

**Interview with James Bevel**[Table of contents](#) | [Add to bookbag](#)**Interview with James Bevel**

Production Team: C

Interview Date: November 13, 1985

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Interview gathered as part of Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965).

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These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in *bold italics* was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize*.**INTERVIEW**

FILM PRODUCTION TEAM:

Camera Roll 552

FILM PRODUCTION TEAM:

Sound Roll 1523

QUESTION 1

INTERVIEWER:

1963 WAS THE UH, CENTENNIAL OF THE UH, EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION AND STARTED THE YEAR GOV. WALLACE PLEDGED ALABAMA TO SEGREGATION FOREVER. AS YOU PREPARED FOR BIRMINGHAM, DID THOSE THOUGHTS KIND OF ENTER YOUR MIND, THOSE OTHER EVENTS?

James Bevel:

Well, it, uh, it does, but um, I guess by '63 we were um, pretty confident that we had developed a science that would allow us to, to eradicate uh, segregation in that it was incongruent, you know with the basic tenant of our Constitution. So, you know, as I hear that statement, the statement that Wallace made that uh, segregation is forever, um, we had tested the science of non-violence in other cities and we knew that it was comparable, incompetent to deal with their problem.

QUESTION 2

INTERVIEWER:

WHAT MADE BIRMINGHAM A CITY TO FOCUS ON?

James Bevel:

Well, it, uh, it had a reputation equal to the Mississippi. Birmingham, um, had a reputation equal to the Mississippi Delta in terms of its brutalization of people. Uh, it was known for its uh, Bull Connor, its police department, its violation and bombing and uh, denigrating black people and it was very resistant uh, city. Klan, a lot of Klan activity, a lot of uh, suppression. And so um, that made it uh, special because the greater the resistance in the application of the uh, science of non-violence the clearer the issues become for the onlooker.

QUESTION 3

INTERVIEWER:

SO ARE YOU SAYING THAT IN ORDER FOR NONVIOLENCE TO WORK, IT HAS TO BE MET WITH VIOLENCE?

James Bevel:

No, I said that it, it crystallizes when um, um, it's like um contrasts. You have a better means of showing and revealing and uh, bringing out the contradiction when there is an adamant attitude in people about uh, superimposing their attitudes upon other people. So that you get a better contrast when you have uh, people who are very adamant about that.

QUESTION 4

INTERVIEWER:

YOU'VE TALKED ABOUT THE OPPRESSION OF A CITY LIKE BIRMINGHAM, BULL CONNOR'S REPUTATION AND THINGS LIKE THAT. I WANT TO MOVE FORWARD TO THE POINT WHERE YOU DECIDED TO INVOLVE CHILDREN, UH, I MEAN IF IT WAS SUCH AN OPPRESSIVE ENVIRONMENT, WASN'T THAT KIND OF RISKY TO INVOLVE CHILDREN?

James Bevel:

Well, in terms of the um, nature of the situation because of the intense uh, suppression and the conditioning of the adults, it was necessary to use children because children had not been indoctrinated into that kind of uh, uh, violence and suppression. Uh, so they could come on the situation with an uh, a fresh approach. But it wasn't particularly dangerous from our point of view of using children at that particular point children were in Vietnam. Guys seventeen was in Vietnam and our thinking was that if a young person could go to Vietnam and engage in a war, then the person certainly the same age and younger could engage in a non-violent war that didn't violate the constitution of the people property and that uh, when you use that method the chances of getting injured is, very little anyway.

QUESTION 5

INTERVIEWER:

OK, YOU MENTIONED CHILDREN OF SEVENTEEN BEING IN VIETNAM, YOU WERE ACTUALLY DEALING WITH CHILDREN WHO WERE MUCH YOUNGER THAN THAT THOUGH.

James Bevel:

yeah, we were dealing with children six(?) and uh, those who, um took the position that they were wanted to involve themselves that they themselves understood the nature of love and its power and wanted to demonstrate that love and its power then we permitted them to uh, become involved.

QUESTION 6

INTERVIEWER:

LET ME BACK UP JUST A LITTLE BIT, YOU TALKED ABOUT THE INDOCTRINATION OF ADULTS, WHAT WAS THE ADULT THINKING BECAUSE I KNOW THAT YOU HAD MANY OF THE BLACK LEADERS INVOLVED WITH THE DEMONSTRATIONS, BUT WHAT DID THE POPULATION IN GENERAL FEEL?

James Bevel:

Well, they felt that segregation would probably be, in '63 in Birmingham, most adults felt that segregation was um, permanent that it was just that way, that uh, that was a permanent system, it would probably be that way that, the power of the city the power of the state the power of the Congress, the Marines, the Army the Air Force, they see all that as alignments of power and they saw it as an impossible situation. And so most of the adults felt that nothing like that could change probably, except if Russia or China invaded and destroyed America, or something like that, but, people didn't think that there was a force or a power within the country strong enough to offset something as entrenched and as reinforced as segregation.

QUESTION 7

INTERVIEWER:

THE ADULTS MUST HAVE HAD A GREAT DEAL OF FEAR.

James Bevel:

Yeah, well you'd had people's homes and churches bombed. Uh people had been lynched and killed and there was no uh, process by which you could gain redress to your grievances because...

CAMERA CREW MEMBER:

WE JUST RAN OUT

QUESTION 8

INTERVIEWER:

ALRIGHT, JUST FINISH THAT PART ABOUT THE FEAR OF THE ADULTS.

James Bevel:

The uh, when in Alabama in '63, the fear was entrenched because the people had come out of a social system wherein they had no way to redress any of their grievances. Lynchings, bombings, uh, so that there was a tendency not to do anything that would aggravate or cause state violence to be upon the people. So uh, they had a conditioning and so you had to get people who had not experienced all of that and who had confidence in themselves and in the, in our system of law. And the young people were susceptible to that principle that um, that the attitudes and opinions of white people did not constitute law. That was simply tradition and custom and that we had to live according to the New Testament and the Constitution and if we did, then we would, uh, forge in law rather than having to live by the attitudes and opinions of the people, of the dominant people at that point.

