

**Interview with Wyatt Tee Walker**[Table of contents](#) | [Add to bookbag](#)**Interview with Wyatt Tee Walker**

Interviewer: Callie Crossley

Production Team: B

Interview Date: October 11, 1985

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Sound Rolls: 1505-1506

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

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INTERVIEW

FILM PRODUCTION TEAM:

Sound Roll 1505, Camera Roll 509-512

QUESTION 1

INTERVIEWER:

REVEREND WALKER, WHEN WAS THE MOMENT THAT YOU FELT PART OF THE MOVEMENT AND, AND NO LONGER AN INDIVIDUAL?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

When did I feel a part of the Movement? I guess uh, you... when you speak of "The Movement" I suppose you refer to the halcyon days of the '60s. But I always felt as an individual that I was a part of that invisible fabric of black people who were struggling for justice and freedom. I grew up in a home with Fred Douglass on the wall. My daddy, a Baptist preacher like myself, was a race man. And uh, my first sit in was at nine years-old at a theater in a little town in southern Jersey where I grew up, which didn't allow black folks, colored as we were known then, to come in. So, I've always felt involved in the struggle against systemic racism.

QUESTION 2

INTERVIEWER:

WE'RE GOING TO ALBANY NOW. WHAT WAS SCLC'S ROLE IN ALBANY?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Well, in Albany we were like firefighters. The fire was already burning

and uh, I try to say this as charitably as I can, uh, SNCC was in over its head. And they wanted the international and national attention that Martin Luther King's presence would generate, but they did not want the input of his organization¹, uh, nor his strategy altogether, which was considerably different from the methodology and strategy of SNCC.

QUESTION 3

INTERVIEWER:

HOW DID DR. KING SEE HIS ROLE IN YOUR OPINION?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Well, he felt he was between a rock and a hard place. Uh, he could not say at Dr. Anderson's invitation that it won't work into my schedule or I can't come, because non-violent struggle is what Dr. King was about, and it was under the aegis of his leadership uh, that it was introduced on the American scene. It had been introduced before, but Dr. King introduced it on a mass scale. So it was a natural place for him to be, but without having organizational input and control. I don't think that's a bad word since he had more at stake than anybody else other than the community of Albany itself. Uh, I just—I know he was aware that uh, it was a very difficult uh, campaign for him.

QUESTION 4

INTERVIEWER:

REMEMBER TO INCORPORATE THE QUESTION IF YOU CAN. WHAT WAS THE STRENGTH AND THE WEAKNESSES OF THE ALBANY MOVEMENT?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

The strengths of the Albany Movement was it was perhaps the first time in this period of struggle of black people that we had mobilized an entire community against segregation. Uh, you had the rather formidable resources in terms of people and resources of the black church of one accord. Uh, you had a community galvanized against a system to which they had been accustomed for so long. And uh, the chief weakness was uh, in my view, was the internecine...²[unintelligible background conversation]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER:

[CAMERA ROLL] 510 IS UP ON [SOUND ROLL] 1505. [TAKE] NINETEEN IS UP.

Wyatt Tee Walker:

The weakness of Albany was that there was some internecine warfare, so to speak, or organizational jealousies which were understandable. Uh, but because Dr. King did not have veto power in the situation it got out of hand. Uh, the other weakness had to do with uh, I guess an understandable error in judgment that the Albany Movement made in attacking anything that was segregated. It diluted our strength and uh, we could not, uh, for the earlier weakness, deliver any sense of victory, or reconciliation to the people of the Albany Movement, and they just got tuckered out, so to speak. But it was a... in my judgment uh, even though the late Lou Lomax, his assessment from—nine hundred miles away that it was an utter failure—I think it was one of the most significant movements in the whole development of non-violent struggle in the South and in the nation.³

QUESTION 5

INTERVIEWER:

WHY DO YOU THINK IT WAS SO SIGNIFICANT?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Well, for two important reasons. One, we learned how to mobilize an entire community for an assault on segregation, and secondly, we learned that valid and crucial lesson that you must pinpoint your target so that

*you do not dilute the strength of your attack.*⁴ And had there not been an Albany we would not have had a Birmingham, which in my view is one of the chief watersheds of non-violent struggle uh... in this movement.

