Interview with **Michael Harrington**
Date: October 11, 1988
Interviewer: Paul Stekler
Camera Rolls: 4001-4002
Sound Rolls: 001
Team: D

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

[camera roll #1001]
[sound roll #114]

00:00:13:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Second slate. Second [inaudible]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Go ahead. Go. Hit it.

[slate]

00:00:20:00

Interviewer:

Why don't we start off with something specifically about Dr. King? What was Dr. King like as a person in your contact with him?

00:00:32:00

Michael Harrington:

It's very strange to talk about what Dr. King was like. He was among other things that people might not imagine a very funny man. I remember one time going to his house in Atlanta. I was in Atlanta for a conference that he spoke at, and we went over to his house afterwards with Ralph Abernathy, and Dr. King, and probably Andy Young. I talked later to Yolanda King about it, and she said she was the little girl peeking out from behind the door. And it was a lot of fun. A lot of joking, a lot of kidding around, and particularly a lot of kidding around by Dr. King in terms of Abernathy, about Abernathy's driving, about…and so a very, a very funny man with a very deep laugh. Secondly, something that came to me as a real shock, and I was sitting with Dr. King. It seems to me we were in some setting where we were eating and listening obviously to what he was saying. And suddenly I was struck by the fact, this man is a southerner. That is to say that he comes out of the South, that he is not explicable except in terms of the South, that he loves the South. And I think as a northern White, even though I grew up in Saint Louis, Missouri, but as a northern White in this, in the South in those days, I was terrified most of the time I was around the South that somebody would discover that I was carpetbagging in Mississippi and do something to me. And my attitude towards southern Whites was one of great hostility, and I suddenly realized that, that for Dr. King, it was not. Thirdly, something that came out in conversations I had with him…he was a fairly, strike fairly, he was a serious intellectual. He was not simply a man of good values. Not simply a man of action. Obviously, he was both of those things. But I think particularly because of his theological education, he was a very sophisticated man. That he read widely. And when I talked to him, particularly one series of conversations where we spent a lot of time together, it was in a sense as intellectual to intellectual. And this was a side of Dr. King that was not always obvious to the public. They didn't get a chance to see it. I remember the first time I saw him give a speech, which was the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom in Washington D.C. in 1955. And at that point, I had not met him. But I remember in his speech, he talked about the difference…he was talking about the need for love in the civil rights movement. And he talked about the difference between eros, kairos, and agape. Using a very sophisticated Greek language with the contemporary theological meanings in a mass meeting. And my feeling looking at the people around, particularly at…we had brought up a, a large number of poor Blacks from the South that we had bussed up to the meeting. They obviously didn't know exactly what he was saying. Eros, kairos, agape. That's not immediately…and he, he gave some description of it. They were deeply moved. They, they caught his meaning without understanding the specific words. So, I would say that he was a very complex person. Much more complex than the, the image of him that's…you get these days.

00:04:21:00

Interviewer:

What about the people that he read, and how that affected him?

00:04:24:00

Michael Harrington:

Well, one of the things that, when I discussed ideas with him, he was very familiar with contemporary theologians. He was, he had read people like Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr. As the result of this and to me as an American socialist, this was very important. The idea of socialism to him was not a foreign idea because all of those theologians, and I would say most of the significant Protestant theologians of the twentieth century or many of them were socialists. Tillich had explicitly written books on socialism. So had Niebuhr. I don't know if Barth was that explicit about it, but he certainly was a socialist. And therefore when I talked to Dr. King about politics and ideas, because he had this rather sophisticated in a sense European background, my socialism, my generalizing our common immediate program and putting the name socialist on it didn't bother him at all. My feeling when I talked to him about it was that it would have been criminal if I had asked him to identify himself as a socialist. I really thought, thought that he had problems enough without adding that one. But I certainly felt that he not only agreed with my immediate program but that he agreed with my concept that what is needed is a new, utterly democratic society committed to freedom that goes beyond the capitalist welfare state.

