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William Henry Chafe Oral History Collection

INTERVIEWEE: Nelson Johnson

INTERVIEWER: William H. Chafe

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WILLIAM CHAFE: The last time we talked I guess you were emphasizing how important you thought that Principal [Franklin] Brown's role was in the Dudley [High School] episode, that his refusal to—he just died very recently, I guess, a few days ago—

NELSON JOHNSON: Oh, really?

WC: Yeah.

NJ: I didn't know that.

WC: But how, if he'd been willing to take a less rigid stance, that that whole issue would not have necessarily resulted in the way in which it did result. Now you were—was SOBU [Student Organization for Black Unity] just starting at that point?

NJ: Founding conference. That was the founding conference that was going on on the ninth of May. The activities at [North Carolina] A&T [State University] reached a peak around the twenty-first, twenty-second of that period. So it was just starting.

WC: What kinds of communication existed at that point between—was there any kind of negotiating framework with people you would think of as the power structure, or were there people who were in touch with the power structure who were in touch with you?

NJ: It was more of the second. There were people in touch with the power structure who were in touch with us, which didn't necessarily mean that we would always meet with the power structure.

WC: Yeah.

NJ: But actually, it was the traditional leadership in Afro-American communities, such as NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] that we had an extremely good relationship with—Mr. [George] Simkins, [Henry] Frye—that we met with periodically and had discussions. The united front among Afro-Americans at that particular period was fairly good. We had clear and sharp differences methodologically, and I think as it worked out also in terms of, well, the extent, you know, that we would go to represent the interests of the masses of people. But there was a lot of unity as well against national pressure that kept the framework there. So that was in 1969, I think, as high as it has ever been.

WC: Do you think that it was high at least in part because of the way in which the Dudley crisis evolved? In other words, was it kind of forged even closer by the repression that took place?

NJ: Oh, it was. No question about it. After the A&T/Dudley revolt, it was a group of five or six people, you know, who called for a civil rights investigation.

WC: Yeah, B. J. Battle and—

NJ: Well, A. S. Webb.

WC: A. S. Webb, right.

NJ: Frye, [the] president of Bennett College. I can't think of his name right now.

WC: I was going to say Miller.

NJ: Isaac Miller, right, and myself, and we sat down and discussed this thing out. Actually, Isaac Miller and myself—we had been struggling with him, too. We had struggles at his campus and all. But it was clear that this was an assault on an entire people. In other words, this would not have occurred if the underlying question of national oppression were not there across the board. And I think however they articulated it intellectually, they all recognized it. And it was pretty difficult for anybody purporting to be leadership or to speak for black people at all, to come out too strong against that. I mean in other words, they couldn't spend time attacking us, you know, in relationship to what the state was doing, so they had to switch their emphasis to the state, even though internally, inside meetings and stuff like that, it was more like pleading, you know, "Y'all shouldn't be militant and bring all the trouble and stuff. Try another way," stuff like that. But the basic unity was around the fact that the problems that we were fighting were real, a lot of this unity on how we should fight them.

WC: Now I gather that at some point—I should tell you this: I don't know what took place the night after Willie Grimes was shot. But when there was that—when the policeman was wounded, one person who was there told me that the National Guard had actually done that shooting of the police ambush, what was called the police ambush. I'm not sure whether you have any ideas as to what happened there or how that happened, but what I wanted to ask you about was whether you or whether you knew about people who were aware that the sweep was coming. In other words, how clear was it that the sweep was going to happen?

NJ: You mean n the morning that they swept Scott Hall?

WC: Yeah.

NJ: Yeah, people knew about it. They had radio communication.

WC: With—in other words you could pick up the police radio?

NJ: We could monitor their radio.

WC: Could monitor the police radio, so that—

NJ: That's why [there wasn't nobody in there?]

WC: Right, yeah.

NJ: [Except people who lived there?]

WC: Now I don't want you to say anything you don't want to say at this point, but at least what I understood is that there was a fairly large cache of weapons there which were then taken out through the heating conduits and stuff like that—does that correspond to your sense of what happens?—so that whatever weapons that were there wouldn't be found.

NJ: That's basically correct. I think it's pretty clear that people did defend themselves, you know, and were able to do so with some strength that made it impossible for the National Guard to penetrate [unclear] and that wasn't a question of throwing rocks at powder puffs.

WC: Right, right. Is there anything that you can tell me about the Willie Grimes murder that's not generally a part of the public record?

NJ: I think the more [phone rings] authentic documentation of Willie Grime's murder is in—public, right. I'm sure the police have more—was in a story by the *Greensboro Record* in which they laid out—

WC: The eyewitness.

NJ: —sketch, the eyewitness. I think the reporter did a fairly good job of investigative reporting, and he put together a pretty good picture of it. That corresponds to my understanding of what happened; that it was in fact the police.

WC: I was—you know, I was fairly impressed by that also, and I wondered whether there was something else that you might have known from other sources that would be—

NJ: No, we helped him get that story. We pulled together witnesses, people who were in the same bunch, you know, who were running and that type of thing.

WC: Right, right. I don't know if you have ever seen the—I got a hold of the minutes, the log, the regular log of the police radio that night.

NJ: No, I've never seen it.

WC: It's very interesting document.

NJ: What does it suggest?