QUESTION 6

INTERVIEWER:

BACK TO THE TENSIONS BETWEEN THE ORGANIZATIONS, IT IS SAID THAT YOU WERE THE PRIMARY REASON THAT THERE WAS TENSION BETWEEN SNCC AND SCLC. HOW DO YOU SEE YOURSELF?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Well, it has been said that I was the primary reason for tension among the organizations. If they need somebody to put it on, my shoulders are broad enough to take it. That wasn't uh... that isn't really accurate. Because I was Dr. King's Chief of Staff, then of course, I was the point man. In any kind of organization or movement uh, your charismatic leader, in our tradition, there's always somebody who's got to make the tough decisions. And I was the organization man. And so, uh, whereas they would not want to confront Dr. King, uh, in his presence, then I became the lightning rod. But properly so, because I insisted that if you want Dr. King's presence and you want his resources, that is the money of SCLC, then Dr. King's got to have some say-so about the methodology and the strategy that's going to be utilized. And I was in charge of that. So, uh, in that view, uh, probably so, but uh, as I say, in my judgment, for sound reasons.

QUESTION 7

INTERVIEWER:

AROUND 1960, WHAT WAS THE NEED DID YOU FEEL OF SCLC TO HAVE THE SINGULAR LEADERSHIP THAT YOU SEEM TO FEEL IS SO IMPORTANT, UM, AND THAT SINGULAR LEADERSHIP BEING AROUND DR. KING?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

I didn't think we had to have any singular leadership. I just felt if SCLC was involved that Dr. King ought to have say-so, input, and if necessary, veto power on what was being done. Uh, we did have a different uh, operations methodology. Ella Baker was the guru of the SNCC arena, and she had a very strong, uh, view that you must have collegial leadership, and it wasn't necessary to have a spokesperson. Well, I ask you on the American scene to point to any movements that have succeeded other than having a strong spokesman, e.g. John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers. Um... I'm trying to think of the automobile fella, who, he... I can't... I can't think of his name now. But movements on the American scene, in the West and probably [laughter] in the East as I think of Dong Chow Ping, have always been more successful and productive when there is a spokesman rather than this collegial arrangement, e.g., the Politburo of the Soviet Union which keeps on stumbling along with its uh, attempts at Marxist theory and what its production quotas are as far as feeding the people of their... of their land.

QUESTION 8

INTERVIEWER:

I WANT TO GO DOWN A HIT LIST AS IT WERE HERE AND ASK YOU TO RESPOND TO JUST THE NAMES OF THESE PEOPLE IN A VERY SHORT FASHION, LIKE ONE OR TWO SENTENCES. UH, CHARLES SHERROD?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Charles Sherrod, a very dedicated uh, and earnest young man. Grew up in uh, my church in Petersburg. For the record I helped him with his college education, and he's still uh, in the trenches in Albany, sits on the City Council.

QUESTION 9

INTERVIEWER:

CORDELL REGAN?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Ah, I did not know Cordell Regan very well, but I knew he was an activist and very skilled in mobilizing young people, and he's presently in New York, and uh, I never had any uh, untoward relations with him of which I'm aware.

QUESTION 10

INTERVIEWER:

YOU DON'T HAVE TO TALK ABOUT THEM NOW. I'M JUST INTERESTED IN THEM BACK THEN. JAMES GRAY?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

James Gray. That's the publisher?

QUESTION 11

INTERVIEWER:

THE EDITOR OF THE ALBANY HERALD.

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Well, uh, typical southern...

QUESTION 12

INTERVIEWER:

START THAT AGAIN.

Wyatt Tee Walker:

James Gray uh, was a typical southern racist journalist, a product of his times.

QUESTION 13

INTERVIEWER:

BULL—I'M SORRY. WRONG PERSON. LAURIE PRITCHETT.

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Ah, Laurie Pritchett posed as a sophisticated law enforcement official. Uh, a better... a more apt description would be slick. And uh, he was not non-violent as I've seen some people write. He was non-brutal.