QUESTION 9

INTERVIEWER:

OK, BUT IF THE PEOPLE, IF THE ADULTS WERE SO FEARFUL, IT SEEMS TO ME THAT YOU BECOME A PIED PIPER IN A WAY OF TAKING THESE CHILDREN AWAY, I CAN'T BELIEVE THAT THE PARENTS WERE SUPPORTIVE OF THEIR CHILDREN GETTING INVOLVED WITH YOU

James Bevel:

Well, they was. Um, we had, um workshops and we had mass meetings, um

QUESTION 10

INTERVIEWER:

OK TELL ME ABOUT THE ADULT RESPONSE TO YOUR USE OF THE CHILDREN

James Bevel:

Um, well it was good. Um, a lot of adults would come out. One of the things we were interested in was getting um, the American um, black community involved. And in a city like Birmingham, you can't hardly go to

a church say in Chicago where there is not a member in that church that is not related to Birmingham. So if you put several thousand children from Birmingham uh, say in jail, you sort of affected the religious community in Cleveland, Philadelphia, Chicago, Cincinnati, so you wanted to get the black community involved in it. ***We wanted to get the black community in Birmingham involved and the way you get the people involved is get their children involved.***¹ A lot of people were afraid to come to mass meetings in terms of the uh, the Alabama Bureau of Investigation would be around taking pictures and harassing people. So when the children became involved, they became involved which meant they started coming to workshops and mass meetings. And our position was, rather than kind of get your children out of the movement, join the movement with your children that um, the reason we had uh, was faced with segregation because they themselves hadn't assumed the responsibility of um, breaking the uh, attitudes and the patterns of um misbehavior say from their parents and if the students didn't break those patterns then they would live a life of uh, degeneracy in that kind of state. So, so, it was like the parents pretty much agreed that and most parents even when it's dangerous and risky, they have a deep uh, sense of appreciation and respect for young people when they're doing what's right. I mean, all of them knew it was potentially dangerous, but they knew it was honorable, and they knew it was noble and they knew it was right. So they didn't fight against it. And then you had myself and Fred Shuttlesworth, Abernathy and Martin King preaching and it's very difficult to um, to um, go against the logic and the reasoning of a preacher who is really in the about the business of preaching and all.

QUESTION 11

INTERVIEWER:

ALRIGHT, UH, LET'S JUST GO ON. TELL ME, TELL ME A STORY ABOUT WHAT IT WAS LIKE WHEN YOU STARTED TO TRAIN ALL THOSE CHILDREN, YOU HAD, THOUSANDS OF CHILDREN THAT YOU WERE TRYING TO TRAIN, THERE MUST HAVE BEEN SOME FUNNY INCIDENTS ...

James Bevel:

Well, what happened uh, um, I had come out of the Nashville movement and the Mississippi movements where we had basically used young people all the time, and um, well at first King didn't want me to use young people because I had eighty charges of contributing to the delinquency of a minor, minors against me in Jackson, Mississippi for sending young people on the Freedom Ride. Well, uh, that was about five to ten, twelve people would go on demonstrations each day and my position was well, you can't get the dialogues you need with a few people, besides ***most adults have bills to pay, house notes, rents, car notes, utility bills, but the young people wherein they can think at the same level are not, at this point hooked with all those responsibilities. So a boy from high school, he get the same effect in terms of being in jail in terms of putting the pressure on the city as his father and yet he is not, there is no economic threat on the family because the father is still on the job***² so the strategy was, OK let's use thousands of people who won't create an economic crisis because they're off the job so the high school students was like our choice. And we brought that to them in terms of, um, you're adults but you're still sort of living on your mamas and your daddies so it is your responsibility in that you don't have to pay the bills uh, to take the responsibility, to confront the segregation question. And what we did, we went around and started organizing say like, the queens of the high schools, the basketball stars, um the football stars, so you get the influence and power leaders involved. And then, they in turn got all the other students involved. Because it was only about like I said, 15 people a day demonstrating was willing to go to jail because the black community did not have that kind of cohesion in terms of a camaraderie, people knew each other, but only in terms of on their way to jobs, on their way to church. But the students they have sort of community they'd been in for say, ten, eleven, twelve years since they were in elementary school so they had bonded well. So if one went to jail that was a direct effect upon another when because they was classmates. Wherein parents people live in the community do not have that kind of closeness, so the strategy for using the students was to get the whole involvement. To help them overcome the crippling fears of dogs, and jails, and to help them start thinking through problems on their feet, to think through a living problem causes you to think. Wherein if you're just reading books and referring but once you get involved you have to think.

QUESTION 12

INTERVIEWER:

OK. NOW YOU'RE TELLING ME A LOT OF THE PHILOSOPHY. BUT WHAT, WHAT HAPPENED WHEN YOU BROUGHT THESE KIDS TOGETHER DID YOU HAVE, I KNOW THAT THERE'S A STORY IN HERE SOMEWHERE, WHAT HAPPENED WHEN YOU FINALLY SAID, OK I NEED SOME GOOD VOLUNTEERS HERE.

James Bevel:

Well, first thing we did, we got to—there's a film, "The Nashville City and Story" I don't know whether you've seen it or not, it was NBC White Paper. We would show that film in all of the schools, and one of the things that I was, I guess the difference that uh, that we approached was that you are responsible for segregation, you and your parents because you have not stood up. In other words, our position was that according to the Bible and the Constitution, no one has the power to oppress you if you don't cooperate. So then if you say you are oppressed then you are also acknowledging that you are in league with the oppressor now it's your responsibility to break league with the oppressor. If you don't second his motion on what's wrong, his motion on what's wrong will die and you make a motion in terms of what's right and second your motion and that motion will become alive. So it was like, as long as you go along with segregation, you second Bull Connor's motion. So don't second his motion put your own motion on the floor, the fact that schools and business shouldn't go on as usual as long as you're involved in being oppressed.