WC: Well, it basically just gives you a minute to minute thing of when they call the APCs [armored personnel carriers]. And it doesn't suggest anything other than the *Greensboro Record's* story, but it does make all those things fit together very much in a way which is consistent with the *Greensboro Record's* story. And it does not suggest that there was gunfire from the car going to the hospital, although later on that's what was claimed by the police.

Well, there are a whole series of—I guess one of the things that strikes me about the period right after May is that two things are going on. One, there is in a sense, as you've indicated, an even higher degree—probably the highest degree of unity within the black community around issues on which maybe you and others were taking the lead, but on which there was solidarity of support, beginning, I guess, with the Civil Rights Commission hearings, but then moving on into the school cafeteria workers strikes, the rental strikes, sanitation men strike, things like that. So that's one theme that I see coming out of '69.

The second theme is a kind of pulling back from the point of repression that had been reached by—pulling back by white economic and political leaders who recognize that that can't continue, or if it does continue, it's going to hurt them in terms of their interest. And hence [there is] an effort to respond to some of the issues that are on the table that have been put there by—especially by the more traditional black leadership. So that there's a response on that side which basically is trying to restore the city's progressive image and at the same time perhaps have the effect of separating, let's say, your faction of the movement from an older faction of the movement by bringing some of the older people or the more traditional leadership into positions of influence in the city, whether it be city council or city manager or citywide boards or whatever. But that—as that happens, for at least a period of time, the unity remains, and that the only—the unity remains because the issues are ones which did not specifically evoke the tensions that do exist over methodology and over politics.

But the one issue which is bound to raise those issues in an unavoidable way is the desegregation issue. And that in a sense, the segregation issue is the wedge which finally does, in some extent, create those divisions or make them more open. And that from one point of view at least, what the whole effort of '71 amounts to is a very skillful kind of divide and conquer process. Does that—how do you feel about that capsule?

NJ: Well, I think it's generally correct. We didn't have the understanding of the busing issue then that we have now, right, and there were some weaknesses in our presentation of what it was in essence. But it was clear that it wasn't right the way it was happening, and that it took just demand of an earlier—[tape error]—for integration, which we were for, you know, stripped it of its content, basically, and sold the farm at our expense. And it turned the whole thing inside out, you know, in the sense that the essence of the struggle against national oppression is against real things, and it's against oppression around jobs and housing and education. That's reflected in the schools, whole schools, whole communities. Now the question of whether busing rectified that or not, the federal government was putting forth that it did, because it integrated. We were putting forth that it didn't, and further more it created a warped sense of your being, in that the solution to your problem was proximity to somebody else physically.

WC: Right.

NJ: So there was a struggle. And actually it never really got clearly struggled out in the sense that it was integration versus separation, which was an incomplete, incorrect presentation of the question. So you're able to get people to fight over that, particularly when you're not able to thrash it out clearly and are able to point-by-point win people to it. And even the clarity we had on it was so very deliberately distorted. It's clearly part of a national pattern. All that occurred nationally and, in fact, it's still occurring.

So, right, in retrospect, like I think it achieved what the state wanted to achieve with it. All of my understanding of that period is that, aside from us here, that overall reformist programs developed by the government were bending momentarily in the direction of concessions precisely to destroy the force the unity, you know, that was actually capable of making the demand and replacing it with individuals in positions that would have, if they were continually tied to their base, been better able to articulate their demands. But they were—the whole point was to put them there and cut them off, right, and it was the kind of people that lend themselves to that, given their career ambitions, that type of thing.

WC: Yeah, yeah. And that was—of course it took place over a long period of time, but probably there was no other issue on which—at least as I looked at it—there was no other issue that could have so effectively created that wedge, because the issue in a sense evoked the symbols of—dealt with issues of both Black Power and with issues of working within the system, as opposed to working against the system. I wonder if—what I guess I'd like to do is talk a little bit about some of the details of that period with some of the people that—was there a point, for example, at which maybe you and Reverend [Otis] Hairston or you and Cecil Bishop or you and Henry Frye would have tried to thresh out this issue in terms of what was coming down and in terms of your response to it?

NJ: Well, we did try to thresh it out to some extent.

WC: Would those have been the people you would have done it with, or were there other people?

NJ: [Unclear] [Wells?] was one other person [faculty?]. I can remember us meeting in her house to discuss it and the logic of what we were saying she accepted, you know, that it would be good if we had schools in the black community that were fully equal, in the full sense of the term, which also meant that the overall standard of the community had to be raised. The education thing was obviously tied to jobs and all of that, right. It's saying that that's not the real world. That's kind of the way that it was coming down. So we have to get what we can get, right.

And, see, it was kind of like you're dealing with idealism. You're dealing with something that's not achievable, and so we have to take this opportunity to integrate with them as a step. And see, it did offer something for a class within the Afro-American community. It really spawned class division, first of all, in which the petty bourgeoisie could see more opportunities of upward mobility for their children, and the masses of people could see basically less attention to the historical lack of education and adequate education, which is actually coming down now in a more disgusting and disguised form

of competency test things. [It's] exactly the same thing. And it's having something of a similar affect in terms of splitting people.

WC: Dividing, yeah.

NJ: It poses—you know, it set off as a way of improving the situation, and like busing, it has nothing to do with that.