QUESTION 14

INTERVIEWER:

WOULD YOU EXPAND ON THAT A LITTLE BIT FOR ME?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Well, he developed the reputation that he was using Dr. King's non-violence to blunt Dr. King's, uh, campaign, which was not true. The foil for our non-violent campaigns in the South had been the uh, anticipated response of segregationist law enforcement officers such as Jim Clark, in Selma, and Bull Connor in Birmingham, Alabama. Laurie Pritchett was of a different stripe. He probably had finished high school, and uh, as I say, uh, I... *I think the apt description was slick. He did have enough intelligence uh, to read Dr. King's book, and he culled from that a way to avoid uh, confrontation and inducing the great uh, ferment in the national community by being non-brutal rather than being non-violent. It's... it's... it's almost—it's bizarre to say uh... that a segregationist system or a law enforcement official of a segregationist system could be non-violent. Because first of all, you... non-violence works in a moral climate, and segregation is not a moral climate.*⁵

QUESTION 15

INTERVIEWER:

WHAT ABOUT THE LACK OF RESPONSE FROM THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AT THAT TIME?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

We were very disappointed in the lack of response of the federal government. One of the sad things of this era is that the federal judges who were appointed by Democratic administrations were the chief stumbling blocks to the enforcement of constitutional law. And I think it was Judge Robert Elliot, uh, in Albany, who issued the injunction. Here again, Dr. King was in a... in a dilemma, because in the history of this republic, our court of last resort had been the judicial branch of our federal government. We never got very much from the Congress. We couldn't depend on anything other than rhetoric from the administration, but if we could get our case before the Supreme Court there was a measure of justice that we could anticipate. Now here in this very difficult campaign, on one of the traditional questions of segregation that affected customs and mores, it was the federal judiciary that blocked us. And it was crucial because uh, in a campaign like ours which depends on mobilizing people, it was definitely a ploy to uh, kill the morale of the movement and drain it of its momentum, while there was this so-called thirty or sixty day cooling off period, whatever it was at the time.

QUESTION 16

INTERVIEWER:

I WANT TO ASK YOU ABOUT DR. ANDERSON, A REAL QUICK RESPONSE. WHAT DO YOU THINK OF HIM?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Oh, Dr. Anderson was an unusual lay Christian and osteopath physician in the Albany community. He was a Morehouse man which some say makes him special. And he had, at least the... dynamics of the preacher figure in his speaking style and in his verve for justice and equality. And so in a very real sense, he was a preacher figure. The strain of the movement got to be uh, heavy for him to bear. And uh, you know, his house was the command headquarters, and his family was involved and uh, his practice was going to pot, and he was receiving threats and that kind of thing, but uh... a heroic figure, without a doubt.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER:

WE'VE JUST RUN OUT.

QUESTION 17

INTERVIEWER:

BIRMINGHAM ON THIS NEXT ONE. WHAT WAS THE SOURCE OF THE TENSION IN YOUR ESTIMATION IN ALBANY?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

The root of the tension in Albany was connected to what I said earlier, is that...

QUESTION 18

INTERVIEWER:

Uh...

Wyatt Tee Walker:

No?

QUESTION 19

INTERVIEWER:

DON'T SAY WHAT YOU SAID EARLIER. JUST SAY WHAT IT IS.

Wyatt Tee Walker:

The root of the tension at Albany had to do with the absence of Dr. King having veto power on the strategy, e.g. the bus company indicated its willingness to desegregate the buses when there was a court decision. SNCC's posture was all a loaf or none. The result was that uh, the bus company went bankrupt, and the black people who made up seventy percent of its ridership were inconvenienced and the Albany Movement had no semblance of a victory. And that was uh, that caused the morale to deteriorate. Had Dr. King had the right of veto, he was... have acknowledged that this is not what we want. We can't have the buses desegregate tomorrow morning, but at least you've got the commitment of the bus company to desegregate when we get the ruling. And it had been... already been a legislative precedent in the Montgomery bus protest. So it would not have been of such long duration. And it was that that produced the tension along with some other minor things.

QUESTION 20

INTERVIEWER:

AND JUST... IT SEEMS A DIFFERENT VIEWPOINT THAT SNCC HAD IN TERMS OF LEADERSHIP AND DIRECTION AND...

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Well, yes...

[unintelligible background conversation]

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Problem with sound?

QUESTION 21

INTERVIEWER:

THE SIREN OUTSIDE.

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Oh.