QUESTION 13

INTERVIEWER:

TELL ME ABOUT THE KIDS, HOW DID THEY RESPOND?

James Bevel:

They responded beautifully. Well, your first response is like the young women. I guess, from about thirteen to eighteen they're probably more responsive in terms of courage, confidence and the ability to follow reasoning and logic. Um, so nonviolence to them uh, it's logical that you should love people, you shouldn't violate people, you shouldn't violate property, there's a way to solve all problems without violating. It's uncomfortable, it's inconvenient it's uh, immediate threat upon you, however, if you maintain your position the threat goes away. So that kind of logic fits very well with young people who are not engaged in a...

QUESTION 14

INTERVIEWER:

OK, SO YOUNG GIRLS THIRTEEN TO EIGHTEEN THEY WERE PRETTY GOOD, WHO WAS THE NEXT GROUP TO RESPOND?

James Bevel:

Then the elementary students. Uh, they can comprehend that. And of course, I guess the last guys to get involved, most of them was finally got involved is the high school guys or the last days because the brunt of the violence in the South was directed towards the young males. So that the females had not experienced that kind of negative violence even the white males as readily as they, the young black males did. So they didn't have the kind of, uh, immediate fear say of white policemen, as the young men did. So their involvement was more spontaneous and up front than say, the guys

CAMERA CREW MEMBER:

OK ON CAMERA ROLL 553 WE HAVE 100 FEET REMAINING.

QUESTION 15

INTERVIEWER:

I DON'T WANT TO PHILOSOPHIZE ABOUT THIS TOO MUCH, ER, I WANT SOMETHING VISUAL, THAT UH, IF YOU CAN DESCRIBE HOW THE KIDS RESPONDED OR BEHAVED, CAN YOU DO THAT?

James Bevel:

Yeah, I think I can.

QUESTION 16

INTERVIEWER:

ALL RIGHT, GO AHEAD.

James Bevel:

Now, say in um, a non-violent movement, I think uh, King makes a statement that it's not like punching a bunch of buttons, and you get automatic response, people with all their frailties make up the, the matrix of a movement. Um, so if you have a philosophy, you have in any movement all the divergent attitudes and emotions, and uh, people bring all their problems with them. And so you don't, in a say a movement dynamic have the absolute discipline, which you have, you have the spirit of discipline...

QUESTION 17

INTERVIEWER:

OK, OK, BUT YOU'RE GIVING ME PHILOSOPHY AGAIN. I WANT TO KNOW WHAT THE KIDS DID, DID THEY RUN DOWN THE STREET, DID THEY RUN AROUND THE COPS, DID THEY DO SOMETHING LIKE THAT?

James Bevel:

Yeah, well, see all of that was like uh, all of that was part of within the tactical scope of what you're doing. In other words, um, none of them got outside the law in terms of what they were doing. They um...

QUESTION 18

INTERVIEWER:

I'M NOT SUGGESTING THAT ...

James Bevel:

I'm saying that, let's say like when we had demonstrations, uh, a demonstration planned, we call a blitz, OK, we said, OK now we're going down this street, and you're going to be confronted by the police. Now while these people being confronted by the police, we want these groups of students to go around the police and go down this street and wind up downtown because we want all of you downtown. Now, in downtown, um, you had not just morning praying people, you had students being students, singing, jovial, walking through stores singing, uh, but you didn't have nothing in terms of out of the ordinary because if you know anything about [telephone ringing] Birmingham, say, in um...

QUESTION 19

INTERVIEWER:

SORRY I THOUGHT THAT HAD BEEN TAKEN OFF

CAMERA CREW MEMBER:

OK THAT WAS A ROLLOUT ON 553, WE'RE GOING TO 554.

QUESTION 20

INTERVIEWER:

OK, UM, FINISH TELLING ME THE STORY ABOUT THE BLITZ AND UH, DON—TELL ME A STORY ABOUT KIDS BEING KIDS IN THE MIDST OF ALL OF THIS.

James Bevel:

Um... [laughter]

QUESTION 21

INTERVIEWER:

ALL RIGHT START THE STORY OVER IF YOU...

James Bevel:

Uh, well I'm saying see, um, I have to tell the story from my experiencing and how I was um, experiencing people and what they were doing in my environment. I'm sure that based on me running non-violent workshops and students seeing me as a non-violent teacher, their conduct around me probably would be different say, if they was around the street in the corner etc. But in relation to my experience in the young people in particularly in all of the confrontation processes in Birmingham, I would say that I had, uh, I had not met even the Birm—I mean the Nashville students who was on a college level did not manifest the kind of maturity and strength of character those young people in Birmingham. So that that, I think that that is what is phenomenal about that movement that you had the total high school population operating at a highly internal discipline, not in terms of external forces, but internal discipline than any movement I've seen. And I'm sure that, like I said, children are children, they act young people act like young people and they didn't always go around acting like you know, monks or anything like that. But uh, but in terms just in terms of respect and uh, decorum, um...

QUESTION 22

INTERVIEWER:

HOW DOES A SIX YEAR OLD GIRL RESPOND IN THE MIDST OF SOMETHING LIKE THIS?

James Bevel:

Well, that particular girl that you would see a picture in, say in the Martin Luther King book on why we can't wait, that little girl came to me and said, uh, I want to demonstrate. And I said, well, you're too little and beside you'd have to understand Jesus Christ, and Gandhi and all that stuff, and I said you've got to be born again. And she said, Well, I, I been born again. I'm member of a church and I've been baptized. I said, well, I still think you're too little and her mama said, well, she been thinking about it and she's not too little she goes to Sunday School-

QUESTION 23

INTERVIEWER:

COULD YOU HOLD IT DOWN IN THE BACK ROOM PLEASE? I'M SORRY.