WC: It's also a very difficult issue to make a very simple and clear case on, because it gets so—

NJ: Although, I think that our capacity to do so on that question [was] much better than it was, see, on the busing question. Because it's clear now that you cannot isolate these questions. You cannot say that people like [Governor James] Hunt or whoever pushes these things have really gotten the education bug and that they're somehow are all together just interested in improving education, have become miraculously locked into this rather simplistic thing that's happening nationally, that everybody's come to the understanding that something as simple as a simple test has been the missing link for all these years. So we're able to, like, inside make a good argument in terms of not just what's wrong with that but why it's being done. That's something that wasn't clear on the busing question.

WC: It sounds—from some of the things that you would say back in '71, the idea was there, but the elaborations on the idea that you're talking about now didn't seem to be there.

NJ: No, it wasn't. The—it really wasn't, I mean in the sense that over here on the one side, this busing thing was pushed by the left wing of the Democratic Party, the liberals who had had a historical alignment with the Afro-American national movement coming down through King. The same people who pushed for reducing the militant character, for example, of the March on Washington. It's the same label, liberal, democratic, petty bourgeoisie, Afro-American leadership central that was coming right down through the whole thing. They were most equipped to persuade the Afro-American national movement to go in this direction, see. And it isn't a question of all the people in the Afro-American national movement who agreed with that. Particularly our leadership saw themselves as selling out or saw themselves as doing something not in the interest of the whole people. But it was precisely their reliance not on the masses of people but on liberal democrats that continually lead them to accept these arguments and stuff.

WC: One of the senses I guess I have was—with a few exceptions maybe; maybe you can help me to know who they are, but—that there were a lot of people who really didn't care

about the universal ratio of 60-40 or 70-30, that there were a lot of people who, in a sense, completely identified with your position, but were caught up in the fact that they'd been so long committed to the other agenda that now they had no alternative but to see it through to the end. That in other words, to have switched positions, let's say, in favor of having majority black schools in the black community, would have meant in a sense turning their backs on a psychological and political investment that they had made for a long time.

NJ: Yeah, and this was really built up. That's very true, right. See this thing [was drummed in?]. The whole integration thing was hammered away at, and it replaced, right, the real issues, see. I have developed more respect for the slimy sophistication of the ruling class [laughter] in terms of how they are able to bend over a period of years, whereas people who are struggling against them tend to think in shorter spurts of time.

WC: Right. More immediate objectives, yeah.

NJ: So they can bend your way, you know, for a long while and begin to like accommodate things as long as their laying the ground work to throw it all back the other way later on. [laughs] So the whole struggle around like integration and segregation and separatism, you know, Muslims and all that, all this stuff was being kind of pushed along through the late sixties, and there was a clear, clear nationalist sentiment that saw all white people as a problem. That was egged on to a large extent, in opposition to another trend. So basically people began to see the two trends as integration and separation, all right. And even when that wasn't, you know, what people were saying, it was still pushed. At a certain point, people have a commitment to what they thought they were fighting for, so the way this question is presented is, "Look how we suffered and look how we died for this thing. Now—I mean we can't turn back now."

WC: Yeah. There's a famous editorial that [John Marshall] Kilimanjaro [formerly Stevenson] writes that says exactly that. I mean it's, you know, "We cannot now give up what early generations have struggled through such sacrifice to achieve."

NJ: And precisely what we were giving up was an opportunity for a good education.

[Recording paused]

WC: Was this—was there really a sense of like—did there come a point when there was a sense of open clash where, let's see, you would be on one side on this issue, and Simkins and Kilimanjaro and Bishop would be on the other side? Was there that very clear sense of conflict?

NJ: Was there a setting in which those things were—as close as it came—I mean clearly there were two clear distinct positions on this at which we stimulated some activist activity around Dudley, trying to build a sense of resistance on the part of the students that they really strongly opposed. First it was a gentle fear, right, that even though they had united around the whole A&T thing, the ruling class continually pushed that we were responsible for the children getting into trouble out there. And see that keeps cutting through. People forget what really happened. They just remember the large pictures and jail and stuff like that.

So that thing was beginning to happen again, so we had a couple of big meetings. One big meeting I can remember very clearly at St. Matthews [Methodist Church]—it was covered in the *Carolina Peacemaker* —where we took the initiative to call people in the community, public meeting. And I imagine there were a hundred and fifty, maybe two hundred people. It was a good representative group, at which the two positions were really struggled out. We took a vote and an overwhelming majority agreed with us, I guess. But people like Mr. [Abraham] Peeler, for example—who was principal at one of the schools here, had been retired—NAACP representatives with a very emotional [unclear], argued their position, and to some extent had to use the argument of the state against us, in other words, the whole separatist, kind of prone to violence, too militant, you know. So more and more the argument against us was adopting part of the states' argument which was coming down, which necessarily meant you had to respond to that. And I think we conversely adopted some similar arguments back at them as complete sell outs, [Uncle] Toms, stuff like that, right. But this whole thing, see, there's always a class division in there but—

WC: Which you have been able to bridge over things like the cafeteria workers strike and stuff like that.

NJ: And this was precisely what was being broken down by the state, that it was able to exploit the inherent contradiction and make them antagonists, whereas we had been able to previously resolve them, you know, in a way that had us more and more uniting against them and not able to split our ranks. But then part of the leadership against us, although not in a complete sense that they were, but objectively, you know, that's the way the process was developing, and to some extent has developed now.