[unintelligible background conversation]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER:

Has there been any kind of a formal reunion of the SCLC staff, uh, in the last four or five years?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

The closest thing that I know other than the annual conventions at which a great many of us attend—I was in Montgomery this year—is Gil Noble just did a, uh, I don't know how many hour show, with Abernathy, Andy Young, Dorothy Cotton, who else? Fred Shuttlesworth and myself, and it looks like it was someone else. But that was... and that was the first time we had all been together to sit down, and talk about, and reflect on King. Looks like it was someone else. Abernathy, Shuttlesworth, Walker, Cotton, Andrew Young... had to be somebody else Talking about 150 people. But the inner circle, we're talking about, I would say of the last year of my administration and probably the first year of Andy's which would include, well Blackwell's dead, T.Y. Rogers is dead. Bevel would be one. Bernard Lee certainly would be one, uh, and those that I've already mentioned. You know, Dorothy Cotton, Septima Clark. Septima Clark is quite aged now, and has lost the vision in one eye.

[unintelligible background conversation]

QUESTION 22

INTERVIEWER:

OK, I WANT YOU TO GET TO A LITTLE MORE OF THE DIFFERENT VISION THAT YOU SAW AND HOW YOU RELATED TO SNCC THERE AND ON MAY 1st?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

The tension grew out of the different stance of the two organizations. SNCC was essentially a shock troop operation and they were well suited to that because they had no mortgages to pay, no jobs to go to, no prior commitments to wives and/or husbands and children. SCLC's stance had to be more measured because all of us came to Albany or to any situation with some prior commitments as pastors of churches, as husbands or wives, as fathers and mothers of children. So we could not just pick up and go. The acid test of being committed to the movement so far as SNCC was concerned, as I perceived it, was that would you go to jail and stay? Well uh, I didn't particularly agree with that then, and I don't agree with it now, you know. There are some other things that you may do other than go to jail. But SCLC's operation in that sense was uh, far different from SNCC's, and that made it almost impossible for us to work together cohesively.

QUESTION 23

INTERVIEWER:

BIRMINGHAM... WHAT WERE THE SPECIFICS OF THE PLANNING THAT YOU DID FOR BIRMINGHAM?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Well, I wrote a document—I forget how many pages it was now, probably seven or eight typed pages—called Project C. And I always had a little Madison Avenue streak in me, and uh, I gave things, denotations of a sort—it meant confrontation. My theory was that if we mounted a strong non-violent movement, the opposition would surely do something to a) attract the media, and b) in turn induce national sympathy and attention to what everyday, the everyday segregated circumstance of a black person was like living in the Deep South. We targeted Birmingham because it was the biggest and baddest city of the South. And Dr. King's feeling was that if non-violence wouldn't work in Birmingham then it wouldn't work anywhere. And I think we were cognizant of the fact, and fearful that probably King, Abernathy, Shuttlesworth, Walker, and maybe Young would not get out of Birmingham alive. I know when I kissed my wife and four children good-bye in February and went to Birmingham to set things up, I didn't really believe I'd ever see them again.

QUESTION 24

INTERVIEWER:

I WANT THE SPECIFICS. I READ THAT YOU DID STUFF LIKE COUNTING THE STOOLS IN THE LUNCH COUNTERS...

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Yes... Project C uh, was about, uh...

QUESTION 25

INTERVIEWER:

TELL ME AGAIN. WOULD YOU START LIKE WITH YOU KNOW, THE SPECIFICS OF THE PLAN I DREW UP OR WHATEVER. HOW IT...

Wyatt Tee Walker:

The specifics of Project C had to do with making the presumption that we had 300 people committed to go to jail, to stay for a minimum of five days. My idea was that we could take that 300 and march them at ten and twelve a day, uh, with the presumption that something would happen and it surely did, uh, which would in turn—people admire heroism, and then they imitate it—that that would create a groundswell of support in a community was not totally committed to an all-out attack on segregation. *Learning by the Albany circumstance, I targeted three stores, Positz was one, I don't recall the other two stores now. And since the 16th Street Baptist Church was going to be our headquarters I uh, had it timed as to how long it took a youngster to walk down there, how long it would take an older person to walk down there, how long it would take a middle aged person to walk down there, and I picked out what would be the best routes. Under some subterfuge, I visited all three of these stores and counted the stools, the tables, the chairs, etc. and what the best method of ingress and egress was.*⁶ Now, it occurred to me that we might not get into the stores

