

ROBERT PENN WARREN JAMES FORMAN TAPE #1 JUNE 4th

RPW: This is the first tape of a conversation with James Forman, June 4 - proceed. Mr. Forman, do you mind giving us a little autobiographical sketch?

Mr. FORMAN: Well, no. The name is James Forman - F-O-R-M-A-N. I was born in Chicago October 4, 1928. I spent about the first seven years of my life in the northern part of Mississippi, in a county called Marshall County - it's in the northern part of Mississippi.

RPW: How does it relate to Oxford or Clarksdale?

JF: It's only about thirty miles from Oxford, and about forty-five - it's about seventy-five miles from Clarksdale. The mail came through a little town called Moscow, Tennessee. Marshall County is adjoining Fayette County in Tennessee. I went to grammar school in Chicago, went to high school there, graduated in 1947, spent four years in the army, attended school - the University of Southern California, graduated from Roosevelt University in Chicago, had a scholarship to attend Boston University, where I majored in African affairs, and assisted in the Government Department; left graduate school, spent a year working on a novel while I was working with the Illinois Institute in Juvenile Research, came a school teacher in the city of Chicago, worked in Fayette County on a vote drive, started a student nonviolent coordinating committee in September of 1961 as the executive secretary when it decided to put on a full time staff of some sixteen people. I have been working with the student nonviolent coordinating committee since 1961.

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RPW: Why did you leave Mississippi when you were a boy?

JF: Well, because my mother remarried and then she came to Chicago.

RPW: Were you in the Korean War?

JF: Well, I was in the army for one year during the first part of the Korean War. I was due to get out ^{in '50} /~~the-15th~~, then when the war started they extended the time for one year.

RPW: Did you see active service abroad?

JF: No, I was in California at the time, although I was stationed overseas in Okinawa during 1949-1950.

RPW: How did your involvement with the civil rights movement start?

JF: Well, I'm not trying to give you any histrionics, but I think, you know, it sort of started when I was born. I was always conscious of the fact that I was a Negro and that things had to change and that in order for them to change people had to work to make them change. And I'm not saying that as a baby certainly I had this kind of a consciousness. But, you know, I was not twenty-five or twenty-six years old when it became obvious to me that I was a Negro.

RPW: It is for some, though.

JF: Well, that's very true. So they say.

RPW: Over night.

JF: Well, I question that. I don't think that -

RPW: Or at least for a direct active involvement it comes about -

JF: Well, I question that. I don't think that people make over night decisions, frankly, you know - walking in the orchard which

Shirley Hall
your father, I guess like John Stewart and suddenly you decide this is the idea, you know. I mean I think that things have more historical context than that. Well, you know, it's not for me to say. I mean, people say that, so if that's what they say, O.K. But I just don't accept it, and I think that if they probed a little bit deeper within themselves that they would find other strands.

RPW: Let's cut to something about - well, quotes the young Negro close quotes, you know. Could you give a kind of a profile of this person, this character or sub-type that you might distinguish?

JF: Well, it's very difficult to do. I mean, first I have to -

RPW: Of course it's difficult to do. It's also a stupid question.
(talking together)

JF: Yes, that's right - of getting into the conversation. The reason I say it's difficult to do because, you know, people are always typing individuals and I have just never been of that school, perhaps due to my own inability to give such typings, to give such generalizations. But I think that one can certainly say of those people that I know best, those young people within the student nonviolent coordinating committee, which I call SNCC - I spell it out for the typist - S-N-I-C-K - is the so-called nickname - that there is, you know, an awareness among some of them that social change has to come and that it can only come by people who are being full time and most of their spare time in order to make it come about. At the same time I think that, you know, there exists within this country many young people both black and white, or certainly many young Negroes that are

motivated by traditional American values, a desire to make a lot of money, a desire to be socially mobile and have a home, two cars, pay partial payment on traveling abroad, you know, and then pay for the rest later on. But at the same time you have people who are rejecting these values, and certainly this is characteristic of people who work for us because money is not important. We don't make any money, and the important thing is, you know, working for social change.

RPW: I have just been reading a mimeograph or typescript of a dissertation by a young man named Rose on the American Negro student. He is impressed by the large amount - the large number, the large percentage of Negro students who don't involve themselves - do follow the standard American middle class aspirations.

JF: Why is he impressed by them? In what sense is he impressed?

RPW: Well, he says the **government** number is great.