WC: Since then.

NJ: Since then. Although I think right now that the character of the oppression, national oppression, is leading to a period in which that's going to be turned around. Not just the character of the national oppression, but also, I think, a deeper understanding on the part

of people within the black liberation movement who have tried to represent the base, tried to represent the working class in that—understanding a lot more about how to give leadership in such a way that you can unite with the people.

WC: I guess I had a sense also that there came a point during that period of conflict when in effect you recognized that you couldn't win this battle and basically decided rather than to promote it to an open confrontation, to kind of pull back a little bit. As the debate developed, it became clear that the established leaders were not going to pull back, they were going to go all the way with this. Some of them were already involved with the CCS [Concerned Citizens for Schools] and other things. And that—I had the sense at least that at some point you decided not to push it to the point of an open conflict. Is that fair or is that not true?

NJ: Objectively that's true. The level of consciousness around it was partial and it wasn't sharp. I have always worked for the unity in the community and have been very conscious of that and have been conscious of being isolated. It's always been clear to me that that was going on, that the attempt to isolate was going on. But another thing that was happening at the time that lead to minimizing in general the struggle against national oppression here, was beginning to take up more deeply the outlook of Pan-Africanism, which in actual point of fact was semi-escapist in the sense that it promoted the idea, right—it had a good aspect to it, too—but it promoted—

[End Side A, Begin Side B]

NJ: —with Frye. I have quite a bit about that, Frye, as we worked so hard during the election.

WC: That's right. I mean the other side of this whole thing, of course, is all the steps that you're taking to remain part of that coalition helping Frye get elected, helping—was it SOUL? Was that the organization that was working for the black colleges?

NJ: Oh, yeah. Right.

WC: You and [Lewis] Dowdy and a bunch of other people are appearing at dinners together or at least ate dinner together.

NJ: Right, yeah. We invited Junior Vaughn[?] up. He'd just talked about the vice president at the democratic conventions sometime before, so he's able to help us draw people. He still has an ear for what we're doing, so we're able to sit down a talk to him. He's able to convey it to some of the other people. So all of that's going on.

But basically that's pothole solutions, in the sense that it didn't really grapple with the fundamental thing. See Walter [Johnson] was appointed school board—chairman of the school board for the city, and see that put him in a position of enforcing this jump. So we struggled with Walter, you know, privately. We should have struggled with him more publicly. [laughs] And it was always a thing of understanding, you know, like, "I understand where you're coming from—but," and then it goes off to elaborate a whole other position.

WC: And all of this is taking attention away, in your mind, from the more substantive issues of class, jobs, housing, and stuff like that.

NJ: It does take it away from that, right. The education thing is quite an important issue and has been historically. There has been a lot of history around that on the way up. And it still represents, right, a particular kind of issue that involves the future of children and stuff like that. A lot of emotional stuff comes out around it, and understandably so. That was the case then, so it wasn't—it did pull you away from other issues, but it was more in the way it was addressed.

Right now, it's pretty clear right that all this nonsense about if you pass the competency test you get a job—which is the equation essentially that [Gov. James B.] Hunt is putting forth, but he won't pin himself down to it. Passing the competency test has nothing to do with getting a job—or learning. There's just not that much to it anyway. But the whole thing here was like, the whole—see, that's the motor behind tremendous concern about this question, because it's precisely a question of how my child is going to do, whether he was going to get a job, whether he was going to have a better life. And that's the driving thing. You know, it's the same thing about the competency test. In every parent's heart is the hope that the child will be able to get a decent job and live a decent life. The competency test promises that, when is articulated by Hunt.

Busing promised that, right. Busing hasn't to do with that. It's pretty clear. I think we do have the responsibility now of going back and dissecting that. You know, people have to kind of step back about six years and see how they were thinking in order to appreciate this new game that's coming down.

WC: Yeah. One of the questions, I guess, that we haven't talked about but is just kind of implicit in everything we've been saying, is the role of the [Greensboro] Chamber of Commerce and Hal Sieber in effect putting out connections to people in the black community and in effect building his own coalition. I guess I have a fairly clear sense of what you think of that, but I wonder if there's—at what point do you think you became aware of just what was going on there, and how did you seek to combat it?

NJ: Well, Hal has always been a [foreign?] person to me. Just personally the way he comes on to people is overaggressive and false and phony. [laughs] You sense that in him, which really defined the limitations of what he was able to do eventually. But he was a very treacherous person. I don't mean to individualize it. I know that was the program of the chamber which represented the interests of the people who ran the city here. But he did in fact worm his way around to everybody. [He would] try to build ties and friendships, and to the extent that he was forced to try to appear sympathetic to what we were doing, and attack it at the same time. It's kind of like I can understand why they've been driven mad. In other words, I can appreciate the historical oppression, but they're mad. [laughs] In other words, this kind of an artificial sympathy, and that's kind of the way that, you know, these guys really mean well, but they're going about it the wrong way. And you guys have really got to come in and do a little more, and so breakfasts and lunches and stuff like that was his technique. See, it was less a question of recognizing at least superficially what was going on, which I've known for a long time. It was more the question of the inability to figure out what to do about it.

