Interview with **Coretta Scott King**
Date: November 21, 1988
Interviewer: Jacqueline Shearer
Camera Rolls: 4054-4061
Sound Rolls: 423-425
Team: D

Interview gathered as part of ***Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s***. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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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 #4054]
[sound roll #423]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marking.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jackie.

00:00:18:00

Interviewer:

OK, Mrs. King, can you tell me again ab-about February '65 when you met Malcolm X in Selma?

00:00:26:00

Coretta Scott King:

Yes, I was in Selma to visit my husband who was in jail in connection with the voting rights campaign in Selma. Because he had been in jail for a day or so, and because the campaign had been in progress, I was a little bit weary because naturally, I was so involved in it, even though I was not there all the time. So, when I walked into the church where the mass meetings were held at noontime, Andy Young said to me, Coretta, you're gonna have to speak today because Malcolm X is here, he's just spoken, and he has aroused the people. And you need to speak because you need to, you know, to set a nonviolent tone. And I said to Andy, Well, I really don't feel like speaking. I'm not in the mood to speak today. He said, Oh, but you've got to speak. You need to. You'll be able to do it, you'll, you'll feel like it, and you're gonna have to speak. And finally, of course, I gave in and I did speak. So, I walked out on the platform and…or the, sat down next to him in the pulpit, I guess it was. Well, you know, I, I felt a little [laughs] nervous because I hadn't met him before and I really didn't know what he was gonna be like. But, you know, after I had spoken, he leaned over and said to me, Mrs. King, I want you to tell your husband that I had planned to visit him in jail here in Selma but I won't be able to do it now. I have to go back to New York because I, I have to attend a conference in Europe, an African student conference, and I want you to say to him that I didn't come to Selma to make his job more difficult. But I thought that if the White people understood what the alternative was, that they would be more inclined to listen to your husband, and so that's why I came. And of course, I thanked him. And I was naturally somewhat surprised, 'cause I didn't expect him to say that. I don't know what I expected. But I, he had such a gentle manner, and he seemed very sincere. And I kept thinking, you know, I kept thinking about what he had said and the way he had said it. And of course, within about a couple weeks or more, he was assassinated. And [sighs] it affected me very deeply because I had met him now, and I felt that it was such a tragic loss because he had come around to, to understand better, I think, nonviolence and, and my husband's position. And would have been a, I think, a force for reconciliation and healing, because there was a great need, I think, between Blacks and Blacks, for that kind of thing. And I felt also that if he had lived particularly in the latter part of the '60s, that he probably could have been a tremendous bridge, you know, in bringing Black Muslims and, and other Black people in, from the civil rights movement together. And [car horn] for days, I had [car horn] this pain almost like this feeling in my chest, a feeling of depression, and just feeling as if I had lost someone very dear to me. And I, you know, I couldn't quite understand but then I began to realize, oh, I guess, what an impact he had made on me in that very short period of time in knowing him.

00:04:57:00

Interviewer:

Great, thank you. Cut.

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

I don't see timecode. OK. Mark it.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marking.

[slate]

00:05:09:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jackie.

00:05:11:00

Interviewer:

Mrs. King, can you share with us some of the points of, of agreement and disagreement between your husband and Malcolm X?

00:05:19:00

Coretta Scott King:

I think that Martin and Malcolm agreed in terms of the ultimate goal of the freedom struggle, I don't think there was any difference there. I think it was basically one of strategy. My husband believed that to accomplish the goal of freedom and justice and equality, that [car passes] it was necessary to use nonviolent means, particularly in a society such as ours where we were ten percent of the population. And he believed finally that nonviolence was the only alternative that oppressed people had in, in this kind of a society. I think Malcolm felt that people had a right to use any means necessary, even violence, to achieve the goals of, of their freedom. And I think that was the basic difference. Martin, I don't think, ever spoke publicly against Malcolm in any form. I think Malcolm did against Martin, unfortunately. But that was because Martin was committed to nonviolence, and nonviolence seeks not to humiliate or, or to, to do, depersonalize [door shuts] human beings but to ennoble human beings, human personality. But he never held that against him. They, I think, they respected each other. Martin had the greatest respect for Malcolm and he agreed with him in, and in terms of the feeling of racial pride and the fact that Black people should believe in themselves and see themselves as, as lovable and beautiful. The fact that Martin had, had a, a strong feeling of connectedness to, to Africa and so did Malcolm. I think if he had lived, and if the two had lived, I am sure that at some point they would have come closer together, and would have

been a very strong force in the total struggle for liberation and self-determination of Black people in our society.

00:08:02:00

Interviewer:

Now, you've spoken about your feelings at Malcolm X's death. Do you recall any specific comments or observations or feelings that your husband had at Malcolm's assassination?

00:08:16:00

Coretta Scott King:

Well, I'm, I'm, I am sure Martin had s-similar feelings that I had. I, I think when I first got the news, I wasn't near him so, you know, usually that's when you get these reactions. Martin abhorred violence of any kind and particularly, you know, assassinations of the leadership, you know, Mal-Malcolm, of course, in '65 and, and Medgar Evers in '63, and in many ways, it was, you know, it's like who was next? And I think in '65 while we were in Selma, that was a time when Martin received numerous threats. And I really feel that he had felt that something was going to happen to him in Selma, that he might be killed in Selma. As a matter of fact, when we were in Oslo, Norway, in December of '64, he talked about the fact that when we went into Selma, which we had planned to do the first of January in 1965 and did, to begin the voting rights campaign, that somebody was gonna get killed. And as we always did in the movement, we would, we would make jokes about these things. I mean, you know, this is the way, you, you kind of begin to accept the fact, the reality. And he would say to people on the trip, Well, you better have a good time and enjoy yourself, because when we go to Selma, somebody's gonna get killed. And they had already sent people out to talk to the White community, and they came back with, you know, the reports were not very good. So, there was that strong feeling. And then as we were moving in Selma, you know, there was so many, many threats, rumors of plots of his, of his assassination that took place. And having had Malcolm's assa-assassination to come while he was in Selma, I'm sure it reminded him more of the possibility of his own fate, you know, that ultimate fate.

