own citizens of color? What it had done to Native Americans.

Coming from that canvas, I said, “That’s where our mission is headed. And you should really be mindful and have it in your head that your administration’s going to have to confront a lot of this, and it will not go away. We have no idea of what might be evoked in the hurdles that will be put before us. But the loss of life is the least of our concerns. As important as it is, that will not impede us. Our incarceration is a part of the fabric of our philosophy of nonviolence. To become a burden to the state is our mission. That the use of the human body to fill up our jails, to bring pressure to the justice system, to flood our courts with candidates for justice will be one of our greatest resources. We will use that, and we will not hesitate to let the world view what is happening to us and the pursuit to becoming morally supported.”

DAITCH: And you presented that to him that clearly?

BELAFONTE: Yes. Sure. Well, maybe not with the kind of preciseness that I’m now recalling. But it was very much evident in our discussion where the movement was going. And that he had to understand, as others would come to understand, that this was not foolish prophecy. But this was the mood. And that the murders that were taking place were deadly serious. And he had to understand.... And very importantly, Kennedy had never heard this kind of language.

DAITCH: Right.

BELAFONTE: He’d never talked to people who carried this kind of thought. And if they did, they saw them as malcontents and rebels without cause, and just noisemakers. And people certainly, if you dug deep enough, who were rooted in communism and malcontents, and therefore had no equation. Nothing paid any regard to the fact that communism embraced aspects of who we were in our struggle was not of our doing; it was their choice. And if they made those choices, they would necessarily position themselves to be in alliance with what we did. But they were not the motivators of what we did. They were not the reason for doing what we do, or did. And if you choose to think that, it would be wise for you to find that we have--that is to diminish who we are. That

is to say that we cannot move in our world without you Tarzans. I said that, I remember. Yes, we don't need external racial influence to tell us who we are and what we have to do. We welcome white power in our service but we do not acquiesce to it. And the sooner you guys understand those are the principles that drive us, I think the more solidly-rooted your presidency will be in the things you have to do. Or you can be wrecked by it. And I think as the mission unfolded, these early warnings, these things that were said, some casually--by that I mean not in any formal document--and arenas of documentations as well. I'm quite sure some of these conversations were picked up by wiretaps I didn't even know were going on in offices, much to my naïveté and amazement. But this was the tenure. And I think that as history unfolded, they found more and more truth to that rather prophetic series of meetings we had, and not.... I think the more they saw that what I said, and I was an activist. Among the civil rights organizations and movement...

[END SIDE 2, TAPE 1; BEGIN SIDE 1, TAPE 2]

BELAFONTE: ...or at least having the capacity to influence, to strategy and to influence, therefore the course of history began to evidence itself more and more.

One of the things I remember talking to John about was the pros and the cons of celebrity. Because in our early discussion I talked about the fact that you've come to get a black celebrity to answer something that was done by a black celebrity. And that's a silly game, I thought. Because in the final analysis, the black community trusts us as far as the black community knows it can trust us. They judge according to how their loyalty is attracted. With Jackie Robinson, black people came to a place where they just didn't like what he was saying. You can rest assured they're not going to jump into the bath with him, or me.

However, in my work I had understood clearly that my celebrity could be baggage, could be a burden. This kind of visibility in this kind of movement would make me, because I had so many platforms that were press-attractive, journalism-attractive, would have me running my mouth a lot. How protected would confidences be? How much evidence? Where was my own vanity and ego framed in all of this? And I had to tell them that from the point of view of celebrity I had found this more of a hurdle for me than a desired tool, of a convenience. And that how I did things and the way in which I sought to protect anonymity would be partly recognized by those whom I shared these intimacies with, as well as my own conscious behavior with the press. So you will find that in a lot of places if you do not go to the most remote places where documentation of who I am and what I have done, there is no easy access in the press to my declarations.

Wherever I stood with Dr. King, it was never in a photo op. We have a lot of pictures together, but I got him in places where he was standing on my platform. But when it came to politics, when it came to social events, when it came to who rushed to be at his side, there's always this blurred background. You'll occasionally see me in a picture somewhere at a press conference and questions were directed to me, I said that's not my purview. You're talking with Dr. King. He is the voice of our mission. He will tell you. He will be.... Like people will defer to the President and say, "Ask him, our president will tell you," the way I did. And a lot of things with Dr. King and with Malcolm [Malcolm X] and with leaders of the civil rights

movement, as well as with the Kennedys, were definitely off the table to everyone. So that in this context I later come to find that I have no real ego in this, I really don't, because I am very comfortable in my skin. And the joy that I've had in being able to play these roles in the history that's making a difference.