I've just recently been reading some of Bobby Seale's stuff. It was clear, for example, that the [Black] Panthers recognized that they were being set up to be assaulted, to be murdered, but they weren't able to figure out how to break through it, and they just got trapped in there. So it isn't like they ran into a hail of bullets without any knowledge that they were being come down on. And that had to do with—we didn't have a tradition of struggle and history that was bequeathed to us directly, and you had to kind of find your own way out of this stuff, right. The Communist Party USA could have possibly done that if it had not gone another direction altogether. I know when I came here I didn't even know what was happening in this town up until I came here, I mean gradually, piece by piece. So it isn't like you had any way other than relying basically on your own experience and talking to other people, figuring out what to do. And that's extremely small compared to the awesome power that you're up against and the availability of accumulated techniques from around the country and over a period of time for busting up these type of things.

So that's why I've tried to like—in retrospect, people keep asking, "What happened to the sixties?" and a kind of sense of a depression, hopelessness. And the thing that people have to appreciate, you know, [is] the tremendous force that was thrown at us, the tremendous set of things buying and corrupting and slandering and jailing and murdering. It was in the wake of that force that the movement bowed. It would have anyway, but it gives you some appreciation for what people did do in those circumstances. It's precisely understanding that concretely that allows us to be able to push this thing much further. It's clear that the flow is coming again, how deep it will cut, how long is—you can't say for sure.

So anyway, I mean the thing is—back to Hal—[we] instinctively knew what Hal was doing, but we just didn't have a way of uniting the community.

WC: Because his effectiveness was at sharing it off and building those alliances.

NJ: Yeah, and they had things to offer like money.

WC: Yeah.

NJ: [laughs] And Hal even, you know, women and stuff. I know all the different ways Hal dealt.

WC: See that's, of course, exactly the kind of thing that one can't say in a book. [laughs] But I know what you're talking about. But when you say money, was there ever—was there an exchange of money? Would there have been an actual buying off in literal terms of—well, let's say—I guess I have a sense that Hal's strongest connections were with Kilimanjaro, with Bishop, and with to some extent Hairston, although a lesser extent. And he never really made inroads with the Simkin], I don't think. The Simkins never really trusted him.

NJ: Right. I think it was, you know, not exchanging cash behind the bush in the [unclear] kind of thing, but he could facilitate them getting things they would otherwise not get. Let's face it, Bishop and Hairston and all those would engage in building programs, houses, in which they became the landlord, which put a guard between us and the landlord. All this was happening. And it was all hooked into redevelopment. You could get a little better deal based on how [unclear] on things. They could make it a little rougher on you, you know. In fact, they could make it so you couldn't get it. It was like that kind of thing that I know was going on.

Like Hal offered me a job. He didn't offer me money, right. And this is kind of the false flattery of like, "A guy like you could really go places. I really need you to help. If you're ever interested in work, good paying job. It doesn't mean you have to give up what you're doing," which was the whole point, right. [laughs] So he's made that offer to me. And I don't even know if he could have fulfilled that or not, because he did throw a lot of bluffs out.

But it's pretty clear that he could—he would try to find out where your weakness were and he would come that way. Flattering people sometimes was sufficient. People like to be thought of as more than they are, so you tell them that, and they feel good about it.

WC: Did you ever try to organize, for lack of a better phrase, a consciousness-raising session around the issue of Sieber? I mean did you ever try to get people together to kind of try to—?

NJ: It was more like person to person. I discussed Hal with almost everybody, but I never tried to forge an organized block against Hal. Hal has been able to do things, right. Let me give you an example. We were having a meeting around the housing problem in a church, Frank William's church, in fact—who has his own history, but he—he would help, and his community was—or his church base was hooked into this community. So he let us have a meeting there and all.

We were there and we wanted to discuss tactically how we were going to proceed. So Hal came to the church and asked the minister was this meeting closed to white people. [laughs] So the minister, being an integrationist, said no, it wasn't closed. So then he came down to come in the meeting, right, which I stopped him at the door. We were in the basement, right. Then he went back up and told the minister. Then the minister came down all mad talking about, "This is the house of God," and so we had to go outside, right, to try to thrash this thing out. It objectively put us in the position of letting him come in, because it wasn't our church. He set this kind of thing up, right. So we never had—and it's probably something we should have had—a real collective get-together to dissect that, not with the broader people operating with students and stuff.

WC: But then that episode actually served to cause problems for you with some of the traditional leadership—

NJ: Yeah, precisely.

WC: —because it made you appear to be aggressively—

NJ: And then he would come in and come off understanding, as if he's trying to help. "I know that you think I'm going to do something." He was really a worm like that. See, that also defined—I think he conceived himself to be slicker than he was, because after the real edge is off of this thing, those kinds of guys are not generally liked.

WC: That's true.

NJ: So they get fired.

WC: That's true. There's no way—there's no way he could come back to Greensboro. There's no way. Although there are other questions involved with—I mean I want—the way he's fired, how he's fired, when he's fired, had something to do with what he's been doing, as well as—I mean what he's been doing in the community, because in a sense he's no longer needed, you see, I think, and so—

NJ: Worked himself out of a job.