00:10:48:00

Interviewer:

Good. Cut. [coughs]

[cut]

[camera roll #4055]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marking.

[slate]

[plane flies over]

Camera Crew Member #3:

They may be circling.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jackie.

00:11:02:00

Camera Crew Member #3:

Go ahead.

00:11:03:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, we're back on January 26, 1966, 1550 South Hamlin Avenue. Can you describe for us your new home as you walk into the building for the first time?

00:11:17:00

Coretta Scott King:

Well, first of all, as I walked up to the third floor and entered the building, the first thing I noticed was a very strong smell of urine and, you know, the smell was all over, it perme- permeated the whole apartment it seemed. When I got inside, and, and the living room was, of course, the first thing I saw, it has a, a large dirty couch in the living room and the walls were very dirty. It was not the kind of place that you would want to live in. We had to get it fixed up, I think it had to be repaired and all. But we had to look at it first to see whether this was what we wanted. And of course, we wanted something that was very typical of the way [car horn] people had to live and we found it. [car horn] In other words, the place was generally broken-down, nothing worked. Toilets, refrigerator, stove, everything had to be repaired. But this was the kind of living that I'm sure most people in the area encountered daily. I [bus passes] knew, of course, I didn't have to live there permanently, so I could live

there for that period of time, and, and be very comfortable and satisfied, because it was for a purpose, it was for the cause, the sake of the cause. Of course, the place was fixed up a bit by the landlord when he found out that Martin Luther King Junior, was gonna be renting it. And even painting it up and, and getting some different furniture, you know, still didn't improve it but so much. But one of the things that I, I realized living there, you begin to feel a sense of close identification with the people in the neighborhood. They were, they were so happy to have us there. I mean, they, they extended such a warm welcome. And, you know, we lived in a neighborhood where there were gangs. And one of the, one of the gangs, the…I think it was the Blackstone Rangers, lived in that neighborhood, and of course, they came and offered their protection. They said, You don't need, Dr. King you don't need any police. We can take care of you and we're going to take care of you, so don't you worry about a thing. And they came to visit us from time to time and, of course…I remember one night one of them came upstairs and knocked on the door. And we opened it and he, we thought he wanted to come in, and we said to come in, Dr. King said, Come in, have a seat. And it just happened to have been at a time when Martin had sent out for some barbecue. And so he sat there and he said, Are you Martin Luther King Junior? Reverend Martin Luther King Junior, are you Reverend Martin Luther King, Junior? And Martin said, Yes, I am. He's, Are you really? You don't mean that this cat's been up there in Washington, eating with Presidents, eating filet mignon steak, and here he's sittin' down here eatin' barbecue just like me. [laughs] And of course, you know, we really knew then that, you know, we had it made, because he saw Martin as another human [horn] being that ate the same kind of food, lived in the same kind of home, a house, apartment and so on. But it was, it was a great feeling, you know, knowing that these people really cared and that they would, they would be there for whatever we needed. And we didn't want 'em to use any weapons or to be violent. But it was…we knew that they were not going to do anything to harm us, but they would do everything they could to protect us.

00:16:08:00

Interviewer:

Now, when did your children come up and join you and how did, how did you feel about raising children in, in a neighborhood like this?

00:16:16:00

Coretta Scott King:

Well, it was the summer of, I think in July when we brought the kids up and they came for a few weeks. And we thought that it was important that they have this experience. But since Martin was away so much, it was also a matter of just spending time together, because he'd have to come back and forth to Atlanta. So, having the family there for that period, and having the children experience this kind of living, was very important. And I remember, I guess, one of the hardest parts of the whole experience was when I would bathe the kids in the morning and get them dressed, and they'd go out in the back yard to play, and the dirt was very dark, it was really black dirt. You know, it was, it apparently was mixed with, with coal

or something, I don't know. But the dirt would stick on their clothes, and so within a short period of time, they would all be dirty as they could be all over again. And I kept thinking if the kids had to live this way, you know, all of their lives, what effect it would have on them, and, and yet, you know, there were other children who knew no other life but this. So, the kids enjoyed playing in the dirt and they enjoyed playing with their little playmates in the neighborhood. Of course, we had supervision and all of that, but it was a tremendously valuable experience I think for them, although they were very young. The other part of that experience was we just happened to be there the night when the rioting started on that side of town. We were in that apartment and with the children, and that was very scary for a while, because the children had no sense of the danger of, of, of, of a riot at all. And they thought it was funny to hear the guns popping and, and, and the, and the shooting in the neighborhood. They didn't realize that they could be killed. And I was there in the apartment alone with the children trying to get them to, to calm down and to get them ready to go to bed. And it was a, a, a night that I shall always remember because I stayed up most of the night in the apartment while my husband and the SCLC staff stayed out in the streets, just trying to control the violence as much as they could and—

00:19:15:00

Interviewer:

I seem to recall hearing about you and Yolanda looking out the window. What did you see in your own neighborhood as you looked out the window that night?

00:19:24:00

Coretta Scott King:

Some window, window panes in a store, I think, were shattered. There was some shooting into a, a, a store, and the children saw that, and, and, of course, that was when it first started. Then later, we looked out the kitchen window, which was the back part of the house, and we saw people looting the grocery store. It was the strangest feeling to see people going into a store and picking up all the groceries, putting them in baskets, and you knew they were stealing it out. And of course, we watched this for a while and all of a sudden we could hear someone said, Police! Police! They said it loud enough so we could hear and everyone sort of disappeared into the alley. And [laughs] well, the police came but everybody was gone, I don't think they caught anybody. But this was the way it usually happened and this store was so close to our apartment, we could have almost thrown a rock into it from our window.

00:20:43:00

Interviewer:

OK, thank you. Cut.

[beep]

Interviewer:

That was very—

[cut]

[camera roll #4056]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Speed.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Roll number what?