But a lot of fine young people who've come, and even some elders, will say -- because I speak a lot at universities. I just came from Princeton and before that I was at Howard. And when you speak to the students, a couple of thousand or whatever the number may be, I'm always fascinated in the Q&A -- kids not knowing anything about -- that I was even in that world. And their parents. It is just now within the past--since Taylor Branch's book called *Parting the Waters*, he has begun to reveal, as others, roles that I had played -- thorough I played -- has now begun to give a rise to presence and people having a lot of questions. So I respond. But now that I don't have, I'm not sworn to that kind of protection of... There are some things I will never talk about because of it's personal, it's deeply personal characteristics. It would mean nothing to history. So that part has no place in any debate or dialogue. Nor are they that many. So let me not try to suggest that I've got some really choice goodies here. It's just simply just certain discretions that I think family and people don't need to be queried about.

But with John Kennedy and his brother, and I think people around generally, as they began to see more and more evidence, and especially once I made a conscious move to engage as the point person for our movement the international community, I became hugely problematic to the administration, very problematic.

DAITCH: How was that?

BELAFONTE: Here we were in a critical war, albeit cold, with a major, major adversary, Russia, the Soviet Union. And among all other things that were in contest between ideologies and super powers, was the minds and hearts of people globally, not just the Soviet constituency or the American constituency. One of the biggest struggles was for the hearts and minds of people in the world, world opinion. And the large bulk of that constituency were people of color: Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the continent of Africa. Our strategy was clearly that this was a constituency. And although we may have some reservations about, as it was said, "airing our dirty laundry in public," we should keep our struggle to the domestic boundaries. Others of us said absolutely not. That is the silliest application you could ever hope to hear. That you're asking us to surrender the most powerful mechanism we have, which is world opinion morally to our cause, and to have no relationship to that? Silly, silly, silly. And we're going that way.

And what we did was in the first such moment was we were running out of funds. We were really being drained economically. The movement was growing, resources were needed, there was no 501C3 tax write-off. Each time we tied up large sums of money in bail and court procedures. By law once that person charged responds to subpoena and to summons, our bail money is to be released. But in the South they took their own good time when to release the bail that we put up and the bonds and whatnot. And they just knew they were being obstructive. And we had to go to court many times just to subpoena for the release of our money to get on with our campaign.

As our resources became more and more drained, we then had to look beyond our borders for allies. Canada was the first place that I went. And in Canada I found a rich resource. First and foremost Pierre Trudeau, who was a very good friend and the prime minister of Canada, gave us validation, hosting several things that we did in the name of civil rights and in the name of human rights. He gave us the Canadian platform to reach out to Canadian scholars and parliamentarians and whatnot. That enhanced our cause. But I then went to a meeting we had and said, "It's time to reach out to the world at large. And the best thing to do is to test our capacity in places where we are viewed favorably. And we should certainly start in France." It is a place of contentiousness with American foreign policy all the time. They have a strange history. Not so strange in its application of colonialism. It was as cruel from one nation to the other. But there was a liberality, the liberal code of behavior within the French borders among black citizens of Francophone origin, who've had a far more easy relationship to society as black people than they did.... There were no laws in France that were segregationist laws. Just that simple fact gave black people mobility, academically, intellectually, and socially that just didn't exist here. So there was an arena of favorable acceptance to our cause by so many blacks who were in exile in France. I knew many of them, and I said, "Let's try going to France."

After some debate and resistance.... Now, I have to tell you two instances. Daddy King [Martin Luther King, Sr.] -- Dr. King's father, in the Kennedy thing on getting his son released from prison, who was a Republican -- led the charge for endorsement. So I gave his animus in early debate that suggested that we should not do such.... And this was not in any power play. I had no power vision. That's not my game. To serve power is much more fun. And then when we talked about going to Europe was the second time that Daddy King then raised this "our laundry in public, white folks gonna get mad, really mad." And I retorted, "How much madder can they get? We're hanging from trees. I'd hate to see if that ain't the worst of it, what could possibly be worse than that? So I don't know what you mean by this white folks gonna really get mad."