JF: Well, that's very true. There's no question about it, I mean, and I don't see how it could be otherwise.

RPW: I don't either. I'm not raising that question.

JF: You know, we have a society which has these values and Negroes are a part of this society and they're going to accept these values just as many whites do or as most whites do. And - but that's not relevant to social change, because you don't have to have a whole mass of people who believe in certain things. You just have to have people who are dedicated to working for social change and spreading the message. Now, the fact of the matter is, however, that - and I'm - you certainly haven't said he made this assertion - but I would

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Do you see what I'm getting at? The two kinds of motivations or poles of activity?

JF: Yes, well, I don't - see, I can't really judge this, but I don't think that there are many people who are involved in the movement simply as an emotional - as an outlet for their emotional frustrations solely. Now, there's no question about it that - myself I am personally frustrated and that involves my emotions about the racial scene, and that there are certainly emotional drives operating in me. At the same time, there is a sort of intellectual and idealistic commitment. And I don't think that the two are - the three are inseparable. On the other hand, you know, we're not just like the herd of beings that are just moving forward purely on emotionalism without some type of rationale which would involve their intellect and what we are doing - about what we're doing.

RPW: I remember Gilbert Moses talking about this in Jackson, Mississippi, saying his first shock to find among Freedom Riders and other people who came in, a type that he associated with street corner hoodlumism, you see - the drifters. Then he went on to say this first shock passes, or this was their way to become people.

JF: Yes, well, that's true too, but you know, in the first place, I'm not sure of the context in which he said this, and I think it's maybe necessary then to stand -

RPW: He's not saying all - he's saying some.

JF: Yes, but even I'm going to take to the some - you know, it's probably necessary to understand the frame of references from which

he speaks, because I don't think that, you know, that it's accurate just to call people street corner types, you know. I think that they're human beings who may not had the so-called formal education, the so-called grasp of intellectual ideas, the so-called world view that some of us may have. And yet they know that within their own social circumstances or within the context of their environment, that there are certain things which are not right and they therefore feel that these things have to be challenged. And do participate in the movement. And that's very good, because racial prejudice doesn't just affect so-called Negro but it affects all people in a sense, and if you're going to have any kind of profound changes you must get people whom some would call in the lower classes involved, you see.

R PW: This reminds me of something that Adam Clayton Powell said, there are two distinct Negro movements now at the same time. The one in the South is primarily middle and upper class, the protest of people of some education or a great deal of education, claiming their rights, the rights appropriate to what they feel their talents to be. In the North, a mass movement based on the claustrophobia of a ghetto culture.

JF: Well, I just don't think that he understands - if that's his statement. (talking together) what's going on in the South, I mean, because the movement in the South is not basically a middle class movement. It is based now - there's no question about it, on the other hand, that in 1960, when the movement first started, it was led

by students who might be considered as middle class students or aspiring to be in the middle class. But it didn't take it very long to become a mass movement involving very poor people, and I could cite numerous examples of the people who have even participated in demonstrations certainly could not be considered middle class. As a matter of fact, the - I would say that so-called middle and upper class individuals in the South are not involved in the movement, and sometimes even act as a hindrance.

RPW: What about the leadership of SNICK, say, itself? The persons I know who are in SNICK, the ones I'm acquainted with, are all persons of a high degree of intellectual attainment.

JF: Well, that's very true. And I think that SNICK is the one movement in this country that has within its spheres of activity room for intellectuals, and I think, as far as I'm concerned, it's one of the main strengths of our organization in that we are capable of absorbing the energies of many people of intellectual attainments, but who at the same time are not snobbish, you see. I think that there's a difference between being middle class and having intellectual attainment, you see. The two are not synonymous, and that if people recognize - and the reason - and actions even indicate that they are not synonymous, because the people who come despite their educational attainment have to first of all recognize that we are a bunch of equals and that they must work on the same level as, say, a guy with maybe a high school education that's working for us, and there are a few who don't even have that. And there's a commitment to work with people. We're

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not working in the major cities - we're working in the very poor areas of this country, and so that whatever your intellectual attainment is, then you have to begin working with the masses of people, and I think that there is a characteristic that's different of the so-called typical middle class individual.

RPW: Do you find this - some of the people who actually, say field workers in voter registration in Mississippi or some of those places now, who are people of intellectual training and attainments, have - and I'm not offering this as criticism - but have a romantic view, a romantic feeling for the purity of experience of the cotton field hand, the deprived and ignorant - this romantic feeling for the purity of experience, Wordsworthian view of that world?