Camera Crew Member #3:

Roll number four, oh, five, six. Sound roll four, two, three.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:20:59:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:21:00:00

Interviewer:

So, Mrs. King, can you tell me what happened as you left Mahalia Jackson's to go to Shiloh Baptist for a rally that night?

00:21:09:00

Coretta Scott King:

We were driving through the neighborhood, and all of a sudden, we saw some children running away and the police chasing them. And we knew something was going on but we weren't sure what. [brake squeals] So, as, as we continued to, to watch back and forth, we realized that the children had been [bus passes] playing with the water hydrant and had turned the water on and the police turned it off. It's a very hot day and this kind of thing going on, and there had been some rock throwing and all, and we saw some of that. And so my husband, of course, always got very nervous when there was any kind of violence taking place, because he knew what it could lead to, more violence and, and, somebody, you know, can end up getting hurt or killed. So, we, as we moved along, we realized that, you know, the, you know, the, the violence and the, all this was taking place, and it was spreading. So, we finally went to the church and made some phone calls, and we found out that some of the people had been arrested, a number of people had been arrested, and had been taken to, to various jails in their neighborhood. So, we found out where some of these were and we visited some of those jails that night. It seems like we stayed in the streets most of that night. It was very interesting, you know, with Mahalia being there, because being the celebrity that she was and with Martin Luther King Junior, us being out in the street and going into these precincts where these people were detained, naturally, everybody was very pleased, you know, to see them. And then that night, of course, we spent the night at Mahalia's, but we didn't get much sleep that night because, you know, it was a very uneasy night with all of this violence taking place. Martin, of course, and the SCLC staff, you know, would be, of course, around in the street trying to do what they could to contain it. SCLC had a very excellent staff and many of the staff had worked with some of the gang people. So, they were able to, to communicate to some extent with them. And I think they were able to, to do something but they were not able to control it completely. Once violence starts, it's very difficult, you know, to control it. But it was a very frightening kind of thing because we knew it could spread. And of course, they never did get the violence to subside, it went on throughout the night, throughout the day. And the next night it had spread on the West Side, where's…that's where we were living on Hamlin Street. And of course, it went on for a few days as you know. But this was quite an experience. I never thought that I would be in a situation, up to that point, where, you know, there was a real riot. But I was right in the middle of the riot, really, during that Chicago experience.

00:24:37:00

Interviewer:

OK. Cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Cut.

[beep]

Interviewer

Great. Thank you.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Continuation roll forty, fifty-six

00:24:48:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jackie.

00:24:49:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, can you tell me about Bunny's first march?

00:24:53:00

Coretta Scott King:

As we had planned to not take Bunny because she was three years old, and we felt that because it was so hot, matter of fact, the hottest day of the year in July, July 10th, that we would get a babysitter and leave them in the apartment. We took her to the rally and my [car horn] husband said after we got to the rally and she started asking if she could march. She said, You know, I wanna march. When are we gonna march? Mommy, when are we gonna march? And of course, you know, I was hoping that I could find a way to, to d-distract her from, you know, from the whole thing. And finally, Martin said, Oh, let's take her, [car horn] and we decided to take her. So, all of the children and Bunny and Martin and myself and the whole crowd of, oh, I don't know, thousands, marched towards City Hall. And as we marched toward City Hall, little Bunny got tired, and Andy Young put her on his shoulders and he carried her for a large part of the distance. Between Andy Young and Bernard Lee, they carried her all the way to City Hall. And of course, I could see her head bobbing up and down as we walked along, on his shoulders. And we got to City Hall, where Martin nailed the demands on the door of City Hall, which was…the symbolism was very much like that of

Martin Luther of the Protestant Reformation, of, when he nailed his theses on the door of Wittenberg. And Bunny did not get to see City Hall because she was fast asleep. I certainly wish somehow that I could have a film of that or a photograph of it, because it was very special since it was the first time that all of us had marched together.

00:27:03:00

Interviewer:

Great, thank you. Cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Cut.

Interviewer:

How much do they—

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Speed.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:27:13:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:27:14:00

Interviewer:

Now, Mrs. King, I understand that you took part in an unprecedented action at 1321 South Holman. Could you describe that for us?

00:27:23:00

Coretta Scott King:

The Southern Christian Leadersh, Leadersh, excuse me. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, in an effort to dramatize the plight of poor people who lived in slum dwellings in Chicago, actually took over some apartments. And began to clean them up and to, of course, collect the rent and, and to file complaints with the Housing Authority which, of course, were acted upon. And in that process, Martin and I, and along with Al Raby, got into our work clothes, and we got shovels and, and we began to, you know, to lift up the garbage and put it into the cans. Because it was all around the apartment buildings, on the ground, and every place, and clean up the place [clears throat] in general. And this was a, a, I think was an important effort. And I remember, it was very cold, a very cold day when we did this. But it was important to, to make that statement, I think, so that it was carried, you know, on the news and in the newspaper. Those conditions were not known, certainly, by a lot of people. They didn't know how badly, how poor…how, how, I said, how, how bad the slum conditions were for some people who had to live under those conditions, and yet pay exorbitant rents for what they were getting. And this was a part of this whole fair housing thrust that began in Chicago, that finally ended up in getting housing legislation in 1968. And this was, of course, after my husband's death, but I think that this effort eventually did pay, pay off but it took a long time.

00:29:45:00

Interviewer:

Now, could I just get, for our editing purposes, it would help if you could just give us a beginning—

Coretta Scott King:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

—to the story, by describing how five families came to your house one night to ask for help.

00:29:57:00

Coretta Scott King:

Oh, I see. We…as I said, we took this apartment on Hamlin Street on the West Side of Chicago. And one night, while Martin was home in the apartment, five different families came to him, and to ask for his help. And they talked about, you know, the inhuman conditions under which they were living. The lack of proper sanitation, [sirens] the lack of, of, of extermination of, from, from rats and that kind of thing, and they were very concerned

that they had to continue to live this way. And, of course, after Dr. King heard their, their pleas, and he wanted to try to help in some way, and [sirens] inasmuch as he had come to Chicago for the purpose of, of addressing this problem. They decided then, after meeting with his staff people, that, you know, one thing that could, could take place would be to, you know, just go in [sirens] and, and in a sense, take over the buildings, and start helping the people and running the apartments, in the sense that people would no longer pay the rent to the landlords, because the landlords were not doing anything to improve the conditions of the homes.