00:06:01:00

Interviewer:

In conversations, especially in the last couple of years, do you remember talking about concepts such as redistribution of income?

00:06:08:00

Michael Harrington:

In conversations with Dr. King in the last years of his life, we always talked about the fact that to abolish poverty, to abolish economic racism would require changing the structures of American society. That it meant that you had to have a different kind of occupational structure. That you could not have Blacks concentrated among the unemployed, the, the low paid, the uninteresting jobs, the jobs without any responsibility. That you had to really change that in a radical way. That you had to change the income structure of American society. That you had to redistribute wealth. And…now that came out as a demand for more progressive taxation. That is to say things that we would talk about in private or where we could talk in a sense, what, much more candidly, much more openly about the, the need for really basic democratization of investment decisions, a much more democratic allocation of income and wealth, and of work, things like that we would talk about privately. Then when you go public then you immediately have to think how do you phrase this message, and Dr. King had a genius for this. How do you phrase this message so that you don't betray the message, but you put it in terms which are understandable and accessible to people on the street? But certainly although he wouldn't use racial phraseology in many cases for that reason, and I quite agreed with that. And indeed in my own book, *The Other America*, I did

not mention the word socialism once for precisely that reason. But I always knew that Dr. King, through my conversations, had what I would consider in the good sense of the word a small "d" democratic radical view of what was required in American society.

00:08:14:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]

Interviewer:

Sure.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Cut it?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yeah.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Roll it.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Good.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take two.

00:08:22:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Hit it.

[slate]

00:08:25:00

Interviewer:

So, about this idea of, of if he actually transformed in terms of the, his economic stuff.

00:08:32:00

Michael Harrington:

I think Dr. King, in my experience, and I really got to know him in 1960 and knew him until the end of his life. And during those eight years, I don't think he changed his mind very much about economic questions. 1960, I found him understanding the need for a rather radical restructuring of the society. 1968, the last time I saw him, he was talking about the same thing. I think where he did change and that was a momentous decision, and I think he made the right decision, is he was profoundly committed to coalition politics. And he was forced by the war to ask himself the question which was more important, maintaining his ties with the pro-war liberals and playing down or finessing his opposition to the war or making a straight declaration of hostility to the war. ***He knew that if he made the statement of hostility to the war that he was breaking his ties with Lyndon Johnson. That he would no longer be welcome in the White House. Johnson didn't in this period let people do that. He decided that he had to do it.*** So, I think in that sense, he became politically…was forced to become more radical by the war and had to break with the pro-war liberals.

00:10:02:00

Interviewer:

Was he viewed in '68 as a radical?

00:10:05:00

Michael Harrington:

I think by…he was viewed as having made the wrong decision. Bayard Rustin, whom I respect profoundly even though we had great disagreements on the war, Bayard had a different view. Bayard's view was, and there were, there were liberals who had this view, that Dr. King should have spoken only on behalf of the Blacks, and the poor, and the problems of the economy, and stayed out of foreign policy. Not that he should have supported the war but that he should not have gotten into the anti-war movement. And that's, that was the point at which Bayard and I, among other things, diverged.

00:10:46:00

Interviewer:

Did Rustin actually talk to you about that specifically at one point?

00:10:48:00

Michael Harrington:

Oh, sure. At the…and one of the things that, that, the last time I saw Dr. King, which was in the, sometime—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Michael Harrington:

—winter, early spring of 1968.

00:11:00:00

Interviewer:

OK, why, why don't we start, start there?

Michael Harrington:

Yeah.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, that's a camera roll out.

Interviewer:

That was, that was very good. I liked—

[cut]

[camera roll #4002]

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Got it.

Interviewer:

OK. Let's move to—

00:11:15:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible] OK.

00:11:20:00

Interviewer:

Let's move to 1968. You were part of Dr. King's research committee, and there were meetings or a meeting that convened in the city to talk about the Poor People's Campaign. Can you describe what was happening, who was there?

