

ROBERT PENN WARREN RUTH TURNER CLEVELAND MAY 7 TAPE #1

Mr. WARREN: Miss Turner, where were you born ? - just to get a little biography on this first.

Miss TURNER: I was born in Chicago, Illinois.

RPW: And I understand you were educated partly in Berlin - is that right?

RT: That's correct. After completing my undergraduate training at Oberlin College I spent one year at the Free University of West Berlin.

RPW: And you are a German teacher by profession - is that right?

RT: That's right.

RPW: Had you studied German at Oberlin?

RT: Yes, I had. I was a German major at Oberlin.

RPW: Yes. (test tape) How did you happen to go to Germany?

RT: Well, I received a German Government grant from the German Government upon graduation from Oberlin.

RPW: Just for the purpose of studying?

RT: For the purpose of studying, yes.

RPW: Then you came here to Cleveland to teach in the public schools?

RT: Well, not directly. I spent one year after returning from Germany at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where I received a Master of Arts in Teaching.

RPW: And then out here?

Ruth Turner - Tape #1 - p. 2

RT: And then out here.

RPW: Tell me about how you came to leave teaching and to devote yourself fully to the work of CORE. Was this a long process or a sudden decision? How did it come about?

RT: Well, I was the chairman of the chapter here in Cleveland from November 1962 to June 1963. The events in Birmingham brought about the rather sudden decision. I felt after what occurred there that I could no longer continue teaching German at a time like this, and, again, looking for ways in which to work in the civil rights movement on a full time basis.

RPW: But you had been, you say, connected with CORE for some time before that.

RT: Yes, I had been. I was chairman here in Cleveland, and I was also working with CORE in Boston.

RPW: How long back does that fact go in connection with CORE?

RT: In connection with CORE as an organization goes back really to the year in Boston, when I became involved. But I had been involved in civil rights organizations - oh, ever since being a teenager.

RPW: People I have talked to about the Cleveland situation and some in Cleveland are very pessimistic about the immediate future here. Do you want to talk about the local situation a bit? It seems highly polarized now.

RT: Yes. I think it is very unfortunate. We have a polarized community here by virtue of the fact that a vacuum has been created in the white community through apathy, and that vacuum has been filled

by people who would rather prevent the civil rights movement from achieving its goals by people in leadership positions such as the president of the board of education, our mayor, who would rather scream Communism than address themselves to the real grievances that lie behind the protests now. In view of the fact that they are the ones who have taken leadership and have organized around the principle of keeping down the movement and totally misunderstanding the movement, we have reached a point where I am afraid the community is rather polarized. The outlook, then, for the immediate future looks a little bleak. However, for the long range future this may be a different story.

RPW: There is considerable white support within a certain segment, isn't there - the clergy here?

RT: Yes, there is considerable white support. The clergy has come out very strongly in favor of the goals of the freedom movement. There is also considerable support in suburban communities. But our major problem is that the white community in Cleveland has seen only one way to express themselves, and that is to - well, misunderstanding the goals of the movement and has received no leadership to help them understand the goals of the movement.

RPW: Now, in some cities you find at least an uncommitted body of opinion that is more or less willing to approach matters privately if not with high idealism. A kind of moderate or frankly liberal sentiment which is malleable. But in those cities frequently you don't

*Shaker Heights
integrated*

Ruth Turner - Tape #1 - p. 4

find any committed body of leadership in the church or in other organizations. Now, here you have the reverse situation, don't you?

How do you account for that?

RT: Well, it is a bit strange. I don't know if you would consider it the reverse of that. We still have a large mass of uncommitted people, but -

RPW: Who are not polarized?

RT: Who have the - I think we do have a large number of people who are not polarized or, given a second chance to re-think their position, would pull away from the polarization that has already taken place. I again feel it is the function of the leadership in a white community. The only voices that have spoken out up to this point have been the voices which would help to polarize the community. I do not give up the white community for lost, however, because I feel that if other leaderships spoke out that many of those who found themselves on the other side of the fence could also find their way back over.

RPW: What is the role of the white liberal in the freedom movement?

What is his function - position?