WC: Yeah, to the extent that he's already fulfilled the purpose that others have had for him, then he too becomes expendable. But that gets into the kind of thing I really want to close with. I'm confronted with this incredible problem of writing a conclusion. [laughs] And trying to get a sense of just what does, you know—what has and what hasn't happened in twenty years time. In a sense, I guess, I want to ask you about what happens to the movement after '72. Clearly there is an ebb. In some ways the alliance, the unity that you have forged together with others in the years around and then following '69 begins to disintegrate over the school desegregation issue. What kinds of thoughts do you have about—what does happen after '72 in terms of where the struggle is, how—how the balance sheet looks at that point, what's happened sense then? Are we simply back to a situation where the " progressive elite" is now riding high without any threat at all or any insurgency at all, or are we at a—? It's those kinds of questions.

NJ: Well '72 really up to '76 was—I mean '72 started the bottom out sometime and '74-'75 gradually began to pick back up and is getting back about to a normal period headed to a flow. I think it's a continuous motion that's pushed by a large economic lever on the whole thing. Everybody's catching hell. But the fact is that in the short term, right, the ruling class was successful in splitting the national movement and consolidating more opportunistic leadership in it such as Jimmie Barber and people like that who are not going to fight for the interests of anybody, really, but particularly it's not going to be any struggles, you know, for Afro-American people and other oppressed people. So that kind of weak-kneed leadership came to the fore, and some more well-intended people, but without any sense of how to lead the struggle, more and more relied on bourgeois politics in the sense of elections and promises and basement meetings and less and less on organizing the strength of the people. That clearly characterized that period.

But in my opinion, the situation that's developing now is an excellent situation. It's very good. What we were doing during in this period really went in the closet in a sense that the push was toward Marxism, trying to study it, to learn it. And in trying to learn it and practice it, like any science, if you practice it and don't know it, it don't work and it creates a lot of problems. It becomes dogma and hard formulism, but there's no other way to learn it, I mean, other than to continue to fight for it in connection with the real world. And also we're very fearful of being red-baited, which is justifiable to some extent. Not as much as what was warranted, I don't think. But at this point, you know, we have rebuilt, I think, a substantial base in the city that's not appreciated by the ruling class. That's fine with us. We have the most highly developed network of high school students that are much more politically developed than Europe's, for example.

WC: Much more than Europe's?

NJ: Much more than Europe's, right. Our work on the college campuses has intensified. We don't particularly try to announce ourselves the way that we previously did, but just recently, you know, big struggles around hot water A&T were lead by us.

Also we've penetrated people—we've been working on Cone Mill three or four years. We've just been able to get down like how you do trade union work. It's really different, the process of how it develops.

WC: Is that a coalition effort or is that—is that a biracial coalition effort or is that you working primarily with black workers?

NJ: It's a biracial thing, but black workers in it, for example, they are the parents of some of the high school students we're working with it. So it has a national character to it. So the thing is the situation looks very good and the outlook looks very good. It's twists and turns, right. You're being thrown off on clarity, and you just have to fight to get back on the track.

But I think the thing that we have now that we've never had is some way other than just gut feeling to try to figure out fundamentally what it happening. For example, we've been grappling with this competency test thing. Everybody instinctively—it was just like the busing thing—they felt it was something wrong and all the stuff was not acceptable. Exactly what, though, was a different question. Everybody had their own interpretation, cultural bias, you know, all of this kind of stuff. We pushed real hard the whole question of wages in relationship to the state. It seemed to make sense, but it didn't quite satisfy the whole thing. It's a national trend. By North Carolina lends itself to a lot of people pushed out of school, surplus labor, hold down the wages, right to work state, all of that, you could kind of make that work in thinking through why this thing is being done in North Carolina. But it doesn't actually explain why it's happening all over the country, right? This is a different question.

WC: It's also four or five different steps you have to pass through before you come to the conclusion, which is hard.

NJ: Right, right. But what is becoming clear is that the crisis that the country is in, the economic crisis, the inflation, is one that can't be solved by this country by further exploitation of other nations, because that trend is on the decline. And the periodic crisis, which has become chronic, keeps cutting deeper and deeper. And if you can't whip other people into line, in part blocked by the Soviet imperialists, what are you going to do, right? It forces you to have to get more out of each worker per hour in this country. That's the way it has to go. But education in the sixties didn't serve that. It didn't turn out the kind of disciplined student who would strive harder to make it, who had the

orientation to do so. It was a rather rebellious bunch, and they didn't lend themselves to working harder and harder on the factory lines and going by what the boss says and stuff like that.

Actually, this whole developmental process comes to task as well as strictening [sic] rules and stuff like that. It serves to hold down wages, but more fundamentally on a national scale, it serves to strengthen the class rigidity in the society, the fluidness with which people are able to move from one class to another. It's basically nobody's telling you you can go from rags to riches now. They're saying if you pass this test, you might get a job. [laughs] It's getting you to accept that station, and to work to accept the bottom. So the whole thing is that you do what the teacher says, you don't raise a lot of questions about all of these social affairs, you try to pass this test, and in order for that kind of discipline to make you [smarter?], you obviously have to punish some people. It's the same logic as the slave master had to whip some slaves in front of the other people. So if you don't do that, you get put out of school. You don't do that, all of these things begin to happen. So in fact, you have a situation where the education system as a whole has to gear itself to serve the needs of society as a whole from the perspective of the class that's ruling it, which is to increase productivity, and that necessarily means the schools gradually become more like European schools. People gradually become to accept more where they're going to be the rest of their lives and they hammer away at it. So it wants to create a bunch of robots, not educated people who will jump to the pop of the whip on the factory line and feel pretty satisfied that they even have a job at all because a lot of their brothers aren't going to have that.