00:11:34:00

Michael Harrington:

I don't remember all the people who were there. I do remember Dr. King, Ralph Abernathy, Andy Young—

Interviewer:

Let me start again 'cause I, I feel like that wasn't a good question. It's actually not important so much who was there, but—

Michael Harrington:

Yeah.

00:11:46:00

Interviewer:

—but can you describe that meeting?

00:11:47:00

Michael Harrington:

OK. The last meeting of the research committee that I attended before Dr. King was murdered in the winter or early spring of 1968, we did two things. One was we discussed the general political situation, which we always did at those meetings. And it struck me that Dr. King was very pessimistic, deeply disturbed at the way things were going. On the one hand, he was being increasingly attacked from within the Black movement. There was a surge of

nationalism. There was, there were the Black Panthers had begun to come on the scene. There was in SNCC, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, there had been a turn away from nonviolence, so he was being attacked for being too much of a pacifist, too namby-pamby, not willing to really fight back, not willing to use force against racism. On the other hand, he was being attacked by Lyndon Johnson and even by the Hubert Humphrey liberals for going too far to the left, for being in the anti-war movement, for taking part in the April 1967 demonstration against the war in New York. And I had the feeling that his sense was that the people who really supported him now had really shrunk very much and that he was sore beset on both right and left, and didn't know where to go. I have always thought that that famous speech he gave the night before he was killed, when he was talking about being Moses, being allowed to lead the people to the promised land but not to enter the promised land, perhaps it was a premonition of his death. But I think it was also a, an expression of the frustration that he felt at having been deserted on both right and left by peop-people who had been his allies. And he really didn't know where his leadership was going at that point. Within that context, we then talked about the Poor People's Campaign. And, and in a sense, the Poor People's Campaign was certainly no repudiation by Dr. King of his opposition to the war but was an attempt to then go back and refocus on basics, and perhaps more importantly to mobilize a mass movement. Dr. King understood himself as a leader of masses of people. Always did. And knew that that was his strength, that he still, whatever these political people to his right and left thought that among the masses of Black people and among many White people, in the Black church, there was still a tremendous reservoir of support. And so we were going to under these very difficult circumstances raise the issue of poverty and racism. And at that meeting, and this is typical of Dr. King, he was an integrationist. And that got him into trouble at this point. Because in the Black community, there were people who were begging to despair of the notion of integration. And Dr. King said to me, Will you write the first draft of a manifesto for the Poor People's Campaign? I said to him, Dr. King, given the fact that we've just been talking about the attack on you from the left within the Black community, do you think it wise to have a White write the first draft of the manifesto for the Poor People's Campaign? And he smiled and laughed, and said, Why, Mike, we never knew we were poor until we read your book, which would be very typical of Martin Luther King. And I was impressed not simply at, at the remark, which I've quoted ever since, since it's the greatest compliment I ever received in my life but at his principled commitment to integration. That he, even under these difficult circumstances, was going to build the movement that was genuinely multiracial.

00:16:08:00

Interviewer:

Can we stop for a second please?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sure.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Camera stop?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes, camera stop.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

Interviewer:

Now—

[cut]

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, thank you. OK, we're rolling.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. And we're [unintelligible]?

00:16:22:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yes.

00:16:23:00

Interviewer:

Let’s go back to the last meeting of organizing the Poor People's Campaign. What was the, the state of the organizing of the campaign, and what about this…?

00:16:33:00

Michael Harrington:

The state of organizing of the Poor People's Campaign at that last meeting was very chaotic. Organization in the sense of careful preparation was not Dr. Martin Luther King’s strong suit.

He improvised. He went with the flow. And what he knew was that something had to be done given the, the problems of the criticism from both right and left. What he knew and what I kept urging at that meeting was in addition to everything else, we have to pose some things where we can actually win. That is to say [pause] [sniffs]

00:17:14:00

Interviewer:

Do you want to start that one over again?