00:31:47:00

Interviewer:

Great, thank you. Cut.

[cut]

[camera roll #4057]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:31:57:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jackie.

00:31:58:00

Interviewer:

Did your husband feel constrained about coming out so publicly against the war before 1967, and if he did, how come?

00:32:07:00

Coretta Scott King:

Yes, I think it's important to realize that, that Martin, for a long time, for many years, had really wanted to take a position, a strong position against the war. He had discussed it in the SCLC board meetings, with his colleagues, and got reactions that were strongly opposed to him doing it, because they felt like, you know, it was not connected with civil rights. Most

people felt that civil rights and the peace issue were two separate pieces. And Martin knew that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, and as he said, I've fought too long to, against segregation to now end up segregating my moral concern. So, he was very, very concerned always about the question of, of the injustice of war. And this particular one, he felt had a tremendous effect on the lives of people in this country who were poor and disadvantaged and, and he felt that, you know, he had to make that connection for people. And it was event-eventually affecting, you know, the whole climate in this country. Because there were a series of, of riots that were…that had, had broken out in various cities around the country. Between '65 and '67, there had been quite a number. And so he felt that it was, there was a very direct connection. I think he had come to a point where he felt as if he had, you know, no choice if he were going to be true to his own convictions and his own conscience. That he had to make a statement, he had to take…make a public stand against this very inhumane and unjust war, as he said. He did not get the support from his colleagues or from any of his SCLC Board members that he would have liked. As a matter of fact, I think most of them went along but they didn't agree with him. And he finally decided that, you know, he had to take this position. And on April 4th, 1967, he made a far-reaching statement at the Riverside Church in New York, in which he, he talked about the, the Vietnam conflict and why he was taking the position. And shortly, very shortly, there was condemnation from all quarters, both Black and White leaders across this country. It was a [clears throat] very agonizing period for him, because, you know, most of the people that he'd worked with, leadership for other organizations, made public statements against Martin Luther King Junior. They felt that, you know, he didn't know enough about foreign policy to speak about it, that he needed to stick to civil rights. And of course, he knew he had made the right decision and he was willing, I think, to, to suffer whatever—[missing footage]—the consequences might be, even the loss of funds to his organization. He knew that was going to happen and it did. SCLC's contributions suddenly—[picture resumes]—went way, way down, and we had to take some special measures to try to solicit support from some of our peace friends. I had been very much involved in the peace movement, he had encouraged me to be active since 1962. I had been the family spokesperson on the peace issues, having gone to the, the, the dis-disarmament conference, the Seventeen Nation Disarmament Conference in Geneva in 1962, as one of fifty American housewives. And from that point on, appeared in rallies and, and marches between Washington and New York, through nineteen, up until 1967, when he took his position. And I think his feeling was that if I was speaking out on the peace issue, then at least there was a King person, family person, who is, who is, you know, speaking to the issue. And somehow he, he felt a little bit more comfortable with my doing it and his not doing it, but not really totally comfortable and totally relieved. And he said, as he said, he was the happiest person in all the world when he could finally come to a point where he could publicly make a far-reaching statement against the war and condemn it. And that was the time when he felt, I think, in his own conscience, that he had done what he knew was right to do.

00:38:13:00

Interviewer:

Great, thank you. Cut.

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Marking.

[slate]

00:38:23:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jackie.

00:38:24:00

Interviewer:

So, Mrs. King, I'd like to have you give us a sense of the anguish that your husband went through. And then, as I said, if you could also wrap up by telling us about the phone call to Whitney Young.

00:38:37:00

Coretta Scott King:

Martin agonized, really, over the decision of whether he should come out sooner than he did. I mean, over those several years, I remember the…right after the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, December, and in the early part of '65, he made a statement, a fairly strong statement. And of course, the press noticed it and sort of attacked him about the statement. And he, he began to, I guess, kind of weigh his, his words. But at that time, he conferred with his board and because he said that it would affect very directly SCLC, and the work that he was doing, in terms of the support that he was getting. Because, People who are with me on civil rights will not be with me on this issue, and we have to count those costs. And all I want you to do is to allow me to make the statement as an individual, not on behalf of the organization. And now, of course, he had the right to do that on his own, but there was no way you could, the press would make that distinction or, or the people would make that distinction. Therefore, he had to prepare them for what were, were, were real consequences. And he, I think, always understood that, but it was very difficult for him because he really felt very strongly from the

very beginning on this whole issue of the war. And the Vietnam War especially, because he had studied the conflict starting back in the '40s, and he was able to, to see the development of, of the United States getting more involved, and, and how all that happened, and why, you know, we didn't have to get that involved. And then he could see the in-injustice of it all, and how it was affecting the country domestically, and how the people who were the poorest people in this country were more directly affected by it. And I remember when he continued to, you know, to feel that, you know, as a person of conscience, he, he needed to come forth and make the statement. And it was like, you know, I…whatever the risk is, you know, I must take it now because it's the right thing to do. And he finally, of course, did take the position, as I said, and he was attacked by many of his colleagues. And I remember one day when he was home, he'd been traveling for a few days and he happened to be home that day. And in the morning of that day, he started talking about the fact that…how he was very disappointed in Whitney Young's comments. And Whitney had made some very negative comments about his statement and he said, I can understand the older leaders like Roy Wilkins and others, but I don't understand Whitney. He's a younger man. And, you know, he was so, seemed to be so hurt. So, I said to him, Well, Martin, if you feel that way, why don't you pick up the telephone and call Whitney? Because whenever, whenever you feel like that, I think it's the right thing to do and you normally would do this. Why don't you just go ahead and do it? So, he said, I believe I will. And he picked up the phone and he called Whitney Young and they talked for—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Coretta Scott King:

—at least an hour. And I heard him rehearsing the history of the—

00:42:57:00

Interviewer:

Oh, I'm sorry, we're gonna have to change. And so he [unintelligible]—

Coretta Scott King:

Oh.