But in this context, getting back to France, among them, in compromise, they decided to go through the American Church. We have the American Church in Paris. And through the American Church, seating capacity around four or five hundred, we would be brought by the church to France. Dr. King would have his first platform publicly. Because I think he had already by this time been viewed for the Nobel. I think he's already won it, if I'm not mistaken. Winning the Nobel validated him, but it did not bring him into a closer proximity with that constituency in the world that was waiting to hear from him directly. And this thing at the American Church would be his first presence in France to do that. We made overtures to the church and they agreed. Then I decided that while we were there we should go to Sweden because the prime minister, Olof Palme, and others in the Swedish government and parliament were very favorable to our issue and the global issue. So I said, "With these two societies back to back, we might go into places that will give us some favorable response in the press and among citizens, in response to Dr. King."

And roughly I would say at outside ten days, inside around seven days, we got notice from the church that it would not, it no longer wanted to be part of Dr. King's visit to France. The church could not do that. That there were powers that be that had declared that such an act was not to the best interests of the state, and that they didn't want to get caught in that. So they cancelled. And those who thought it was a bad idea to begin with said, "Hey, already

we're feeling the ramifications if the church drops us. We don't need this burden because now we're setting up more, we're going to have more critics than we're going to have friends here." So that little group of us again said, "Oh, wait a minute. If we retreat in the face of this onslaught from the State Department then we're forever going to find ourselves caught in a vicious campaign between outreach and obstruction, desire and counter-desire. We can't take this defeat. We can't let them do this. If they can morally reach to the church and have them capitulate then I think we have a serious problem." "Well, what do you propose doing about it?" "Well, give me some time, and I should know within the next 12 to 24 hours what I can and cannot do."

So I got on the phone immediately to Yves Montand, who at that time was one of the biggest artists in all of France, and very loved in America, Yves Montand. And Simone Signoret, one of the largest actresses in the world. And then I called Peter O'Toole, a great Irish actor and very much loved in America, and then Melina Mercouri. All these people who were friends. And said, "Here's my problem. Can we come together in ten days or in a week and welcome Dr. King to Paris?" And I called.... "Yes, you've got us." "We'll take care of it." "We'll get all the other artists." And I called some friends in the labor movement in France and some intellectuals and academicians. And set up _____: We need some resources and some support. Will you campaign and be there for us? So with the French labor movement and with my few friends in the world of culture, we wound up with the largest stadium in Paris, thousands and thousands of people. We had to have the French police security to cordon off a large section of Paris because the people who came now stood outside of the arena could not.... So we had thousands on the street with speakers and whatnot. Dr. King came and spoke.

Our first trip was a huge triumphant. And then we immediately went to Sweden where I had protected ourselves there as well because the king of Sweden [Gustav VI Adolf] became our patron. The prime minister of Sweden became the head of our committee to receive Dr. King. The post office of Sweden became our mailing address, and the Bank of Sweden became our deposit. And we raised all funds through that mechanism. In a ceremony here in New York Dr. King met with the Swedish ambassador, and a check was turned over for our cause. And I made sure that all of this was amply publicized so that the State Department would be the first to get wind, I'm sure they knew right away not only what we were doing, but the detail of it. I didn't want to leave anything to mediocre CIA agents who'd report incorrectly, as they were in the habit of doing.

DAITCH: Guessing.

BELAFONTE: And guess because they were too drunk that night to go to the rally to count. They would say three people showed up. So the press was there. And this rather large international response to this first minimal request indicated that we now were going to stretch beyond borders that the American government could control. In an ideological struggle with the Soviet Union, to have the international community now speaking chapter and verse to our cause because they would be intimately involved in the details of where we were going. Ramifications of which had already had profound impact on the ANC and Nelson Mandela, who were watching very closely what was happening to the black movement in America because little by little they

began to adopt many of the same principles. After all, apartheid and the institutionalization and the legalization of racial separation was learned from the American text. The way the Afrikaans patterned apartheid was after our own legislative design. And to attack that and how we were doing it became very critical to ANC observation and others. So that even Mandela, whom I had began to correspond with a little later than this particular moment. His incarceration, when he was in prisons, you know, talking about where the liberation movement was going, what people of color were experiencing. And I think State began to understand very quickly that this thing was going to have ramifications beyond our expectation.