So it's, you know—I mean like our ability to sort through this thing early on—I mean we could have gotten stuck with the wage question, which seemed to make sense, and I think did make sense to a certain extent—but it actually begins to explain the thing a little better. Which I know that the conversations that I've had with people who've been for the test and who are getting caught on statistical gimmicks such as you can make a test that people can fail, 50 percent of them; you can make one people pass 90 percent, all of this is tactically getting the thing started. Hunt then goes not only on state television; he goes on ABC, because it's not a North Carolina thing, right. North Carolina just becomes a point where a breakthrough can be made, legitimacy is granted. And of course it's compatible with Hunt's career ambitions, so he strived for all of that. The more we're able to sit down and go through this thing with small groups of people, actually the more people really see new light on this whole thing.

And this is something we simply weren't able to do with the busing question, so they could split us. And they can do so now. Obviously we don't have the capability to present this thing comprehensively on a mass scope. But it's not going to develop that way anyway. We just have to go inside. And at first we actually thought we would develop that way, so we lagged for a long time on this thing going on for a while, but

we're coming underneath it. And it's not a question in my mind that the kids that are consolidated around this view have a much better arm to fight it that than—

WC: Conceptually—

NJ: —you hype them up on just like your job, just—and the scope is broadened, because you begin to see how this whole thing fits not just in your town but in the country, and not just in the country but in the world. And the relationship between this and Iran and everything else begin to fall in place, and you see how all these things are in fact very connected, you know. So that's a new kind of person, and that's what we're striving toward.

WC: Now when you are working with people at Cone Mills, are you working with them on this level, or are you working with them in terms of things like organizing the union, getting an election, stuff like that?

NJ: Well, both, right. There are particularities. I mean getting a union, getting organized, is the bottom line in terms of getting any other thing. But you see, we have good discussions about things such as the trade wars that are going on. [U.S. Secretary of Commerce] Juanita Kreps comes out and says that essentially that some [unclear] in this country are going to have to be heard in order to establish trade relationships with the European countries. Obviously that means textiles, right. That for the South the industry that's going to get hurt is textile. That's going to create a thing where the textile bourgeoisie tries to create an alliance between themselves and the workers against—in other words, and then try to blunt the differences between them. Being able to talk this thing through with the most advanced workers greatly prepares people.

[Unidentified speaker interrupts. Recording paused]

WC: One of the things that's always really hard for me to deal with in writing about this, especially over the past thirty years, is to find—is to find the points of connection. Obviously class and race are terribly intermeshed, but it's very hard to deal with it because the kind of evidence that you need to show how management uses race to divide workers or resists unionizing and job desegregation with equal intensity. I mean that kind of evidence is there, but it's very hard to bring it all together in a nice package. One of the things that interests me about what you're doing now is how you're addressing those twin things, those twin issues, and trying to develop both a strategy and a constituency which will deal with both of them.

NJ: First, I mean, it's been necessary for me to really appreciate the differences between, say, the working class movement and national movement. And I know when I worked at Cone, I tried to organize the same way I organized at the, you know—the thing is that the national movement is much more political. Everybody talks politics in one way or another, right. Everybody talks semi-revolution. This is not true of the working class—the working class here I'm talking about mainly, white working class. And that to a certain extent there's going to be like—those two movements are not going to merge right away, but the most advanced thinkers in both of them can merge, and that will facilitate how they merge eventually. So it's really seeing—trying to get a sense of how the process will develop and not trying to bring it into [phone ringing] something it objectively can't be at a certain point. That's one of the important things about it, because you can get locked into what you'd like it to be and jump outside of what the real world is about, and you can't really take it to where you'd like it to go.

So you must come to recognize that the main thing as a whole in the white working class movement is to really learn how to engage economic struggles, because that's really where it links up, and to like systematically create a base of respect. In other words, like people have to respect you for fighting with them. And in there the whole thing of forging unity between the most advanced people becomes real. You're able to talk politics at a deeper level and create an organization in which they actually operate together. And at the very same time, on both sides, these are the people who have the most respect among their constituency. And when a divisive line comes down, right, if that has been built up—and can only be built up through actually fighting together—then you're able to help sort through it. It's a gradual process. That's kind of one of the things that's happening.

The other thing is just trying to instill a deeper appreciation for how this divisive thing has gone down historically. Like for example, black colleges. I just heard yesterday—I'm trying to find out more about that because we are trying to help really open up a stronger campaign around this thing. But the Title III thing that has allocations for black colleges, it seems as though the way it's developing is that a little [bachyism?]—in the sense that smaller white colleges are saying they are a minority, too. So they want a cut of the money. Then within the whole thing of minorities like Indians and Hispanics, right, so they want a cut of the money. So essentially, HEW [Department of Health, Education, and Welfare] has very fox-like created a situation in which this pool of money for the development of minorities, which is first of all tremendously insufficient, becomes the focal point of contention and how black people define Indians, which is most ridiculous—blacks and Hispanics, you know. So it's really like sitting down and even discussing this kind of stuff with workers, because you can usually see somebody else's thing quicker as you can see your own. But the orientation, right—

And see, the experiences such as the miners last year; we had to really draw the deep essence out of that, particularly the role of the state. Because one thing that's not

clear to the working class is that it's a working class, right, and what its interests are versus somebody else. That has to be taught through their own experiences, so those are just like some of the ways that we're trying to unfold this. There's no magic to it. It's just day by day, step by step.