RT: We have had quite a bit of discussion about whether the people who are really involved in our movement are liberals. We think that perhaps another name is more appropriate.

RPW: All right. You want to save the nasty word for other people - is that it?

RT: We would call them the white committed, and we feel that their

Ruth Turner - Tape #1 - p. 5

role as it has been exhibited in Cleveland is a very strong supportive role. And there are many instances of very strong leadership role in their own communities. There is a definite role for the white committed person, the person who is willing, as the Reverend Bruce was, to lay down his life for the cause in which he believed. There certainly is a role for that person.

RPW: You were present at that event, weren't you?

RT: Yes, I was. I didn't see it, but I was at the scene at the time.

RPW: I understand that you did a great deal to try to quiet the mob sense after the event and the attack on the driver of the bulldozer.

RT: Yes, well, that occurred around 3:30 or 4 when the construction had stopped and the policemen were attempting to send the mob home, and we knew they were angry - they were justifiably angry - they had been provoked considerably by the actions of the police that day. And yet we felt there was no cause to be served at that point by exploding there in the community. We attempted to quiet them and to send them home.

RPW: In the attack on the bulldozer driver - that occurred immediately, didn't it?

RT: Yes, it did, and - it was not a mass attack. There was one young man who went - who became hysterical after seeing the Reverend run over.

RPW: Only one person was involved in the attack?

Ruth Turner - Tape #1 - p. 6

RT: That's right - in a bodily attack. There were sticks and stones thrown at the police too, but in terms of actually attacking the driver there was only one person involved in that.

RPW: That wasn't the way the press reported it - in some places, anyway.

RT: No, it wasn't. Time Magazine carried a deliberate distortion of that.

RPW: I saw the Time report. You saw it with your own eyes, didn't you?

RT: Yes - I didn't see this with my own eyes - this was reported to me by eyewitnesses. There was one person who attacked the driver - a young man who went beserk after seeing - temporarily at least - after seeing the death of the Reverend

RPW: Did any sticks or stones find their way to the driver?

RT: Not to my knowledge, although I think most of the sticks and stones were thrown at the policemen.

RPW: Could you see a situation where this explosive violence which you helped to stem could serve a useful purpose?

RT: Well, this is the whole purpose of the nonviolent demonstration and protest action. We try to channel the justifiably intense feelings of people who have gone through and lived under this system - tried to channel them in ways which will be creative and will bring about constructive changes.

RPW: I noticed again from Time Magazine that Mr. Ely - Louis Ely in

Phil Ely

Ruth Turner - Tape #1 - p. 7

New Orleans, with whom I have had conversations about this - two long ones in fact - now says if violence comes this summer he would take no steps to curb it in New Orleans.

RT: Well, I think there's a point at which the curbing can no longer be done. I feel that it is primarily the drive of law enforcement agencies to curb violence. This is a heavy responsibility for citizens. I feel that we should take those steps that we can, but I'm also realist enough to know that if wide scale mob violence breaks out, that I would no longer be in a position to curb it, and I think this violence has to be seen as an expression of such tremendous discontent and an expression of tremendous frustration that has built up over a long period of time. No one person can stop it. I think it's too much to ask that one person attempt to stop it.

RPW: The other day I was talking with Mr. Stringfellow, whom you may or may not know or know about - he's white - a white man - very much interested in and committed to the freedom movement. He says, in predicting violence in Harlem this summer, that the white man is willing to accept it, to put his hands down and take the brickbat or the knife or whatever it is. He takes a totally - I say what about the cops then, what should they do? What should the cops do in that case?

RT: Well, unfortunately, the policemen, if they behave in other places like they do here, are also unfortunate tools of a power structure which has failed to understand the dynamics of the protests, and

Ruth Turner - Tape #1 - p. 8

consequently, not understanding anything about the people with whom they deal, have not been able to deal with the situation in any kind of constructive way. That's why police brutality takes place, and of course police brutality breeds more violence. I feel that clearly at some point the policemen ought to step in to prevent loss of life and limb, but they should not be there to prevent one side of loss of life and limb as has been the case. An example here is that at Murray Hill, where a mob rioted out of control - a white mob, I'm happy to say - the police made no attempt whatsoever to curb them - permitted them to riot, refused to take horses there because they said it would incite the mob to more violence. And yet with a smaller number of people, they did use their horses, they charged the crowd and again did what they said they couldn't do elsewhere.