downtown. They might block us from getting downtown, uh, so we had to have secondary targets. I then targeted the federal installations, uh, Social Security, the Veteran's, uh, where there were some eating facilities. Our tertiary targets, I had gone out into the surrounding suburban areas and looked at some variety stores, Woolworth's, M.H. Lampston, in these shopping centers as the third target. And I felt that with those primary, secondary, tertiary targets we would be able to do something. In addition to that I spent time with the lawyers, uh, Arthur Shores, to be absolutely familiar with what the laws of the City of Birmingham, Jefferson County, and the State of Alabama, so that we could anticipate what the legal moves would be on the part of the law enforcement officials. And that was I think a judicious move, because when the injunction came we had expected it, and we knew that we were going to break the injunction even before we came to Birmingham. So that, those were the essential pieces, the legislative research, the practical, uh, research so far as roots and whatnot and then the recruitment and training of the people who were going to submit to jailing first.

QUESTION 26

INTERVIEWER:

CAN I HAVE ANOTHER LITTLE SHORT HIT LIST, WHAT WAS...
START WITH JAMES BEVEL.

Wyatt Tee Walker:

James Bevel had... had one of the best...

CAMERA CREW MEMBER:

[unintelligible] start that again, I was...

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Alright. James Bevel had one of the best tact—tactical minds in our movement. And one of the best uh, facilities for analyzing uh, segregation as a system and what it does to black people. As you know, he was a native of Ittabena, Mississippi, and anybody who grew up in Mississippi in his generation certainly had all of the emotional and psychological scars of what, uh, segregation does to them. So he was, uh, hyper-sensitive to it, and he drew very strong analogies as to how you had to fight the enemy. There was no one—[unintelligible background conversation].

CAMERA CREW MEMBER:

MOVING ON TO TAKE TWENTY-ONE. CONTINUATION OF
WYATT TEE WALKER INTERVIEW. [unintelligible background
conversation].

Wyatt Tee Walker:

...any better at mobilizing young people. Well, I was about to finish a sentence, I don't know whether you want me to finish. There was no one any better at mobilizing young people than James Bevel. And uh, had it not been for him and probably... the support of help of Dr. Cotton with her song leading skills and Andrew Young, Andrew Young to some extent, um the influx of the school children into the Birmingham equation might not have taken place. I think he was a skillful tactician and without being immodest, I think the combination of James Bevel and Wyatt Walker was unbeatable.

QUESTION 27

INTERVIEWER:

DID YOU KNOW YOU WOULD BE CRITICIZED FOR THE
CHILDREN'S CAMPAIGN? FOR THE USE OF CHILDREN?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

We presumed so, but that didn't bother us. We knew we were right. One of the uh, basic tenants of the non-violent philosophy is that it is the kind of struggle in which everyone can participate—young, old, children, adults, blind, crippled, halt, lame, whatever—because it is a moral struggle. And I think someone quoted me as saying that six days in the Jefferson County Jail would be more educational to these children than six months in the

segregated Birmingham schools that they were attending.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER:

I'LL TAKE DOWN ON THAT.

Wyatt Tee Walker:

...this so forth with key figures, you know, visually representing—It's going to be on in the Martin Luther King library in Washington, D.C., and they're going to dedicate it on the new holiday. So we did this against the backdrop of the mural in process. It's fantastic and some of the likenesses... I mean it looks like E. D. Nixon is going to speak.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER:

OK, HERE WE GO AGAIN. [unintelligible background conversation].

QUESTION 28

INTERVIEWER:

OK, WHY DON'T YOU TELL ME...[unintelligible]

Wyatt Tee Walker:

It's sad to me that even from this brief historical vantage point in history that we do not appreciate the significance of Birmingham. One must realize that the customs and mores that had been in place for more than a hundred years changed abruptly with the Birmingham campaign. And uh, it just gets lost among other civil rights campaigns. For me, Birmingham is the chief watershed and is really as significant as the Civil War, but it was fought without guns and muskets and without the shedding of blood, in the sense of the bloodletting that went on uh, within the nation.

QUESTION 29

INTERVIEWER:

A QUICK REFLECTION ON BULL CONNOR.

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Well, he served our purposes well.

QUESTION 30

INTERVIEWER:

START WITH [unintelligible]

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Oh. When I think about Bull Connor, I always think of uh, the baseball analogy that he gets an assist for Birmingham, because without the prototypical figure of a white racist law enforcement officer, it would... it would... the Birmingham Movement would not have accelerated and built up the momentum as fast. I often wonder why Bull Connor didn't have somebody smart enough around him to say, "Let the niggers go on to City Hall and pray." You know, he would stop the march everyday, and our purpose was to go to City Hall and pray. If he had opened the Police cordon and let us go down there, after three or four days it's an old story. He never had enough intelligence, or anybody around enough intelligence to let us do what we wanted to do. Instead he was fixed on stopping us, and that became the flash point of the dogs and the hoses and of the national and international attention in the 1964 Civil Rights Bills.