WC: It's starting from the bottom to be able to build a very big building.

NJ: Right.

WC: There's no way of—

NJ: Actually, the thing you were raising earlier about students asking new questions, I've just been thinking that in the last two years there have been so much packed in those years. See, that amounted to the whole fifties. Didn't that much happen from '56 to—[laughs] So you've got in there a concentrated set of development that's bound to raise questions on everybody's mind. So one of the things that seems really favorable at this point is that who can explain what's going down, you know, in a way that's—that people can see the truth, and not only see it, but see the light, see the way out. Unless we're able to do that, this confusion can be turned into its opposite. It can consolidate itself under a Populist trend, which can be the basis for fascism.

WC: It also becomes a cultural thing rather than a political thing, which is very hard to deal with also because it's so ambiguous. But it becomes very much a way of dividing people off from each other.

NJ: The superstructure in this country still is like—I guess the single most thing that came out of the sixties for me is how it is able to absorb a revolutionary thrust for a relatively long period of time and come back. Because I know we used to talk about "up against the wall" and all that, you know, but actually we didn't really recognize—

WC: Up against the sponge? [laughs]

NJ: Yeah. Only one sector of the U.S. people was revolutionary at that point; it was the Afro-American national movement. And as long as, say for example, that and the anti-war movement could be kept separate—which was I think an objective, you know. In fact, I've always tried to figure out why [Dr. Martin Luther] King was murdered, and that's about the only way I can explain it, in the sense that overall his philosophical doctrine was on the decline. That he could have been humiliated gradually in terms of wearing down his effectiveness, the March on Washington. He was expressing that weariness. It was questionable whether he would change.

WC: Yeah, but you listen to—have you ever heard those last lectures he gave up in Canada? He gave a serious of lectures.

NJ: Oh, yeah? I didn't.

WC: Just like six months before he was killed, and those lectures are profoundly radical. They make those connections. They talk in worldwide terms about economic and racial oppression and the need to mount a revolutionary thrust against systems of power which are economic and political and social. Those lectures are incredible because the logic and the analysis is so far beyond what you would ordinarily associate with Dr. King, at least in terms of the early and mid-sixties. There's a whole new level of conceptual sophistication.

NJ: You know what I thought, that's not completely in contradiction. [unclear] I spent some time going over his Riverside [Church, "Beyond Vietnam"] speech at which he took this position of Vietnam. And the thing was this was not a shallow position.

WC: Right.

NJ: He took that thing from forty-five all the way up. In my opinion, he was the only guy left at that point who could have bridged the black liberation and the anti-war movement. Because see, while his tactic wasn't growing in the black liberation movement, he had a tremendous base of respect, basically because people thought he was honest, and I agree he was, otherwise he wouldn't have taken on the position. Two, that he would fight, right. So that's enough. [chuckles] I mean he would fight. You pray and I cut. That's all right as long as you're doing something. I mean internationally, he couldn't be chumped in the way that the Panthers were being chumped. The anti-war movement was looking like hardcore drug addicts and stuff like that. [Vice President Spiro] Agnew and them was chumping them. He could have been a bridge, right, between them.

And I was thinking that because he had taken a rather clear stance that was objectively anti-imperialist, even though he never came down that way. And I thought the way he spoke he spoke of the Vietcong and the Vietnamese was pretty sharp for 1967. This had to be a very dangerous thing. My thinking was like suppose—suppose they had to kill him in say '71, right. See the calculated response to that would have been much greater than in '68, I think. In other words, if this thing had come together—

WC: Oh, yeah. Sure.

NJ: Because I have never been able to figure out—they knew damn well that this response in the heat of the black liberation movement was going to be of the character that it was, I think.

WC: Yeah, and there's also the whole connection of the Poor People's March, the whole move toward an economic—

NJ: Attack on the poverty program [Poor People's Campaign], right.

WC: I think there were an awful lot of things coming together at that point. You've really got the international thing, you've got the racial thing, you've got the economic thing. They're all coming together.

NJ: See, the thing is I kept thinking in terms of him. See, he probably couldn't hold it together.

WC: Right.

NJ: He could bring it together.

WC: He could bring it together and he could be symbolically—he never was a very good organizer—I mean administrator, but—

NJ: It's kind of like I think a similar analogy between that and [Ayatollah Ruhollah] Khomeini. It's clear that the organized forces in Iran are very sharp and disciplined in terms of their understanding of things, in that I'm not buying this kind of whole religious thing as the single most thing. I mean it's clear they struggled against the [unclear], but none of them can do what Khomeini can do at this point. And Khomeini for a time will be able to hold the thing together, at least until other forces are more developed.

And I think King—you know, just on analogy, but represented, some are saying, glue in terms of the progressive forces inside of this country. That's why I was thinking that wiping him out then was a short, quickest way out of this thing for the imperialists.

WC: Yeah, because there was no one left.

NJ: Right.

WC: At that point. Just to go back to Greensboro for one second, in this new phase, this new stage of your struggle, your efforts, is there a sense that you have now that the class

division within the black community is one which is going to prevent an alliance being re-forged between let's say people you work with versus the people—

[End of Interview]