JF: Yes, well -

RPW: Do you find that sometimes?

JF: No, I don't find that. I obviously don't - well, not obviously, but I don't understand all of the implications of your statement, I mean, in terms of the Wordsworthian -

RPW: That was a question.

JF: Yes, your question, rather - because we both come from different backgrounds in a sense, and I don't - I have not yet attained that literary level one might say. But the fact of the matter is, though, I do understand it sufficient enough to know that there's sometimes a romantic attachment to poor people, but I don't think that that is the case, you know. And I hope that you understand my ambivalence, I mean, I'm trying to be as concise and perhaps (talking together) and try to

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clarify your question and also my reaction.

RPW: I could offer you some examples to the contrary.

JF: All right.

RPW: Among people you know and what they talk about, you see.

JF: All, right, why don't you do that?

RPW: I haven't the tapes with me, you know, to play them back to you, but you know, I mean - I think it's fine, you see, but it's one of the things one always enters when you have people who different intellectual experience and intellectual attainment assessing each other. Now, this conversation was a kind of romantic admiration for this purity of experience.

JF: That may very well be the case. But I don't - you know, I - you know, I haven't talked to everybody within the organization and certainly haven't talked to them, you know, for two or three hours at length, but I don't think - now I would - certainly am subject to error on this point, and this is just an impression - I'm reacting impressionistic - but I don't just think that there's this romantic conception of the purity of experience. I think what people may be saying, on the other hand, is that working in some of the Deep South areas, that the issues are somewhat clearcut. Now, I don't think that this has anything to do with the romantic conception of the purity of the experience, and I think that, for instance, in Greenwood, Mississippi, it's quite obvious who the opposition is. It's a different situation from, say, the west side of New York when you're trying to get in a Princeton Plan. I mean, where is the opposi-

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tion? It become ambivalence because some Negroes may even present a plan which is counter to that; in Greenwood, Mississippi, it becomes quite obvious that, you know, people can't register to vote, that -
RPW: Shotguns are clearcut.

JF: That's right. And I think that that's entirely different from conceptualizing it as a romantic conception of the purity of the situation. I may be wrong.

RPW: Changing the topic a little bit, what do you conceive to be the specific function ^{of SNCC} ~~at stake~~ as contrasted with the other civil rights organizations?

JF: Well, I think that -

RPW: What vacuum does this fill?

JF: Yes, I'm saying. The first vacuum was that it decided to go into the small towns and into the underprivileged areas of the Deep South. And it took the movement out of the big cities into these rural areas. That's number one. That can be substantiated, now. All everybody's talking about Mississippi - of course all those who are talking about Mississippi are not going to be in Mississippi, you know. But even there, civil rights organizations or some of the people in civil rights organizations were vocal about going into the state of Mississippi to talk about voter registration. Secondly, as SNICK would feel a need among some students to feel a certain unity that had some type of Southern base in a sense. That is, in 1960 when the sit-in movement started -

RPW: In Greensboro?

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JF: In Greensboro - two months later a conference was called at Raleigh, North Carolina, the students themselves voted -

RPW: Excuse me, was that under the auspices of the SCLC?

JF: SCLC, called the first conference in Raleigh, North Carolina, Miss Ella Baker was on our executive committee, was very instrumental in having that conference - SCLC I understand paid for the conference. But the students themselves voted that they would have a temporary coordinating committee which would not be a part of any other organization.

RPW: Now, you've retained an office that you had at that time, didn't you?

JF: No, I became an officer in 1961. It was a year and three months later - almost a year and six months later.

RPW: Well, how did you enter the organization - that is, what way did you come into the organization?

JF: Yes, O.K. But I - I want to go back to your question in terms of the specific - the different functions because I think this is a question that people are always asking, and I think one has to look at this historically. And when these students got together and formed this committee, it was basically a Southern-oriented organization composed primarily of Negro students, students who had been involved. And this was the specific function and even now it's serving a distinctive function in that the primary focus of the organization is not so much in building the organization itself as trying to develop leadership not only in students but also in some of these communities.