QUESTION 31

INTERVIEWER:

WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE FIRST DAY HE USED THE FIRE HOSES AND THE DOGS?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

The use of the fire hose and the dogs were on two separate occasions. The dogs came early and were not used on demonstrators; even the revisionists

who write about Birmingham now have missed that. I stumbled on a ploy early on as to how to create uh, a confrontation. I had promised Dr. King, he told me, you've got to find some way to create a confrontation. I said, I don't know what it is, Leader, but I'll find out. And our demonstration on a given Sunday afternoon was very late, two or three hours with morning services and whatnot, and a crowd collected of a thousand people waiting to see what was going to be done that day. And A.D. King and uh, John Porter, and Nelson Smith led a group of twelve or thirteen people, and they were arrested in six or seven minutes. Now this crowd had been out there waiting for an hour or so and they, you know, nothing had happened, and before long, somebody was taunting the police dogs. They were out there in full array, and that's what created the confrontation. The next day, UPI carried the story, "1,100 March in Birmingham—Dogs Used." I got on the phone and called Atlanta, I said, "Leader, I got it." He say, "What is it, Wyatt?" I said, "What we're going to do is delay the demonstrations until the people get home from work in the afternoon, and let the, let the, let the onlookers collect." I said, "And we can count on Bull Connor and his folks to do something silly." And that is how the confrontation began with the dogs. The water hose was another circumstance. By the time we got to D-Day plus 2, there was no place else to put people in jail. The Jefferson County jail was filled, the City Jail was filled, the Bessemer Jail, the Ainsley Jail, uh, they had people out at the fairgrounds supposedly in jail under arrest, and at the city auditorium there, we had 4200 people in jail. So they decided what they would do is break up the demonstrations before they got started and this was when the children came. And that's when they started using the fire hoses. The so-called "Battle of Ingram Park" was not a battle. It was a roman holiday. We were in the midst of negotiating whether the marches would continue and the onlookers had gathered. And the business of the fire hoses being used to skitter people down the sidewalk around Ingram Park were onlookers, they were not a part of the Movement, so to speak, they were bystanders.

QUESTION 32

INTERVIEWER:

WHAT ABOUT THE NIGHT THE GASTON MOTEL WAS BOMBED AND YOUR WIFE WAS, WAS BEATEN? WHERE WERE YOU?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

That was a... that's a, a very ugly night in my memory when I think about the night that the Gaston Motel was bombed. The agreement had been formally agreed upon early Friday morning and Dr. King and Shuttlesworth and Abernathy had issued a statement. This was the Friday before Mother's Day. The task then before me was dismantle Birmingham. I had put it together. I had not been home to see my family in eleven or twelve weeks, and Martin, almost as an afterthought said, "Wyatt..." said, "Everybody's leaving, and somebody from the National Staff needs to be here," and he asked me would I stay. I said, "Well, you know I haven't seen Ann and the children in eleven weeks." He said, "Well, I'll tell you what, SCLC will pay for them to come to Birmingham." So my wife and four children were in Birmingham. My wife and two of the, the two eldest children—the two youngest children were in the Motel—and two were staying out in the city with friends. And the Motel was bombed Saturday night. Well, I went first because I heard this explosion, and someone called and said it was A.D.'s [King's] house and I went out there. While we there we heard another explosion, and I feared the worst. It was the Motel. In the midst of that, uh, I am told that uh, the State Troopers, who Al Lingo had brought in, told the people to go to where they lived, and my wife turned to go to her motel room, and this uh, state trooper hit her with a carbine, split her head open, sent her to the hospital. And of course, they had been in the Motel when it was bombed. A UPI reporter from Mississippi—I never shall forget it—Bob Gordon, who was a segregationist up to this time, saved my life probably, because I asked which state trooper had hit my wife. I was there within a matter of minutes. I'd been out fighting fires, and he pointed him out and I started for him. And this white reporter from Mississippi, Bob Gordon, tackled me and threw me to the floor and held me until I, you know, it occurred to me that I... that you know, they'd, this guy would take this automatic rifle and shoot me as quickly as he had brained my wife.