James Bevel:

And she goes to Sunday School and she's um, she lives out her conviction. And my position, Well, if you, if you understand what the cross is about and you don't have no problem with getting killed and you don't have no problem going to jail, and uh, you understand that you can't sue nobody, cuz this is something you take up on yourself. If that's the way you feel, if you feel about it like I do, then you can get involved. Uh, and it was like on that basis, that uh, that young girl was involved.

QUESTION 24

INTERVIEWER:

OK NOW, SOMEBODY'S SPEAKING IN FROM THE KITCHEN JOHN, IS THAT IN YOUR SHOT? OK I HAVE SEEN A PHOTOGRAPH OF YOU, REV. BEVEL WHERE UH, YOU WERE USING A POLICEMAN'S BULL HORN TO TALK TO SOME CHILDREN BECAUSE I THINK THEY STARTED TO MISBEHAVE ONE DAY, I THINK—WONDER IF YOU COULD TELL US THAT STORY.

James Bevel:

Um, yeah that was the time I was, I was referring to. That we were coming off a demonstration and the police was using, was driving the students back with water and dogs and when we got back to the church, a lot of their dogs had come out of the community was watching. Now the students was

being playful and jovial and mocking the police, but the adults upon seeing a lot of the students knocked down by um, the water and the clothes torn off by dogs began to organize their guns and knives and bricks. And what I did, actually, was uh, was tell the students that they had to respect police officers and that their job was to help police and that uh, to keep order. And that the police was there to keep order and that uh, the people who was there probably throwing was probably paid as instigators and therefore we had to watch them. And it was like it was very effective, uh, it started all the students to pointing at adults who had rocks, and knives and guns and then the adults had to start dropping them and uh, because it would've started a riot and a riot would've gotten off the issue. And I think the students was very aware of that and the adults weren't aware of that so what we did, we got the adults that day say, maybe nearly a thousand to go into the church to go through the reasons why you don't use violence and the fact that we were in control and that we were uh, gaining because we were not using violence because the issues were being made clear. But um, that, that was like uh one of the spectacular events that that you got this policeman with a bull horn not knowing what to do with it and I said, Well, where's Bull Connor? And uh it was like, he, he said, uh well, he started looking for him, I said, well let me use your bull horn. So he just gave it to me, so when *I took the bull horn I said ,OK, get off the streets now, we're not going to have violence, if you're not going to respect policeman, uh, you're not going to be in the movement, and uh, you know. It's strange I guess for them, I'm with the police talking through the bull horn and giving orders and everybody was obeying the orders. It was like, it was wow. But, but what, what was at stake was the possibility of a riot and that, uh, once in a movement, once a riot break out, you have to stop, takes you 4,5 more days to get re-established and I was trying to avoid that kind of situation.*³

QUESTION 25

INTERVIEWER:

YOU EVER HAVE A RUN-IN WITH BULL CONNOR?

James Bevel:

Yep, I uh, one day, uh we, I had been out on a demonstration since eight that morning 'cuz the kids would come in, instead of going to school they'd come to the church, say about 6:30 on. And I started doing work shops, so I hadn't any food any water so the police was out all that morning also, so there was a lieutenant, so I said, well look man, uh, I don't want to leave them out here because, all these kids out here, so can I get some food off the truck? So he said, yeah, just get in line with my men, so by that time, Bull Connor came up and saw me in the line and he started screaming, he said, Get that nigger! He said, He ain't eatin, that's the city's food! [laughter] So the lieutenant said, I told him he could get the food. He can not have the city's... I mean he just went into a rage and it was interesting, because that's the point at which he actually lost control, uh, of his policemen. That when he carried on like that, and the lieutenant was saying, No, Reverend, you can have the sandwich, and Bull Connor was saying, He can NOT have the sandwich, and Lieutenant say, I told him he can have the sandwich. And it was like, it wasn't really between me and Bull, it was between Bull and his lieutenant. And so I said, Well Mr. Connor, if you, you know, don't think I should have your food, you can have your food back, and the lieu said, no you can eat the food. And it was like you know, something that simple and petty that the lieutenant was really, was really pushed in terms of seeing how petty he was and how um, how uh, negative he was about something that small. But, but that was to me a great day of confrontation in terms of he and his men, you know, and my eating the sandwich was interesting

CAMERA CREW MEMBER:

ON CAMERA ROLL 554, 50 FEET REMAINING SORRY 150 FEET ON 554

CAMERA CREW MEMBER:

AND FLAGS UH, JIM, IT'S ALL YOURS.

QUESTION 26

INTERVIEWER:

OK, TELL ME ABOUT HOW YOU HEARD ABOUT THE 16TH STREET CHURCH BOMBING.

James Bevel:

I was uh, on my way to Sunday School, I was in Edington North Carolina. Uh, had gone up to work with uh, Gordon Franks, who was our North Carolina and Virginia Field Secretary. So I was on my way to Sunday School, and uh, I was preaching that Sunday night heard about it on the radio.

QUESTION 27

INTERVIEWER:

AND WHAT WAS YOUR REACTION WHEN YOU HEARD

James Bevel:

Well, my first reaction when I heard about the bombing was um, anger, rage, uh, I felt that the bombing of the church was almost like a personal insult. That we had used the church and the young people and I was feeling that the, the reactionary forces or the Klan, or whoever, was trying to teach us a lesson. And it was like, uh, I guess I experienced it more or less as an insult than an injury. And uh, then I got information to the effect that some of the guys who was involved in it was from the uh, Sheriff department. And then I was thinking about uh, killing people. And then, uh, I had to do a lot to thinking about that. And that's when I started thinking about uh, what would be the appropriate response to that kind of situation.