And the mere fact that we have in Mississippi, for instance, split what is obviously - supported ninety percent of the called for budget - most workers in there - trying to create an impression of unity on the part of the civil rights organizations working within Mississippi to the exclusion many times of any kind of projection of the student nonviolent coordinating committee. And I think that it's because we feel that ultimately a strong organization within the state of Mississippi will be the best for the people in the state, and we think that this is true across the South, you know, to develop local leadership. And I think that that's a distinctive role - a role which is not in theory, which we can point to instance after instance after instance where we have carried that out. And of course the ^{converse} ~~inference~~ is not necessarily true. Now, as far as myself - the way I got involved in the student nonviolent coordinating committee because I first of all felt that young Negroes in this country, and expressly young Negroes who had had Southern experience, would have to return South and to lend their technical skills to the development of movements in these areas. And this experience became quite vivid to me when I was involved in the Fayette County situation where people had been put out of their land and living in tents.

RPW: In Tennessee?

JF: That's right. And I was discussing with many people in the summer of '61 the absolute necessity for developing this type of young people's organization, and I met a lot of people who had been involved in SNICK and it was in the fall when SNICK decided to put on a staff. Prior to

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that time - well, when they decided to put on a staff, that I was called and asked to come and work within the framework of this staff. I guess people knew of my commitment and my interest and of my work, and perhaps felt that I could make some kind contribution and of course I decided that I should do this because, one, it was the kind of thing that intellectually I was committed to doing, and the kind of thing that I knew was absolutely necessary - absolutely necessary for social change in this country.

RPW: What had you been doing just the year before you came to SNICK?

JF: I had been working in the Fayette County situation from September, 1960, to August of '61, was involved in food and clothing drives in the North, sending food there to break the boycott, to which to me was very important because if the boycott had succeeded in Fayette County, then it would have been extremely difficult to talk about voter registration drives in Mississippi.

RPW: How did you get into that - the Fayette County operation?

JF: Well, you know, I could write you a history of my life. Well,

M I got involved because I had just come back from ^{Millbury} ~~Millbury~~ French summer school and some friends of mine in Chicago had started organizing to send some food down - some friends that had been involved at the Congress of Racial Equality in Chicago - asked me to help them to do public relations work for the campaign, and I agreed to do that.

RPW: Earlier, when you were a graduate student at Boston University, what did you plan to do? Go into academic life or into political life or what? What was it all leading to?

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JF: Well, it was all up for grabs, you know. Really, I have never been able to clearly state at any one point in my life that I'm going to be this or I'm going to be that. Or that this is what I want to do. I've been very ambivalent about many things, you know, and the ambivalence revolved I think basically around the whole question of whatever it is that I do, how can this best integrate with the conception of doing something for the Negro in the United States.

RPW: You say you were writing a novel at one time.

JF: That's right.

RPW: How did you write your novel to this question of doing for the Negro in the United States?

JF: Because I was writing a novel about the absolute necessities of this kind of a movement, so that there was - it was perhaps a bad novel - it's never been published. But one of the - some of the themes running through it was the daily frustrations in a Northern city - you know that a lot of people of encounter, and one of the characters involved tries to break through this frustration around developing a nonviolent movement, which was obviously an expression of something that I wanted to do.

RPW: We were talking earlier at lunch about Ralph Ellison, and you said - if I can crudely paraphrase you now - that you had never understood what was meant by a person saying I want to be primarily a writer or an artist. Is that clear?

JF: That's right. Not only that - or a tennis player or a golf player,

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you know, and then after that I want to be a Negro, or I am - or - you know, people stating positively an artist first of all, or I am a tennis player first of all, or I am an architect first of all. Then after that I am a Negro.

RPW: And after that a human.

JF: Yes - yes. I just don't understand it. I really have never understood what people meant, and I'm not, you know - I'm critical of the position and - but in being critical I am sophisticated enough to know that I should understand the frame of reference that other people are talking about. But this has never been clearly explained to me.

RPW: Maybe it's not a frame of reference, but it may be a compulsion.

JF: Yes, I think that - you see, I think that there's a lot of - it seems to me what little bit I know about the artistic field, you know, it's sometimes sophisticated and to say, you know, that a person is striving to be an artist - art for art's sake, you know - but I've never understood that term. I mean, even in school, and unquestionably some of this may be my own naivete, but I have never understood what is art for art's sake. What does that mean, you see.

RPW: Well, some of the greatest artists would deny that, of course. Tolstoy, for instance. This is the end of Tape #1 of the conversation with Mr. James Forman. Proceed on Tape #2.

(end of tape)