QUESTION 33

INTERVIEWER:

I NEED TO ASK YOU ABOUT THE NIGHT OF... THE MOB SURROUNDED REVEREND ABERNATHY'S CHURCH IN 1961. CAN YOU DESCRIBE THAT NIGHT, THE EVENTS THAT HAPPENED?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

The night that the mob attacked Abernathy's church was during the break in the uh, delayed Freedom Ride. Do you remember? The buses went to Anniston and got burned and bombed. And the students in Nashville led by Diane Nash, Bevel, and John Lewis came to Montgomery to pick it up. They said that they shouldn't allow terror and violence to stop it. And the SCLC gave the students their support, and we were in a rally that night at Abernathy's church. I guess it was a Sunday night as I recollect. And this mob of Klansmen and other sympathizers came with a couple of truckloads of cinder blocks and they took sledgehammers and broke 'em into pieces. Their strategy was to throw teargas into the church and flush us out and as we come out they would stone us with the broken pieces of cinderblock. In the midst of this, uh, around 10:30-11:00 o'clock, we were surrounded and Dr. King instructed me to get Bobby Kennedy on the phone. You know, we had our own sense of propriety. Dr. King was the President of SCLC and John Kennedy was the President of the nation, and in a sense I was Dr. King's Attorney General so the Attorney Generals should talk to each other. So I called Bobby Kennedy and told him that our lives were in danger and there was this mob out there, and he told me he had sent the FBI and tell me, it's hard to tell the FBI from the people in the mob, these federali— federal marshals. And then he asked to speak to Dr. King, so I let him speak to the President, you know, and somehow, Dr. King got what I thought was a weird idea, that the only way to satiate the frenzy of this mob was for the leadership to go out and give ourselves up. And I knew this man was crazy, but... even though I was scared to death and didn't want to go I went on out there with him. About the time we got out there the teargas was flying and a brick flew over Dr. King's head, and hit Fred Bennett on the ankle and, then a teargas canister came and Fred picked it up and threw it back at the mob. And by the time we got around front, these 400 marshals against this mob of a couple thousand somehow repulsed them. So that's why we didn't die that night. And we stayed in that church all night long and left at daybreak the next morning under the cover of uh, the National Guard, which during those early morning hours, Bobby Kennedy had federalized under Brigadier General Graham, as I remember.

[unintelligible background conversation]

QUESTION 34

TEAM B MEMBER:

...GO INTO THIS AND THEN YOU KNOW THE QUESTION, BASICALLY, YOU DON'T EVEN NEED TO LOOK AT CALLIE EXCEPT MAYBE JUST FOR THE CONTINUATION OF THE SOUND, BUT, UH, YOU KNOW, JUST EXPRESS WHAT YOU THINK— THOUGHT ABOUT YOUR BEHAVIOR THAT NIGHT WITH .
[unintelligible].

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Well, if Bob Gordon had not wrestled me to the floor, uh, I think aside from me probably losing my life or being seriously maimed or injured, it would have done irreparable harm to the non-violent movement. Because here was Dr. King's top lieutenant, chief of staff, attacking a... a police officer. And I certainly would have been the aggressor. That's the way it would have appeared, uh, however, I, you know, I just wasn't thinking about anything, except that my wife, you know, they informed my wife had been injured and hit with a carbine and that was the man who did it. Now uh, the non-violence has many different levels, and at this stage in my life and career, I was committed to non-violence as a way of life, but for me there was no prohibition against me protecting my home and family. And with an attack, a physical attack on my wife, I guess in my mind, this guy was fair game and it didn't even occur to me, uh, you know, that he had an automatic weapon, you know. It's just one of those human responses. And uh, upon reflection, you know, hindsight is 20/20, I'm very grateful that this white UPI reporter from Mississippi, stopped me uh, aside from the physical harm that might have come to me uh, the smear that would have been potentially available to place on the non-violent movement. And one of the things that I think is so fantastic about the non-violent movement, is that it's hard to find any single occurrence of retaliation in our movement.