Interviewer:

—[unintelligible]

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #4058]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Marking

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jackie.

Interviewer:

OK. So, let's pick up with that phone conversation.

Coretta Scott King:

Do you need to—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Oh, I'm sorry.

Camera Crew Member #3:

You got your key in your bag, don't you? Lynn's gone. So, we—

00:43:18:00

Coretta Scott King:

Oh.

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Marking.

[slate]

00:43:25:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

00:43:25:00

Interviewer:

So, if we could begin with, "They talked for an hour…"

00:43:30:00

Coretta Scott King:

[sighs] They talked for an hour and I heard him rehearsing the history of the Vietnam conflict, starting back in the '40s and going on up to the present time. And I could tell that Whitney was saying, Well, Martin, you understand this, you know that history. Well, you know, I didn't know that. I didn't know that. And of course, Martin felt very relieved after he had done it. And I heard him saying, you know, as he was talking for a long time, I encouraged my wife to take a position against the war and, but the time has come when I can no longer be silent because silence is betrayal. And I was the happiest person in the world when I could come out and take a position on, against that evil and unjust war. And of course, after that conversation, at least I think Martin, you know, got out of his system, you know, his disappointment and his hurt. The fact is that nothing changed in terms of the reality of the reaction against [bus passes] him. It was a very, very agonizing experience because he knew that he was right on this issue, and of course, history has borne him out on that. And I think it was the timing was right, it was something that took a lot of courage to do. But I think that the fact that he took that position put him in a, put him in, I think, in, into a, a relationship in history, I believe, that, you know, that few people stand in. Because there are times in your life when you, when you have to make those difficult decisions which can cost you the ultimate sacrifice. And I think that that position, as well as his continuing efforts with the Poor People's Campaign combined, really, was the beginning of the, the so, so-called, end of his, his life. You have to pay the ultimate sacrifice if you stand up for what you really believe in. But I think there's something greater than that, that you don't try to save your life because, I think, history was moved forward as a result of, of the position that he took.

00:46:46:00

Interviewer:

OK, thank you. Cut.

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Speed.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marking.

[slate]

00:46:55:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jackie.

00:46:56:00

Interviewer:

In the summer of '67, how was Dr. King feeling as he had taken the stand against the war, cities were flaring up, people were looking to him for answers.

00:47:08:00

Coretta Scott King:

Well, Martin had a tendency to take things upon himself, take the blame for things that he didn't deserve the blame for. Whenever there was violence, whenever violence erupted any place in the country, particularly racial violence, he would always feel that he was going to be blamed, and he would say, Well, you know, they're gonna hold me responsible. And he was meaning the press would write about it and say that Martin Luther King Junior, with his nonviolence is causing violence, you know. And I kept saying, But you are not responsible. You know you're not responsible, Martin. You are the one that's trying to make sense out of all this chaos. And so you're not responsible and you can't blame yourself for this. He knew he really wasn't, because I think there are times when, when, you know, you work very hard and you…and somehow, he was trying to find a way to arouse the conscience of the nation around the, the, the issue of the unjust economic conditions. And he felt that, that, that all the violence was, is, was, as the result of those expectations that were unfulfilled. And he felt that, you know, he knew that the nation had the resources, didn't have the will or the commitment. So, he was trying to figure out a way to generate that. And I think it was somewhere in the late summer that he was in the dis-discussion with Marian Wright Edelman. And she had worked in Mississippi and had, was [car horn] talking about the conditions in Mississippi, and had some, some ideas about, you know, how this whole campaign to help poor people could be addressed. And it's not clear to me who suggested the

idea of a, a mule train starting in Marks, Mississippi. But I remember he came home and he was talking about this whole idea of a mule train starting in Mississippi, using the mule and the wagon as a symbol of poor farmers. Marks, Mississippi, was I guess about the poorest county in the, in the United States at that time. And to dramatize the plight of the poor, this mule train would start there and would go through Mississippi and pick up other people. And the idea was to start and go all the way through Alabama and the Carolinas and on up to Washington. And, you know, have a, a campaign which would be the Poor People's Campaign. But there was, there was much more to it than that. But the whole idea was to bring poor people together around the issue of, of economic justice, the lack of, of, of jobs and income. And so he, he got excited about this idea and started developing it further. So, by March of 1968, he had called together leaders of the poor people of this country, which included Whites from Appalachia, Hispanics from, from what, New York, and from New Mexico and other places…California, and Native Americans and Blacks, of course. And we met at Paschal's Restaurant on what used to be Hunter Street, is now Martin Luther King Drive. And this was the, the first restaurant in Atlanta, hotel, where Black and White people could come to meet and have, have, have dinner and so on. I decided that this was a very important historic occasion and I wanted to be there. So, I did attend this meeting. And, you know, it was so exciting to see Native Americans, Hispanics, and White leaders from Appalachia, and of course, Blacks, sitting down talking about what they had in common. And Martin invited them to join the Poor People's Campaign, 'cause by that time, they had developed a concept to the point where, you know, they were ready to invite people in. And I said to him, Like most great events in history, that are historic in nature, the press will miss this one too, but I want to be there. The fact is that this was March 10th, and April 4th, Martin was no longer here, you know. The fact is that he worked, after he got the idea of what could, what could happen to arouse the conscience of the nation around this issue, and just legislatively lobbying, going to Washington with the poor people. And he said we would stay there and we'd camp out and we would continue to, to, to lobby the Congress and the various departments until something was done, because, you know, America can address this problem. And he was…it was gonna be a real test, I think, for nonviolence. And the press asked him, Dr. King, what if, if you fail? He said, It won't be Martin Luther King Junior that fails. It will be America that fails. And he believed firmly that through nonviolent means he could address this issue and that the nation would respond. He said, And we're going for broke. And he, we will go there and we'll stay, and he was determined to do that. And I think that in that process somehow, you know, along the way, he was detoured, and of course, he never was able to lead that campaign. But the, the, the—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Coretta Scott King:

—fact is that he worked so hard in between, from the summer

Interviewer:

I'm—

Coretta Scott King:

—until that time—

00:54:18:00

Interviewer:

—I'm sorry, [unintelligible], but again—

Coretta Scott King:

Oh, my goodness.