QUESTION 28

INTERVIEWER:

NOW, I GET THE SENSE THAT IT WAS VERY OFTEN HOW YOU HANDLED THINGS, THAT YOU WOULD FEEL THAT BASE REACTION AND THEN YOU WOULD THINK IT THROUGH AND BRING OUT SOMETHING OF A HIGHER LEVEL FROM IT. IS THAT SOMETHING YOU DID OFTEN DURING THIS TIME?

James Bevel:

Yeah, I think that one of the um, um, I think it's natural for human beings to get angry when there's an intense violation and I think if a person don't have the capacity to get angry, I don't think they have the capacity to think fully through, uh, the implications of that which caused them to be angry. Um, so I've always had the, felt I had a right to be angry and express uh, my real feelings about that. Now, I did not feel that to carry out a conduct that's uh, as demeaning to a person as uh, as the person carried out was necessarily correct. Under the non-violent Christian thing, is OK, what you do is you relax and you work through the cause and then address the cause. But basically when something like that happens, my first response is to get angry and want to kill somebody.

QUESTION 29

INTERVIEWER:

NOW, ANDY YOUNG HAS TOLD US THAT, UH, AS A RESULT OF THE SIXTEENTH CHURCH BOMBING YOU AND DIANE NASH CAME UP WITH THE WHOLE IDEA FOR THE SELMA CAMPAIGN, UM, IF THAT'S TRUE COULD YOU TELL US HOW YOU THOUGHT THAT THROUGH?

James Bevel:

Yeah, well we were dealing with uh, well, if the Sheriff was involved in that and the Deputy Sheriff was involved in that, then the way we can stop the bombings is to give the black people the option to put Sheriffs and irresponsible law-makers and law enforcing agents out of office since they're elected by the people. So, rather than being mad and asking for Kennedy to send the army down and those kinds of things, let's take to the people, since all of the people are angry and all the people feel the shock of this um, violation. Let's take to the people a strategy and a plan for working on the right to vote. And what was interesting, all of the people bought into it, but the leaders had problems with it.

QUESTION 30

INTERVIEWER:

WHEN YOU SAY LEADERS, WHO DO YOU MEAN?

James Bevel:

Um, the NAACP people, the Urban League people, the AME people, the Core leadership, um, and in fact some of the people in SCLC, like Shuttlesworth, they had problems with it because it, it demanded a new um, commitment, it demanded an involvement, it demanded that we become engaged in the confrontation over the question of the right of black people to vote. And I think that all of them was aware that most of the violence perpetrated on, and toward black people was specifically for the purpose of disenfranchising them. So they felt that if we moved in that direction, we would probably reap a whole lot of violence uh, unprecedented and so I think that most of them was not willing to face that.

QUESTION 31

INTERVIEWER:

UM, AND OK, OK

CAMERA CREW MEMBER:

OK CAMERA ROLLOUT ON 554, GO INTO 555. OK WE'RE GOING TO STOP AT THIS POINT AND GO TO SOUND ROLL 1524

FILM PRODUCTION TEAM:

Camera Roll 555

FILM PRODUCTION TEAM:

Sound roll 1524

FILM PRODUCTION TEAM:

[Reference tone]

QUESTION 32

INTERVIEWER:

OK, BASED ON WHAT YOU WERE TELLING ME, I SENSE THAT UH, COMPARED TO BIRMINGHAM AND SIMILAR CAMPAIGNS, SELMA WAS A WHOLE NEW WAY OF THINKING. IF THAT'S TRUE WOULD YOU EXPAND ON THAT A LITTLE BIT AND TELL ME ABOUT THE DIFFERENCE?

James Bevel:

Yeah, um the other movements had um, faced um, was focused on public accommodations, uh, the right of a person to eat, the right of a person to uh, ride the bus and the right of the person to use a theater. Um, the Selma movement was to address the specific problem of disenfranchisement. Uh, which was different in terms of it wasn't asking for an accommodation, it was asking for a basic constitutional right. It was addressing the violation of a basic constitutional right, which is the right to vote. My thinking on that was that the American people would be more responsive to that than say, the right to eat or the right to ride a bus because that is more basic in terms of uh, an American principle, the right to govern yourself. That's very basic. There was a lot of debate and argument as to whether people, uh, would respond to that. Um, my position on it, was that if you uh, clarify for people in terms of the need to vote, people understood that, the problem was that they didn't see a way or means by which that could be accomplished. Um, I think once we showed uh, that that was possible if they wouldn't settle for nothing less, the question becomes what's possible. What's possible is what you want, what's yours is right for you to have if you don't settle for nothing less. And, and the point was in getting people to agree to settle for nothing less than that because there was no rational reason why any segment of the population should be denied the right to govern themselves. And it was, it was pretty easy to sell the people on that.

QUESTION 33

INTERVIEWER:

IN TERMS OF UH, SELMA, DO YOU THINK THAT, THAT WAS ONE OF THE BEST ORGANIZED CAMPAIGNS THAT WAS PART OF THE WHOLE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT?

James Bevel:

I would say that in terms of, uh yeah, probably more classical, and uh, better, probably thought out better, if you studied it in terms of Chuck Fagell's book or in other books, I think you'll find that the application and the response is probably uh, um, more accurate. I think it's because it's constitutionally clearer, I think there's a lot of uh, growth and discipline in the people who were involved um, and I think the need was uh, clearer and necessary and I think that's why it was maybe more of a classical movement than the other movements.

QUESTION 34

INTERVIEWER:

THE MOVEMENT DOES SEEM TO BE A LITTLE BIT OLDER AND A LITTLE BIT MORE SOPHISTICATED BY THE TIME YOU GET TO SELMA. IS THAT HOW YOU SEE IT, WHAT WAS THE BASIS FOR ALL THAT SOPHISTICATION?

James Bevel:

Uh, Experience, um...

QUESTION 35

INTERVIEWER:

GIMME A SENTENCE ON THAT.