Michael Harrington:

OK.

Interviewer:

Continue to roll.

Camera Crew Member #1:

No, stop the [inaudible]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Cut? OK.

Michael Harrington:

The—

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]

Interviewer:

You ready, Tom?

00:17:24:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Let's go.

00:17:26:00

Interviewer:

OK, start the same way. That was perfect.

00:17:28:00

Michael Harrington:

The state of preparation for the Poor People's march was very chaotic. That was typical of Dr. King. Careful organization and planning was not his strong suit. He was a, a, a genius at improvising. What he did understand was that his strength was in his appeal to masses of people. That he had to mobilize those masses, given the defections he felt both to his right and left. And what I said to him at that meeting was whatever else we do, what we have to do is we have to come up with some demands that we can actually win. That we can't ask for the moon, or we can ask for the moon, and we should ask for the moon, but we should also make some demands. And I don't remember the precise ones that I urged, but they would have been winnable demands in terms of legislation. And I would say, This is something where Dr. King and I always agree. Tha-that ***part of his genius was to understand that you could not have a movement simply based on promises of the future. That you had to deliver, and he had delivered on voting rights. He had delivered on public accommodations. He had delivered on the Montgomery Bus Boycott and so many other things. And he understood now above all was the time to deliver.***

00:18:43:00

Interviewer:

What was he like the last time, what was he actually like? Let's, let's go to Resurrection City. You told me a nice story about going down to Resurrection City to give a lecture. Can you tell me about that?

00:18:53:00

Michael Harrington:

Yeah, I went to Resurrection City. This of course is after Dr. King had been killed. Resurrection City was a mess. There was a great deal of violence inside Resurrection City. It was not the beloved community. The beloved community as we called it really had come to an end. And I gave a talk there, and I was sitting down on the ground. People gathered around. And there was a Black man in the group listening to me who might have had some emotional problems, I think he probably did. And he decided that I was the representative of White racism in Resurrection City, and he began to attack me, and attack me, and attack me in sort of a wild and even incoherent way. And…[sniffs]

Interviewer:

Bobby, are we gonna start that one over again, or…?

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

Michael Harrington:

I'm sorry to be…

00:19:46:00

Interviewer:

No, that's OK. That's, why don't we go just straight from, "I was invited down to, to Resurrection City…"

00:19:54:00

Michael Harrington:

I was invited to Resurrection City. When I got to Res, Res, Resurrection City, I already knew from reading the newspaper reports that there had been a lot of violence, a lot of disorganization, that the beloved community was not that there. And by the, by the Washington Monument. And I lectured. And everything was given rather impressive namings, and I think it was called "The People's University," or "Resurrection City University." Or, it was a group of people were coming down and giving lectures during the day. A group of people sitting on the ground, gathered around, and a Black man among them I think with emotional problems decided that I was the incarnation of White racism and wanted to know why I, who had been in the process of giving a talk, attacking racism, talking about what was needed to, in order to, to, to end racism and poverty in the United States, he wanted to know why I was in favor of racism and poverty in the United States. And he got very agitated. And I became concerned that he could physically attack me. And the meeting sort of came to a very unhappy ending where my message didn't get across, and it's very hard to concentrate on your talk when you're worried that somebody might be about to jump you. The meeting came to an end. The man left. And I left to go and catch a plane and to come back to New York, and literally ran away from the meeting. I wanted to get as far away from this place as I could. And on the one hand, I was delighted that I was out of this miserable situation and I no longer had to be literally physically fearful. But on the other hand, it dawned on me that this was an end of an entire period of my life that went back to 1954 when I had joined the Harlem NAACP right after Brown v. Board of Education, the desegregation opinion. And that one of the most marvelous political movements in America in the form which it took under Martin Luther King from 1955 to 1968 had come to an end. And that the beloved, beloved community was gone forever.

00:22:11:00

Interviewer:

Let’s stop it for a second.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:22:15:00