Interviewer:

—we're lucky because we ran out in between paragraphs.

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #4059]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

[cut]

00:54:30:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jackie.

00:54:31:00

Interviewer:

So, begin again with you're talking about your husband searching for an answer to these problems.

00:54:42:00

Coretta Scott King:

Martin had, had been searching for a, a creative solution to the problems that existed during the summer of 1967. You know, the, the, the poverty that was growing, the number of poor people in, in this country of, of all races. He, he had not been able to, to find that, that, that, that creative solution that he was looking for until he had a conversation with Marian Wright, and she had been in Mississippi and started talking to him about some of the things that she had experienced there. And this, this whole, the whole question of how do you, do, dramatize the plight of poor people in the country, poverty at its worst? And he felt that somehow if he could come up with, with a, a dramatic way of doing that, that the nation would perhaps respond. And also at the same time, you'd get other people involved. So, the, the, the thing, the thing that happened was when he came home, of course, he was excited, really excited. I mean, he left home, you know, kind of down, he'd been going through sort of a depression, you know. He had been depressed because there was so much violence and he knew that the nation couldn't survive this way, something had to give. And, and the more violence there was, the more some people would blame Martin Luther King for the violence. And ***so when he came home that evening, he was real excited, you know, about this idea of a Poor People's Campaign starting in Marks, Mississippi, with a mule train and going all the way to Washington D.C., picking up people along the way.*** And he talked about it and during the fall period, he worked very hard and all into the early part of the year. And in the spring, he went all over this country talking about it and promoting the idea. And most people who knew him felt that he was working as if this was going to be his last job. I mean, he really was. We were very concerned about him. But the fact is that, you know, he could, he could see, I think, a way that this could all come together, and he felt very confident that this could be a real test of how nonviolence can, can work to change the lives of people economically. When the press asked him, Dr. King, what if you fail? He said, It will not be Martin Luther King Junior, failed, it will be that America failed. He believed very firmly and reaffirmed his commitment in nonviolence as the most potent weapon available to oppressed people. And he said, If, if I'm the sole person on earth who clings to the belief and the practice of nonviolence, I will be that person.

00:58:59:00

Interviewer:

[coughs] That's a cut. [coughs]

[beeps]

[cut]

[sound roll #425]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Speed.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

00:59:05:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark.

[slate]

00:59:08:00

Interviewer:

So, Mrs. King, I'd like to get a sense of the pace of your husband's people-to-people organizing in February and March, and let's focus on March 23rd, when he took Marty and Dexter with him to rural Georgia.

00:59:22:00

Coretta Scott King:

Martin was away so much of the time that he looked forward to occasions when he could take the children with him. And Marty and Dexter were able to go with him to Georgia, rural Georgia, and they were so excited because it meant that they could spend, you know, a whole day or whatever time it was, with their father. [car passes] And now, they, they were just genuinely excited and Martin too was excited, because, you know, he was very concerned about his father role and spending time with the children. And he saw this as a time he could spend with his sons. And he knew how much it meant to them, but he also, it meant, also it meant a great deal to him. And Dexter, of course, being younger, I'm sure he, he, he got tired quicker than Marty. So, he was talking about how, you know, how, how Daddy worked so hard and how he, you know, went so long, and how he seemed never to get tired, and that was the way it was. It seemed that he, of course, he got tired, but I think he was inspired with the whole idea, but it was hard work to do what he did. I mean, it is very tiring, you know, to travel, you know, you've…it was like a, almost like a political campaign, three hundred sixty-five days of the year. I would say to, to Martin, you know, [laughs] The movement is like a political campaign, but you never take a break, it never ends, it's continuous, year-after-year. And that's the, the Poor People's Campaign was one of those frantic periods where it seems that, you know, Martin was just continually going, and he had so much anxiety about all of this working out and making it happen successfully. But I think one of the more wonderful moments in the family was when, when the children could be with him for that length of time.

01:01:54:00

Interviewer:

OK, thank you. Cut. OK. Now, I'd like to—

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

01:02:03:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

01:02:04:00

Interviewer:

So, can you tell us how your husband felt when the march in Memphis on March 28th ended in violence?

01:02:13:00

Coretta Scott King:

He was very depressed over the situation and, and the fact that the march had been aborted. And I think at first he did not really know what caused it. He said that he had arrived in Memphis and got off the plane and went directly to the head of the line. Normally, the staff of SCLC was involved in the organizing process, that is getting ready for the march. And usually, if there are any problems and conflicts within the community, they would know about it. There were no SCLC staff people present in Memphis, it was just the local people, the sanitation workers, and the local committee. However, there were some SCLC board people who lived there, and so he [car passes] was not apprised of the fact that there was a conflict within the community. There were some youngsters who were, who had some problems with the way things were being done. And I guess they'd, the assumption was that, that it had been smoothed over. But Martin was not aware of this. That is by…the leaders had assumed that it had been smoothed over. So, as the march, when the march began, when the

rock throwing started, Martin was very nervous because he knew that if violence was started, if it broke out, it could lead in any direction. And he also felt that he would be held accountable and responsible, although he, you know, he, he really didn't know anything about the background of it at all. So, when he called, he was, he was very distressed, but he was also I would say depressed, and, and he said to me, You know, I, I really hate to see the newspapers in the morning, because I know they're gonna say Martin Luther King Junior, is responsible for this violence. And, you know, I tried to dissuade him from thinking that way, but he…and I said, Well, you know, you, you are not responsible and every demonstration that SCLC has organized, you know, this did not happen. It didn't come from the demonstrators, but it came from people on the sideline, of course. But the fact is that, you know, you know, he got blamed. I did everything I could to try to encourage him and all, but he was obviously very much depressed and down in spirits. I understand that he had a press conference that night and the press, of course, sensed that he was, you know, he was, he was very much depressed. But the next morning, when he had a press conference again, I understand that, you know, he was almost like a new person. He, he, he, he seemed to be, you know, really—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Coretta Scott King:

—inspired. He spoke with a lot of energy in his voice and—

01:05:31:00

Interviewer:

Oh, I'm sorry, we just rolled out.