RPW: Tell me this - what is the ethnic situation aside from the Negro-white collisions that have occurred here? There is some talk that there are other ethnic complications involved in these collisions besides the Negro-white, that the Italian section is involved, that the Poles are involved. Can you give me a breakdown on that?

RT: Well, this is quite true, that we have in Cleveland ethnic pockets in the city of Cleveland which jealously guard their own traditions and their own way of doing things. Often this way of doing things runs counter to the mood and the progress of the entire community, and this of course complicates the situations. But I

Ruth Turner - Tape #1 - p. 9

don't think it can be said that these people are responsible for the kind of violence that takes place. I think white ordinary Americans who don't belong to ethnic groups will respond the same way if challenged.

RPW: If challenged, but the challenge now is primarily to say the Polish pockets and the Italian pockets?

RT: Through the education issue the challenge -

RPW: Through the education issue.

RT: - the challenge has been primarily at these ethnic pockets. That's correct.

RPW: Is this an unfortunate experience do you think that has to be dealt with, or would there be ways to avoid this collision with these special highly homogeneous groups?

RT: There would be ways of colliding only with them. If the commitment of the school board at this point was to city-wide integration and to implementing those plans to bring it about, I don't think that these ethnic groups would feel as though they were selected or isolated, that this would be something that would involve the west side as well.

RPW: They feel that they are isolated and must protect themselves.

They're being discriminated against too, is that right?

RT: I guess that's their feeling, yes. I think there's a real strong in-group out-group feeling there.

RPW: What do you think of the theory that some sociologists present that as an ethnic minority achieves equality, the tendency is not to

Ruth Turner - Tape #1 - p. 10

bleed off into the surrounding society but to come back together?

RT: I'm not a real student of sociology, although I am acquainted with that theory. That may be true. It has worked in certain instances with the Jewish community. I think it has worked here in Cleveland with certain elements of the -

RPW: ... observation here?

RT: - the Polish community - yes.

RPW: Would that work with the Negro, do you think?

RT: We've never had an opportunity to find out -

RPW: No. You must have some supposition about it though.

RT: Yes, well, my supposition is that it may very well be true that if all the barriers were lifted, that Negroes, after having the experience of equal opportunity, would still choose to live together.

RPW: There would be no - nothing to prove?

RT: No, that's right. But I think that the protest here is that - in the fact that equal opportunity is very much restricted by the - by denying them opportunity - the opportunity to break out of the ghetto. That's been obvious. Because when Negroes are consolidated in the ghetto they are more easily exploited, they are more easily mistreated and overlooked by the powers that be. And this is why inferior education, housing and employment opportunities are realities in the ghetto situation.

RPW: What's the Negro vote like in Cleveland? How much registration is there here?

Ruth Turner - Tape #1 - p. 11

RT: There's more registration than actual voting, and there's not enough registration. That's one of our programs for the summer, to register more voters and to begin to make our political power felt.

RPW: What is the ratio, roughly, of population to registration here? That is, potential registration population and actual registration - what is the ratio?

RT: I wouldn't be qualified to answer that with any real certainty. I know that there certainly aren't the numbers registered that could be. And this is what our job is, to make sure that that full potential is realized. I couldn't say.

RPW: How much trouble do you have with Negro apathy? What about voting? Two, about civil rights in general.

RT: The apathy toward civil rights is being broken down. I think from the very fact that we had a 92 percent effective boycott - school boycott here in Cleveland on April the 20th, points up that the Negro community can be brought out of apathy and is in fact less apathetic than the white community. Now, in terms of translating that kind of involvement on the civil rights issue into a political issue - that's going to take - the newest organization - that's going to take a new approach to the community. We have to help them to translate into the political arena. But I feel that the problem of apathy in the community is not ~~se-different~~ - doesn't reside so much in the Negro community as it resides in the white community.

RPW: In general let's say that's true. But there is a - the tale

Ruth Turner - Tape #1 - p. 12

you hear everywhere from Negroes when they're speaking in a sort of unbuttoned way - that apathy is a great problem.