James Bevel:

Um the, that which would allow us to be more accurate, more confident, more secure in the application of nonviolence, grew out of our experience, in experiments in Nashville, Albany, Savannah, um, Danville, Virginia, um, Birmingham, Greenwood, McCohm, Pinebluff, Arkansas, Um, Nashville, The Freedom Ride. I had gone through all these campaigns uh, when I got to Selma, so you know, it's like playing ball. Um, you are competent based on the application and the response in your ability to apply the principle, so that people were, were trained, they were accustomed to violence, they were not afraid, and they were, at this point, uh comfortable with the principles and application of non-violence.

QUESTION 36

INTERVIEWER:

OK, UM, ONE OF THE THINGS THAT HAPPENED OF COURSE ANOTHER TIME WHEN YOU TOOK A SAD MOMENT AND CAME UP WITH A MOMENT OF UM, VICTORY, OR AT LEAST A WAY OF ACHIEVING VICTORY WAS AFTER JIMMY LEE JACKSON WAS, WAS UH, KILLED. UM, I THINK YOU, THAT WAS WHEN YOU CAME UP WITH A VERY IMPORTANT IDEA. AND UH, ARE YOU GOING TO PUT THAT IN BECAUSE IF YOU'RE GOING TO PUT THAT IN AND MAKE A NOISE THEN MAYBE WE SHOULD STOP DOWN HERE BECAUSE YOU'RE GONNA ALRIGHT TELL ME ABOUT YOUR REACTION TO JIMMY LEE JACKSON'S DEATH.

James Bevel:

Well, um Jimmy Lee Jackson's death came at a point when I was recovering from pneumonia and a beating I had taken myself [unintelligible] all demonstrations in Selma. Um, so, James Orange came and told me that uh, Jimmy Lee Jackson, James Orange was a member of our staff who was in charge of Marion, Alabama and he came in and told me that uh, this guy Jimmy Lee Jackson a young deacon in Marion, Alabama had been shot and of course a few days later, uh, he died. I was getting out of the hospital myself. So, I asked him what was the situation. And he said, well the people are mad and they're going to, they want to riot, but I think what a significant thing that happened during the period in

which Jackson was killed, the state troopers had gone to Marion and had beat up all of the newsmen and had destroyed their cameras, tore up their pads and ran them out of town. So for the first time, the local and national press really started focusing in on the police violence and brutality. And it was that night that Jimmy Lee Jackson was, was killed. Well, when I went up, I had to uh, preach because I had to try to get the people back out of the state of negative violence. And out of a state of grief, now if, if you don't deal with negative violence and grief, it turns into bitterness. So what I recommend was that the people walk from uh, Marion to Montgomery which would give them time to work out in terms of what energy and thinking through their hostility and resentments and get back focus on the issue. And the question I put to them, Do you think Wallace sent the policemen down to kill the man or do you think that the, in the, in out of the pressures and the fears that the police overreact. Now, if overreact, then you can't go around assuming that Wallace sent the men down to kill. So what we need to do is to go to Montgomery and ask the Governor what is his motives and intentions and did he do that deliberately, and was that in fact, just an error that took place. And so the people agreed to do that. You know, it's like let's, let's further investigate. And my point with the people was that, you know, I don't have no problem with shooting people necessarily, but before you shoot people at least you oughtta have all the facts as to what happened so that you're acting rationally upon the law. So that you're not just indiscriminately going around mad, killing some white people that may be coming down the street. If the Governor sent the man down there to kill the man and you know that then if you want to deal with the Governor on violence, then you have the information. But first of all, do all your investigations and your analysis before you take an action. And the people agreed to that. So then they agreed to walk from Selma to uh, Montgomery to see the Governor.

QUESTION 37

INTERVIEWER:

WAS DR. KING SUPPORTIVE OF THE IDEA?

James Bevel:

Yeah. um, it's a, it's a, *in a non-violent movement, if you went back some of the classical strategies of Gandhi, when you have um, say uh, a great violation of the people and there's a great sense of injury, you have to give people a honorable means and context in which to express and eliminate that grief and speak decisively and succinctly back to the issue. Otherwise your movement will break down in violence and chaos.*⁴ So, so, agreeing to go to Montgomery was that kind of tool that would absorb a tremendous amount of energy and effort and it would uh, keep the issue of disenfranchisement before the whole nation. And the whole point was of walking from Selma to Montgomery, it take you five to six days, and which, which would give you the time to discuss in the nation, um, through the papers, radio, television and going around speaking what the real issues were.⁵ So it was like, we need time to educate all of America to this problem and by walking from Selma to Montgomery, that would give us the five or six days we need to address the nation.

QUESTION 38

INTERVIEWER:

AND WHILE YOU WERE WALKING WERE YOU AWARE OF WHAT WAS GOING ON IN WASHINGTON THROUGH ALL THIS?

James Bevel:

Oh yeah.

QUESTION 39

INTERVIEWER:

HOW DID YOU STAY IN TOUCH WITH IT? TELL ME ABOUT IT.

James Bevel:

Well. We uh, well, we had Walter Fauntroy, who was in charge of our Washington office. And then we had Gov. Collins, I think he was ex-Gov. Collins then, but he was like an emissary of something for, for, for Johnson

who stayed on the scene all the time. And then you had the Justice Department guys, who was on the scene all the time, so um, whenever you have a movement going of that proportion, we were always uh, in immediate communications with the um, Justice Department and the Executive branch of the government.

QUESTION 40

INTERVIEWER:

JUST BEFORE THE MARCH STARTED, OF COURSE, UH, PRESIDENT JOHNSON WAS ON NATIONAL TELEVISION ADDRESSING A JOINT SESSION OF CONGRESS AND UH, MADE THE UH, THE IMMORTAL LINE, UH, WE SHALL OVERCOME. AND UH, HOW DID THAT MAKE YOU FEEL WHEN YOU HEARD PRESIDENT JOHNSON USE THAT LINE?