And I tell you what was so truly, truly, truly incredible: The most incredible aspect of all of this that nobody has ever really spoken to in any real depth was the remarkable strength and courage of simple, everyday working people in this country who took the point on a lot of frontiers, for which they never were recognized or got ample credit. One did: Rosa Parks, this black seamstress taking this seat had the study and instruction to do this. But our canvas is filled with these courageous men and women who came from the simplest walks, who had no connection to the thought of courage, who would tell you in a minute, "I've got no.... I can't do that. I'm too afraid." But who did these things. And here we were now in the world talking to like-minded people and sufferings that were quite ready to see in us clearly the code, the DNA to success in the kind of oppression we were experiencing.

So that with cards like this being played, with strategy like this being accessed, I think the administration, including eventually the Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson] Administration, I think began to understand the civil rights movement for being far more dimensional than has ever been reported and than is ever discussed now. We were prepared to look at divine intervention as our exclusive instrument to success, that somehow God is exclusively responsible for Dr. King and Malcolm X and whatnot.

And although there may be some room for great debate, and it's arguably so, the truth of the matter is that what that tends to do is to subvert and diminish the capacity for genius and clarity of thought and the tremendous discipline that it took men and women to design this kind of life. So you always hear about us as some scattered mass, and we stood on over, we're going, and we don't know what we're doing, and all that stuff is of the past. When the deeper truth sits here very much ignited and ready to be tapped into again. And I think a lot of politicians saw that. And I know for a fact that certainly Bobby Kennedy did. And along the way I think Kennedy and others in the administration grew to understand that we were major, major players if not in many instances the most powerful players on certain fronts to America's interests and America's future.

DAITCH: Somebody told me that they talked to Kennedy immediately after the March on Washington. And of course that was a very stressful day for the Kennedy Administration.

BELAFONTE: That's right.

DAITCH: Because they were so worried about what might happen. But they said he, it was just a one-on-one quick discussion, and he just was very

reflective, and he said, “I never imagined that civil rights would be *the* major issue of my administration.” And, you know, clearly he realized....

BELAFONTE: Even that late.

DAITCH: Even late. But I mean obviously he was also dealing with international issues.

[INTERRUPTION]

BELAFONTE: Go ahead.

DAITCH: But it just was interesting to me that he.... I mean it took him a while. He was slow to pick up on this even though you told him from the beginning this is what we’re doing to do, and it’s not going to stop, and it’s going to be a big thing, that....

BELAFONTE: That’s true. There was no question that there was. I think the kindest thing I can say would be that there was resistance. There was a place of desired denial. Desired denial sounds like I’m splitting some words here that are one and the same. But there was this instrument of denial. And I think it was tantamount to....It was reflective of two things: the absurdity of political thinking in so many ways. And at the same time with all of the nuances of your existence, thinking and sensing, in your senses, have really come to accept that fellow citizens are of a lesser element, are made up of lesser elements, that there is a sub-intellectual existence, that they’re not quite like we are, racism plays out its evil hand to these extremes, there is a built-in dismissal of black people of being of any consequence really. And therefore our cultural sensitivities to issues of race, and some of them are very subtle, can lead us to conclusions that say, Well, it’s not important. Who are they? They’ll go away. Lincoln [Abraham Lincoln] took care of that. What more do they want?

DAITCH: Right.

BELAFONTE: So if one says it’s institutional racism, in part that’s true. And one has to understand the deepest ramifications of race. I think our absence, as a nation, to wanting to get into this, the will to get into this, is what I think still haunts us and will continue to until we come to some real honest debate. That’s why when Dr. Kenneth Clark wrote in his decided argument, the argument that decided the Supreme Court on *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, was the ramifications of segregation not just on the black child, but what it did to the white child, was the first genuine inclination as to the subliminals, the evils of segregation and what they were doing to the human heart and mind. And it plays itself out in ways such as you’re talking about with the Kennedy Administration and others. Blacks are just somewhere in the sub-less department, lesser beings, lesser history, less of this, less of that.

DAITCH: Did you ever feel that personally? Somebody had either told me once or I read it that John Kennedy -- an African-American person when they met him said that they didn't feel that he was quite comfortable with an African-American person. Did you ever get that, you know, you can kind of have an instinct or feel for whether a person feels comfortable with you?

BELAFONTE: I don't think it was that obscure.

DAITCH: Really?

BELAFONTE: Oh, no. The discomfort and uneasiness one could ascribe to subject, what were we discussing. But since we were discussing race, he clearly, very clearly, had no rhythm of exchange. We were not....