RT: Certainly it is - surely it is. But I -

RPW: ... reasons for their apathy.

RT: That's right. It's quite understandable to me that a person who has to worry, as most of the people here in have to worry, about where the next meal and where the next rent payment is coming from, have little time left over to concern themselves with the rights of other men. I think this is a matter of economic deprivation. And some of that we will not be able to overcome. The society has created it. But at the same time, I'm encouraged by the fact that we can communicate with 92 percent of the Negro parents to get them to keep their children out of school. This shows to me that the apathy can be broken down, and we're going to do it.

RPW: Isn't it strange to you, as it is to me offhand, that Tennessee - Memphis, say - the capital of the Mississippi delta - the cotton country - has a very highly organized Negro vote that's very effective as a bargaining basis, and Cleveland does not have. How would you account for that?

RT: I would account for that in the following way: I think that the entire Negro community in Memphis was forced to learn the brutal facts of segregation through civil rights demonstrations long before the entire community of Cleveland was. Cleveland has always been known as a citadel of tokenism. It has always been the place where

Ruth Turner - Tape #1 - p. 13

people thought they were doing all right, and unless you have concrete evidence to the contrary, you'd like to believe that. Now, we have given them concrete evidence to the contrary in the last few months. In the last few months there has been a lot more awareness in the Negro community that police brutality does in fact exist. They see it on television - you know, they know it individually, but now the whole community has a chance to be reminded of it. Now, the fact that we now have a movement here in Cleveland, at least the beginnings of it, is going to make a difference in terms of our political organization.

RPW: Was there ever a kind of Negro vote here which could be delivered to one political party?

RT: Surely - surely. That's in the pattern. In fact, it's the pattern in most northern cities, that the Negro was organized politically all right, but he's organized by the machine, and the machine delivered the votes and no one ever challenged that. And we're challenging that. We're asking the community now to act as an independent body and use their vote.

RPW: Wasn't that machine an education in the use of the vote?

RT: I beg your pardon?

RPW: Wasn't that political machine that delivered the Negro vote an education in voting - in the powers of the ballot?

RT: No, not really, because it was not used in an independent way.

It was - the machine in a sense was used by certain individuals to give individual benefits. It has not been used as the voice of the community

Ruth Turner - Tape #1 - p. 14

or of the entire community. In other words ... There's another problem here that we have to consider too, and that is the machine in the north has been misleading because it's dominated by Negroes. In other words, it was easier to be fooled by thinking that these people were actually delivering the vote for the Negro community when it was not. Just to explain again what I mean by misleading, even though the machine here is white dominated, the Negro community could have been and was easily fooled by the fact that the Negro still seemed to be in prominence. We had Negro councilmen, we had Negro judges, and consequently it looked as though the Negro vote was being delivered for Negro purposes when in fact it's the same kind of maneuvering that went on in the south, one step removed. In other words, I think it's going to require a good deal more organization in the north to break down the pattern than it did in the south where the racial lines are so much more obvious.

RPW: Do you know anything about the relation of the father of Martin Luther King, Jr. to this whole question of power?

RT: No, I don't.

RPW: I wondered if you did. And I don't know what I know. I know - Dr. King says his father stood in an intermediate position in the historical development, you see. The way he would put it, it was a stage in this development. That leads to the matter of, say, development. How would you describe the stages of development in the Negro life vis-a-vis white life, white society, since the Civil War? Do you see clearly defined stages?

PARENT
Ruth Turner - Tape #1 - p. 15

RPW: Or is it more of the same, more of the same?

RT: No, it's not more of the same. I think we have now a generation which is markedly different from the generation which preceded it. You know, that's like talking about my father. He was a hard worker, but he struggled to raise a family of five, and in fact was so engaged in the struggle of survival that he could not give his attention to the problems which he felt very deeply and met every day, and yet in an organized way couldn't do anything about. He was not free to do so. But he made it possible for me - gave me the equipment and made sure that I had the equipment to begin to do something about these problems. And I think this is true of many of us in this generation. There is a certain backlog of security which our parents did not have by virtue of their parents really having to struggle which enables us - a certain backlog of security and self confidence, let me say, that enables us to tackle the problem in a much more general way than our parents were able to do so.