when you consider it was in eleven southern states, innumerable demonstrations and campaigns, and... and we became the victims of violence. I... in my time at SCLC, I never heard once of any retaliation on the part of a demonstrator. I've known of times when we had demonstrators who, who left the line, who left the demonstration because they said they couldn't be non-violent, they just... they, they needed to do something else. They couldn't take it. And that was a part of the genius of our orientation and training under, again, Jim Lawson and James Bevel, to uh, role play how you've got to act in the face of being burnt with cigarettes, and spit upon and called ugly names etc. I think I might say, if I may, in my own defense, that in Monroe, North Carolina in the Robert Williams fiasco, I was attacked by one Van Vicory, 6'6", 240 pounds on the courthouse steps, and knocked down twelve or thirteen steps. And at that time, uh, in that moment, my concern was that as black folks congregated around the courthouse in southern communities then, I did not want to be a black retreating in the face of a physical attack from a white man, so I went back up the steps. At this time the deputies had grabbed him. He obliged me and knocked me down a second time, and I... with this still in my mind I went back up the third time and he knocked me down those steps the third time. I went back up the fourth time, and when I saw them turning him loose again—they'd make a show at trying to hold him—I said, "Look, what are you going to do? Let him kill me." That was about the nearest I came to any defense, and then they grabbed him and carried him away. And uh, arrested him for uh, something, some minor charge which was quickly dismissed.

QUESTION 35

TEAM B MEMBER:

LET ME HOP IN HERE [unintelligible]...AND THAT IS BOTH IN ALBANY AND IN BIRMINGHAM, THE PRESS CLEARLY PLAYED A ROLE. ANY QUICK COMMENTS ON THE ROLE OF THE PRESS IN THOSE TWO?

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Well, the press played a far more crucial role in Birmingham than they did in Albany. At the Albany stage of the non-violent movement in the South, the press didn't understand what was going on. They thought Dr. King was a trouble-maker and... I mean these are mostly southern guys, you know. And for the most part they were guys, they—I can't remember seeing a female reporter, see. By the time we got to Birmingham that crust of their southernness was beginning to crack with what they saw. And Birmingham, with its raw and brutal, uh, terror on black folks and its history. I saw a CBS camera—I'll never forget one—Larry Pierce with tears running out of his eyes when he saw what they did to the children and the young folks and turning the dogs and whatnot. And I think we had a lot of converts uh, in the press corps at Birmingham, such as we had never had before or since. I mean if they didn't get with this movement at, uh, at Birmingham, they probably never did get with it. One of the people that I remember, well, I can call several names. One you'll know, Dan Rather...

[unintelligible]

Wyatt Tee Walker:

...Herb Kaplow, Bruce Golfan of The New York Times who was a segre... a mild segregationist at heart, but when he got ready to get a Neiman fellowship he asked Dr. King to write a letter of recommendation. That's how much he had changed. Eugene Patterson, who was one time the editor of The Constitution, The Atlanta Constitution, did almost a 360 degree turn. I just thought of another piece. I don't know whether I'll give it to you. I can't think of the Rabbi's name. He was the reigning rabbi of Atlanta in 1961, '62, when Ivan Allen succeeded Hartsfield as mayor. He served as the broker to get Ivan Allen, the new mayor, an avowed segregationist, in a meeting with Martin Luther King, Jr. Ivan Allen will tell you this. Ivan Allen said that after a half an hour in Dr. King's presence all of the segregationist feelings that he had just peeled right away. And as you know, Ivan Allen became one of the heroic political figures of the South. Andover Hartsfield Airport. I was being paged. Early that day Mrs. King had had John Lindsay call me and ask me would I come down and take care of the... the uh, organization of the funeral business. And when I answered the page it was Ivan Allen on the phone, who had been, I had been his chief protagonist, in the early in his Mayoralty. And he said,

"Wyatt, I just wanted to make sure you were in town. I know that now that you're here everything's going to be alright." So it's uh, it's interesting that the power and influence of a man like Martin Luther King, Jr., which of course was incorporated into the movement that he led and symbolized.

QUESTION 36

TEAM B MEMBER:

THANK YOU. GREAT.

QUESTION 37

INTERVIEWER:

Now...

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Ma'am.

QUESTION 38

INTERVIEWER:

DR. WALKER, YES, I NEED TO GET SOME PRODUCTION STILLS OF YOU ON CAMERA AND ALL THE PEOPLE...

Wyatt Tee Walker:

Ok, I'll be glad to cooperate with you, darling.

[unintelligible background conversation]