James Bevel:

Well, I don't think it was that line in particular that that really set me off. I think it was the, I don't know whether you read the whole speech, um, but in my estimation that speech, uh, I think it's entitled now "We Shall overcome", I, I would suspect, unless, in my ratings, if I was to rate the Civil Rights speech of the 60's as the most potent, um, best speech, I would give that speech the um, the number one place out of the whole speech. I think it's a classical, in terms of a man rising above being a Southerner, being white and being anything and just in that moment, uh, was possessed by the spirit of being man looking at America, looking at the Constitution, looking at the struggling people. And I think there was a genuine sense of love and respect that went from Johnson to all people. And I think it's very clear in that speech that it is not a political speech it's more or less a sermon. And uh, it was the same effect that I get when I hear good preaching. It's uh, you know, it's like this guy is really saying it and he's not playing and because he is saying it and because he is not playing something is going to be done. And it was like that's the law. That the President is speaking he is not politicking, he's very serious about what he's saying and people hear him and they know that he is right and they're going to address the problem. And it was like uh, yeah, well, the movement, that movement is solved. Yeah, that's, we've solved the problem.

QUESTION 41

INTERVIEWER:

WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT JIM CLARK?

James Bevel:

Well, uh, big, uh, Jim Clark? Big, threatening, uh [laughter]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER:

OK THAT WAS A ROLLOUT ON 555, GOING TO 556

QUESTION 42

INTERVIEWER:

OK, TALK TO ME A LITTLE BIT ABOUT WHAT YOU SAW AS THE BASIC DIFFERENCES BETWEEN JIM CLARK AND A WILSON BAKER.

James Bevel:

Um, Jim Clark was um, was like a typical reactionary, um Southern Sheriff. Who in fact, it's interesting, he um, I used to see him all the time because he was dating a black woman that was lived about a block from the church. So his car would be over at her house, like when day break and all, you know, and um, and everyone understood that that was typical, see that's typical of the reactionary Southerner white Sheriffs. Um, um, his whole power base was based on the disenfranchisement of people and intimidating people. He had a posse of about three hundred people and he would ride around in motorcades with his posse and threatening folk, and this kind of thing and um, he was the Sheriff of the Country and Wilson Baker was, a um, was a, was a, what are called uh... City, um, Safety Commissioner, I think. And of course, he was from North Carolina. What had happened, he had married a woman from Selma, but he was a very um

well-trained police officer in other words, he had a concept of what police work was under a democratic system of government in terms of upholding the law. And of course, his position was that in that that was a science, that a man who had studied and mastered that science could be impartial in the enforcing of the law. And that's all he was interested in and he used to sit down to me and talk about, you know hours, about police work and police enforcement and all that kind of stuff. And on the other hand, there was Jim Clark who was the Sheriff who was negative, uh, threatened if you didn't act frightened around him, demanded that you uh, you know get down for him, all those kinds of antics, And of course, when you'd come around and act just like a man, he would go off, he would go off. Like when he jumped on Vivian, that was a problem that day, you know, he couldn't get Vivian to act cowardly and when a black man didn't act cowardly around him, he just, he went off. And uh, but he basically didn't know police work, um, he had based, uh, you know like the little fiefdoms in the, you read about in, in history, and he was, he'd remind you more or less of the guys, I don't think you ever knew them, the Sheriffs down in New Orleans, not in New Orleans, but in Louisiana. I mean, they was pretty much like Jim Clark. They had little kingdoms and they had these little armies and uh, Jim Clark operated pretty much like that.

QUESTION 43

INTERVIEWER:

LET ME JUST STOP YOU. DO WE HAVE A PROBLEM WITH THE SOUND HERE. SHOULD WE STOP DOWN? SHOULD WE? OK, DO YOU RECALL UM, WHEN YOU FIRST HEARD ABOUT EMMETT TILL? DID THAT MAKE A VERY STRONG IMPRESSION UPON YOU?

James Bevel:

Yes um, when I first heard of Emmett Till I think I was in Cleveland, or the Navy. Uh, I remember that era, it's 'bout '55, '54ish, and um, well, I'm from Itta Bena, Mississippi and the next county is Sunflower County and Ruleville, so it's, uh, the gin, uh fan belt that the fan that they put on his body came from a gin, uh, the Gibson gin right in Itta Bena where I came from. So it had, uh, a real effect upon me in terms of, um, that kind of South had to be changed and had to be dealt with. But uh, I remember that very vividly in terms of how it affected me and how it affected all the people around me.

QUESTION 44

INTERVIEWER:

YOU WERE INVOLVED IN VERY MANY CAMPAIGNS, YOU'VE TOLD US ABOUT QUITE A FEW OF THEM TODAY, WAS THERE A TIME WHERE YOU FELT LIKE YOU WERE REALLY PART OF SOMETHING THAT WAS BIG, SOMETHING THAT WAS, COULD BE CALLED A MOVEMENT RATHER THAN JUST BEING A PERSON, AN INDIVIDUAL THAT WAS OUT THERE FIGHTING ALONE? YOU REALLY FELT LIKE YOU WERE PART OF A LARGE MOVEMENT AT THE TIME?

James Bevel:

Yeah, well I was uh, of the impression that, uh, the movement was an act of God in history. Uh, and that I was simply one of the persons that he had called forth to be involved in it. And I saw it, uh, comparable to the Moses movement out of Egypt, um, um, any of the movements of that proportion. That here was a people who had been uh, oppressed and that they were going to change that condition and that that is an act of God and that uh, that you have to be faithful to God in order to get him to do that. See, cuz, see the proposition is that you ask God to remove the oppressor because you're not going to kill the oppressor. Well, in order to get him to do that, you gotta do what he said to do. So, I feel myself a part of the God Movement or historical Church Movement. That it's the church it's God moving in history eliminating oppression, and war and all that, and I'm a part of that.