RPW: In the 1930's there was great provocation, poverty and distress and oppressions for the Negro, plus the crisis of the depression. Why no freedom movement then? Why did it wait thirty years or thirty-five years?

RT: Well, I don't know. I'm a great believer that the history is created by the times and the individuals who live in those times. I feel that one of the reasons may be - and this is just speculation - is that the entire country was in something of a similar situation in

the '30's, that it wasn't quite so easy to distinguish between the suffering of blacks and the suffering of whites as expressed in the labor movement. I don't know. It's just a possibility. Of course, the blacks have always suffered independently, and much more so than anyone else.

RPW: Where was the leadership in the '30's - the Negro leadership?

RT: I believe it was channeled pretty much in the labor movement, and therefore was not fighting a black battle per se. It was fighting a labor battle, which in a sense was distracted from the strength of the Negro community.

RPW: But the Negroes were even farther outside the labor movement then than they are now.

RT: Right. But they were making some kind of gains. The CIO was forming in the beginning - well, in the '30's - that's not true in the '40's - I guess it's more true - actually, I should let Dave answer that because he's a student of history and I'm not.

RPW: What I'm getting at is this, Miss Turner - I'm going to leave the question of process - the sense of historical process. Now, some people, if asked about Freedom Now, will say - now. All will say in the past - will always say - it was only active - we didn't happen thirty years ago or forty years ago.

RT: No, it's not a matter of action.

RPW: It's not a matter of action?

RT: No, it's not. The real combination of the factors, though, I can't spell out. I really haven't given enough attention to it. But

Ruth Turner - Tape #1 - p. 17

I don't believe it was an accident.

RPW: Let me try this as one factor. Thirty years ago there was ^{little} educated leadership among the Negroes.

RT: That's true. That's sort of what I hit on when I said that my father was not able - was not in a position to remove himself from his own struggle for survival and think in terms of the general struggle. He didn't have the equipment.

RPW: You must be aware that if I should say that to many Negroes they would be very angry.

RT: I imagine so. But I think it's (talking together) I think it's a realistic appraisal, though.

RPW: They would be angry because it seems to imply that process means time, you see, and Freedom Now is outside of time - now. Do you see what I'm getting at?

RT: Yeah.

RPW: How do you interpret Freedom Now in the light of your previous basis for process?

RT: Hmm. Shut it off a minute ...

RPW: About Freedom Now, Miss Turner -

RT: Yes. Well, Freedom Now - and this is perhaps one of the most frustrating experiences for someone who is committed to it - is to a certain extent relative. I would say it is less relative now than it would have been twenty years ago. Freedom Now probably was a slogan of many people in the '30's, and yet there were certain conditions

Ruth Turner - Tape #1 - p. 18

- certain factors - which prohibited that from becoming a reality and we might just talk about them again - some of the relevant ones at least. I have pointed to the idea that self confidence seems to be the mark of the present leadership, an intense pride in being black which was not the case twenty years ago, and I think it is very correctly assessed to be the result of an African and Asian revolution.

RPW: Let me take a point there and go off on a side track. Speaking of pride in being black. DuBoise and other Negro writers have talked about the psychic split of the Negro in America, the pull toward the Mystique Noir, the pull toward Africanism, the pull toward even the American Negro tradition, as opposed to their Christian white Judee less European tradition, a real split. Do you feel this split - impulse?

RT: Yes.

RPW: You do?

RT: I do.

RPW: How do you deal with it?

RT : It doesn't present any problems in me, because I think that by drawing on both traditions I think I have broadened the horizons for me. I am an American, and therefore of course share in the Judeo-Christian Western civilization, but I am also aware of the fact that I share in another civilization, which I think broadens me and broadens other people in the movement. We have the - we have - you know, the strength of belonging to two communities, and they complement each

Ruth Turner - Tape #1 - p. 19

other.

RPW: What about these Italians down the street? That you were deploring a few minutes ago?

RT: I wasn't really deploring them. I feel that - (change tape)

(end of tape)