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible].

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #4060]

01:05:36:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

01:05:41:00

Interviewer:

So, what did Dr. King tell you about the press conference the next morning?

01:05:46:00

Coretta Scott King:

Martin said the next morning when he took, conducted the press conference, he sort of had that take-charge attitude. And normally, you know, he would let someone else give an introduction and he would then come on. But he started himself and, and he was telling them, you know, what he planned to do. And I think the idea was to, to, you know, go on and have another march and so on. The press after the conference, asked him, Dr. King…I mean, during the conference, they asked him, What happened since, in the last night that, you know, you seem to, today, you seem to be quite different. I mean, you, you seem so up and, and so much with it. Last night, you seemed kind of down. Did you talk to someone last night? And he said, No, I've only talked to God. And, but I, but, but the fact is that he, himself, felt something overnight and we are not quite sure except that, that connectedness, I think, that he did have to God. But the fact is that when he came home and he seemed to have been feeling, you know, pretty good, but there were times in the discussion that, you know, I could tell that he was, the thing was on his mind and he seemed, you know, worried. ***That evening, we went to the Abernathy's for dinner and we spent the evening at their home. And Martin, of course, liked to eat and Mrs. Abernathy had some of his favorite food and even homemade ice-cream.*** And so we, we had, you know, a warm fellowship after we ate, of course. You know, he fell off to sleep for a while. [car passes] But then Bernard Lee started talking about that experience the night before and the day…that morning. And Reverend Abernathy said, I've never seen Martin like that, said, He had kind of a lion quality about him. And, and they were just saying there was really something very special that they felt, even though they knew him very well, that had come over him. And I think for them, that was, that meant, you know, sort of like an omen of some kind that, you know, again, you know, they were in awe, as to how he could get that strength, when he obviously could be very low, and very much like any other human being. And then he could transcend and somehow be able to be above it. But the fact is that that was a very difficult weekend for him. He called in the staff from across, across the country and from Memphis, and they had a meeting in Atlanta, and they made plans to go back to Memphis to regroup and to organize for another march. And I think the march was going to be held…it was going to be held, would have been held the following Monday after his assassination. Now, this was the 28th when the march was abor-aborted and the 29th was the meeting in Atlanta. But in the process of that meeting, Martin talked to each one of his staff persons, you know, like, individually but within the group, and he told them the things that they each had to do. And many of them said it reminded them of the, of a last supper when Christ talked to his disciples. Then, you know, they came together, 'cause they

were not together. Some of them wanted to leave Memphis, some of them didn't wanna go. Most of them really didn't wanna go to Memphis, they were just going because Dr. King said we, we needed to go by way of Memphis. And of course, they all got together and said, We'll go back to Memphis, and decided when each one would, would be going in the next week. So, I think he felt much better after that, you know, that experience. And by the time he went back to Memphis on Tuesday, I think it was Tuesday, as I said, this was Saturday, Tuesday of the next week, you know, I think he was prepared and feeling good. The last time I talked to him was, was on a, I guess it was Thursday night. It was Wednesday night just after he had spoken at the Mason Temple. As a matter of fact, he, they'd been meeting all day ***and he didn't wanna go to that meeting that night. He said he had sent Reverend Abernathy over and he said, Because I, I just didn't feel like going, but it's thundering and lightning here, we have a thunderstorm taking place, he said, But, you know, Ralph has just called and said that I needed to come over and said the people were waiting for me, and they really didn't want anybody else to speak but me. So, he said, I guess I'll go on over there. I'll call you later. He said, I'll call you tomorrow night.*** Well, of course, this was April 3rd and I didn't get that call, naturally, because he was assassinated. But I'm told by Reverend Abernathy and others who were there, Reverend Abernathy said [sighs] that Martin spoke that night, you know, again, as if it was kind of a, what you call a swan song. And he talked about the fact that if he had had a choice of which period in history that he wanted to live in, that he would want to live in, you know, in that period that, at that particular moment. And he went on to give all the reasons why, as he went through history and he talked about the great moments of history. And as great as that, they were and he would name them individually, you know. The Greek period and on and on, certain experiences in the United States. But this is the greatest moment in the history of our country that, you know, that for, that I'd like to live in. I…because, then he talked about all the things that had happened in the civil rights movement that, and the progress that had been made, that made him feel that this was the most important time in history. And then he finally, he came around to telling about the threats and, and his final statement, which I think everybody knows now is history. And, but, that…well, what else can you say? [laughs]

01:13:40:00

Interviewer:

Thank you. Cut.

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Speed.

01:13:44:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marking.

[slate]

01:13:49:00

Interviewer:

Do you have any thoughts about the road, from the Voting Rights Act of '65, that your husband had struggled so hard for, to this convention where eight thousand very diverse Black people came together to discuss the future of Black politics in America?