Although we are prone to slogan, and we are prone to a use of language in ways that has another nuance, our sentences are not always grammatically structured in ways acceptable to English teachers. "But to be blinded by that fact, to dismiss content of what's being said, was always there. They can't even talk. How can they be making sense? How can they be talking anything of substance?" When they can be saying the most profound things. Of course you get an articulator like Dr. King or, Malcolm X, and you hear very clearly because sentence clearly isn't their problem -- sentence structure. Now, the Kennedys were always uncomfortable. But one could almost visibly evidence their growing familiarity with the environment. And I think to the height of its revelation was what embodied Bobby Kennedy, his life, his spirit, his soul, his mission. I think it's clearly evident when he stood in Cleveland on the day of Dr. King's assassination and said to America and to black audiences, "I share your pain. I too have lost family. And in this moment we need more than ever as a nation to ___ tyranny." But that plea was the embodiment of a soul, that everything Dr. King said we should do to reach it and to permit it to reveal itself was clearly rewarded at that moment to have completed his mission. And I think that this discomfort that was evidenced, it was absolutely there.

I don't mean to suggest that there wasn't social grace, they didn't throw up when they saw us. [Laughter] [Vomiting sound] "Here they come again." But there was caution with the use of language and what jokes they smiled at and where they watched us go and they couldn't come. Once we sang, however, and danced, they were more comfortable. [Laughter] And they were stimulated by our great capacity to do those things. But this was not just of them. It wasn't like they were unusual in looking at the broad canvas of American behavior. It was America. It's America now. Very much America. It's America to this very second. It exists. So they were part of that.

I guess the best minstrel in the act, wearing the mask and playing the game, is Clinton [Bill Clinton]. Nobody plays the race card better than he. And I don't think he had been that much a friend of the black people. I don't think he's been as good for us as Bobby Kennedy would have been. I don't think he's touched by the same moral depth or truth. I think he's a quintessential politician. I think he plays the saxophone in black churches just at the right moment to assuage black anger about a lot of things that we never experienced legislatively and missions that were volatile and people whom he appointed, etc., etc., etc. But this is not a critique of him. It's just a preparative remark.

But, yes, the fact that that was how the Kennedys evidenced themselves in the beginning and not the way they were at the end of their lives has got to be respected and embraced or we then have no real belief in redemption, we have no real belief in a human being's ability to overcome their crimes against humanity, to overcome their own devils, to find a new and better.... What do we hope for as people of hope if we don't hope that people can do better than they do now? And we have to embrace that when we see it and not hold people forever, not incarcerate them to some lesser place than in life just because that's the way they started.

DAITCH: Right. To find their souls.

BELAFONTE: Yes. Dr. King said it. And I follow his wisdom every day. It's amazing what little nuggets unfold and the prophecies at its center. It's almost biblical the way in which his voice keeps exploding in moments.... I get moments of crisis and things going on even now in the international community. I sit with Mandela, Thabo Mbeki, and we're talking, and boom! something explodes like a time capsule from what was said before that now is very relevant today.

DAITCH: It's an amazing generation, isn't it?

BELAFONTE: Yes.

DAITCH: Of people, mostly men, women, too, but....

BELAFONTE: Absolutely.

DAITCH: Dr. King, the Kennedys, Malcolm X.

BELAFONTE: Absolutely, absolutely.

DAITCH: Well, yourself. I mean not just people who were assassinated. Luckily some people lived.

BELAFONTE: Not enough of us.

DAITCH: No. But such a young group of people with so much wisdom and courage. It's astonishing to me.

BELAFONTE: It's quite something. I met Dr. King when I was 28, 27? He was only 25 or 26. And I met the Kennedys when I was 30. Yes, 1960, I was just about.... Let's see, '27 to '60 is what?

DAITCH: Thirty-three years.

BELAFONTE: Thirty years roughly, 29, 30. So we were all young, relatively

speaking. And of course I moved among nothing.... I still do. I'm just always eternally with the young. And some days I look at it as a curse. I look at young minds and spirits and how much they're wrapped in naïveté. I see so much of my own self back then. But those are some of my more immediate recollections. I'm sure I'll think of other things later. And if I do, I'll feel free to holler at you and say, Here's some stuff that I think.... Or I just saw a letter that might remind me of so-and-so and tell you.

DAITCH: Oh, that would be wonderful. That would be wonderful.

BELAFONTE: Sure.

DAITCH: I would love that.

BELAFONTE: I assume this is an ongoing collection.

DAITCH: It is an ongoing collection. I'll go ahead and turn this....

[END OF TAPE 2]

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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