QUESTION 45

INTERVIEWER:

WAS THERE ANY PARTICULAR TIME WHEN YOU FELT LIKE YOU SAW THAT, OR UNDERSTOOD THAT, AS SOME EVENT THAT REALLY TRIGGERED IT INSIDE YOU?

James Bevel:

Yeah, I um, um, I guess I started uh that kind of feeling whenever King, King spoke. Uh, when I first heard King speak and when I started hearing him and listening to him when he'd come to Nashville. That it was obvious to me that he was not motivated by, say, political ambition, that his motivation was altruistic and theological. And that he was scientifically correct, and that uh, when a person is scientifically correct, and what they're doing is not designed to injure anybody, uh, it's designed to help everybody, then it has to be motivated by God, because the individual motivation is selfish. OK, so when I said, Now, he's not doing this for money, he's not doing this for reputation, cuz he'll mess around and get killed, right, so he's got to be doing it because he's really have a love for black people and a love for white people. So as a minister, he really did love all the American people and he saw it as a contradiction between brothers, so he was not like a black racist, or a black nationalist. So he approached it as a Christian minister. So in that sense, I felt that it was a part of the historical, um, abolitionist movement. You know, I read a lot of Gandhi's books, a lot of the um, Quakers' movements, and I felt that I was a part of that stream of history that addressed the whole problem of oppression.

QUESTION 46

INTERVIEWER:

NOW, LET ME JUMP BACK TO SELMA. WHEN YOU MARCHED FROM SELMA, FINALLY ARRIVED IN MONTGOMERY, DR. KING GAVE VERY FINE SPEECH ON THE STEPS OF THE UH, THE COURTHOUSE, OR UH THE CAPITOL AT THAT TIME, HOW DID THAT SPEECH FEEL FOR YOU BECAUSE YOU'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT DR. KING'S WORDS. HOW DID THAT SPEECH SEEM TO YOU THAT DAY? WAS THERE SOMETHING SPECIAL ABOUT IT?

James Bevel:

Um, well, not particularly in terms of his deliverance. Um, the speech in Montgomery was nothing like the opening speech for the campaign back in January that he'd made in Selma, I mean where he really uh, preached in terms of laying out his intentions. Where he really was like perfect as a preacher, But the uh, Montgomery movement was like a culmination of uh, a culminating of the, summary of where we were. And it was like, I was pretty confident uh, based on the speech and based on what Johnson was saying that the basic work, the basic proposition that we would get the right to vote without a lot of problems, I was confident that that would happen. Uh, but to me that was not say, one of his greater speeches. The greater speech to me was the speech that he made at Selma, I think around January the 1st.

QUESTION 47

INTERVIEWER:

AFTER SELMA, MANY THINGS ABOUT THE MOVEMENT WERE NEVER QUITE THE SAME, SNCC SORT OF CHANGED ITS PHILOSOPHY WITHIN THE COMING YEARS. SO, AND UH, IN SOME WAYS THE ENERGY DISAPPEARED, DID YOU FEEL THAT SLIPPING AWAY AT THAT TIME? DID YOU SENSE THAT MAYBE YOU WERE AT A TURNING POINT IN THE MOVEMENT'S HISTORY?

James Bevel:

Well, yeah, see what happened, it's not to me, it's never the change in the philosophy, it's the abandonment of principle. What keeps the potency in a movement is the principle being applied. And um, and applied to the need and the problem. Um, the need uh, at the time was for the blacks and whites in Alabama to be reeducated to participate in a democratic government responsibly. And I had proposed, that uh, we boycott Alabama and call for a new election and in the proposal, it stated that the universities, like say, Boston U. would take say Jefferson County and each university would take a County and would engage in social education and

political education, economic development education which would cause the people to think scientifically and academically about living in community rather than the age old pattern of black and white. Uh, I lost that struggle within the movement and Hosea Williams came up with a scheme called, Scope. And uh, when King got caught up in that and spent a half a million dollars, wasted time and money, in a scheme called Scope. And to me, that is what threw the movement off because we should have pursued uh, the educating of people so that they could functionally carry out good government from the precinct through the beats on up to the legislative districts, in the, you know, in the counties. And to me, we failed the people when we didn't uh, complete completely take them on to a process of democratic government. Uh, when King made that decision, to put the staff and the money under the auspices of Hosea, I simply decided that I would come to Chicago and apply non-violence to the whole question of open housing so, that's what I did.

QUESTION 48

INTERVIEWER:

SOUNDS TO ME LIKE YOU THINK THAT THE FAILING OF THE MOVEMENT THEN WAS IN THE AREA OF EDUCATION.

James Bevel:

Well, yeah. It's an area of, the application of non-violence to what is the next problem. In other words, see, the movement is a dialogue you know, and so you've got to follow the logic of the dialogue so you say, well, look man, says now, I've taken a bath, the next move put my clothes on. Well, now, you've got to put your clothes on because you've finished your bath. Ain't nothing else to do. So you can't pretend like you haven't finished your bath, and you ain't gonna put your clothes on. So we come to a point where the government say, ok yeah, people can vote. Now the next step is, OK, now that the people can vote, then let's make sure we do what needs to be done so people can responsibly handle that vote. Now if you don't follow through on that, then you're not going to get the kind of growth, and strength and development and clarity and the lack of fear, and the intimidation and harassment and the age-old um, hostilities can be dissolved if you go through an educational process, see. And uh, I think when we didn't do that, I think, we uh, let the people down and we violated the non-violent movement and we violated our constitution, of uh, uh, responsibility. We was, as church, as a church, as a Southern Christian Leadership Conference, as ministers, as American citizens, you have a responsibility to follow through on that kind of work, cuz that's a constitutional proposition. And when we didn't follow through, I think that injured people, and it injured the movement it injured, and it lessened the dynamic and the potency of the democratic process

CAMERA CREW MEMBER:

THAT WAS A CAMERA ROLLOUT ON 556. OK THIS IS ROOM TONE.



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