01:14:07:00

Coretta Scott King:

I think it was a, a very significant gathering [car horn] in that it was, it was, I guess, the first time that, in recent history, that we'd had people from so many persuasions coming together who were Black, who had a, a lot in common. And yet, had…were very different in many ways, in terms of their political, of their, their, I would say their ideologies. And I think it was a, a tremendous effort and we…I think we sent a message to the nation, I think. Particularly [bus passes] to the, to the political parties that, you know, we were not going to be taken for granted and that we were organizing, and I think that was important. Nineteen seventy-two was an important year. Many people forget that Shirley Chisholm ran a gallant race as the first Black woman to run, Black to run for president, and a Black woman. And, you know, I think Shirley was a real pioneer. And it was at that race, that convention, I think that galvanized a lot of Black America behind Shirley. And each time that, you know, that happens, it's a learning experience, I think. And it learned, White people learned about Black people, and learned to, to, I think, to respect certain…that Black people, the fact that Black people are, can achieve, that they're intelligent, and they can lead. [truck passes] Shirley did at that time and I think we, we need to remember that, she made a tremendous contribution as the, as the first Black. And then, of course, most people who are younger remember only Jesse Jackson's race, which is very—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Coretta Scott King:

—which is very important and very significant. But I just like to look at that whole span of history. [laughs]

01:16:49:00

Interviewer:

Well, we, once again, we were lucky 'cause we ran out after you—

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #4061]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Speed.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marking.

[slate]

01:16:57:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jackie.

01:16:58:00

Interviewer:

So, do you remember any feelings that you had as you stood there up on stage next to Mrs. Betty Shabazz? And I'm wondering if you also wonder…think that it was any coincidence that this gathering happened in the last year of Nixon's first term in office?

01:17:17:00

Coretta Scott King:

I think I may have met Betty Shabazz at another time, but the fact was that we were there together, and I certainly had not really had that much contact [car passes] with her. I think the fact that we were there together, at least, presented a, a, you know, some semblance of, of unity. Unity doesn't mean uniformity and I think that sent a message, you know, to the American people, Black people and White people alike. I, I, I, I think that the [truck passes] overall significance of, of, of that coming together said to, to us that, you know, we can together do a lot more than we can being separated and divided. Now, not that there was not

some divisions within the group at that particular time, but I think it was a, a very forward step, working on bringing the Black community and the Black leadership together in a kind of a family, leadership family relationship. Not that we have fully achieved that, but I, I don't think we've attempted anything since then, like that, of that magnitude.

01:19:10:00

Interviewer:

OK, thank you. Cut.

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marking.

[slate]

01:19:19:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK, Jackie. [clears throat]

01:19:20:00

Interviewer:

What was your thinking behind inviting Bishop Tutu to the first Martin Luther King Junior breakfast and memorial in Atlanta in '86?

01:19:34:00

Coretta Scott King:

Bishop Tutu had been the spokesperson in the anti-apartheid movement from South Africa who had, I think, more than anyone else, symbolizes, symbolized the spirit of nonviolence. He had received the Nobel Peace Prize. [truck passes] And it was important that as we celebrate Martin's birthday for the first time nationally, there be a, an international

representative who had championed a cause that seemed similar to Martin, what Martin was involved in. And I think that Bishop Tutu was a good representative of that. To make that connection with South Africa was very, I think, important in, in the work of the, the King Center, the continuation of Dr. King's work. Not that we had not identified with it, you know, earlier, and been involved, but the fact is to, to have it happen at that time was very important. We had hoped that somehow, despite the differences in, in policies of our government, that we would have been able to get the [car passes] President to come at that time, but we were not able to. Because we could envision a picture of the President with Bishop Tutu, receiving the Nonviolent…Martin Luther King Nonviolent Peace Prize together on the same platform, and it seems to me that would have been a very powerful message that could have been sent throughout America and around the world.

01:21:35:00

Interviewer:

Now, why, why did you have the desire to make the connection between South Africa and the civil rights movement?

01:21:43:00

Coretta Scott King:

Because apartheid [clears throat] is the worst, I guess, form of racism that we, we have seen in and, I guess, in, in the modern world. And Martin always said that next to…that Birmingham was next to Johannesburg, South Africa, in terms of its oppression, racial oppression. And that, that, that's why he felt that Birmingham was important to be the, the focal point of the, the public accommodations campaign. If we could, if we could demonstrate the ending of segregation in Birmingham, it would have repercussions far and wide. The other thing is we've always known that there was a connection between South Africa and what was happening there, and what we were doing in our struggle from Montgomery on. There was a bus boycott in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1956. And it was linked to Montgomery in terms of its influence, the influence that Montgomery had had on the people of South Africa and Johannesburg. And Martin always really wanted to, to make the connection stronger himself. He did issue a joint statement with Chief Luthuli in 1962, and he made several statements on, on the, the situation in South Africa. He called for, the two of them called for an international boycott. And he said in that statement, If only two nations really decided that they wanted to end the system of apartheid in South Africa, it could be done. And he named those nations as the United States and Great Britain. But the fact is that Martin didn't live to take on that cause per se, but he was very much aware of the interconnectedness of it, as being a part of, of a problem which affected all of us. And in a sense, we cannot be free until the people, Black people of South, and other people of South Africa are free.

01:24:22:00

Interviewer:

Great, cut.

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #3:

Speed.

01:24:27:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marking.

[slate]

01:24:30:00

Interviewer:

So, I'd like you to think about the significance of Martin Luther King Junior beyond civil rights, to the nation as a whole, and then internationally.

01:24:44:00

Coretta Scott King:

The holiday for Martin Luther King Junior was always meant to be a holiday for an American hero, who was not only a hero for America, but for people internationally. Martin Luther King Junior's message of peace and nonviolence, of, of, of justice for all people was much greater than the problems that we face in America. He often talked about the triple evils of poverty, racism, and war, which were all forms of violence that were international in, in scope, and that we couldn't solve either one of those without working for the solution of the other. The problem of apartheid in South Africa is certainly very much a part of, of the, the three evils, racism, but poverty, and violence, I mean, war is the ultimate in violence. And we have a responsibility as a democracy, if we want people to respect us as a democracy, to make sure that a nation that proposes to be a democratic nation follows in that vein. South Africa has not included Black people. When Black people in South Africa cannot vote, cannot participate in the process of their government, then we as a nation have a moral responsibility to work for their liberation and for their self-determination.

01:26:42:00

Interviewer:

Great, thank you. Cut.

[cut]

[end of interview]

01:26:48:00