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THE SOUTHERN ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

#4007

INTERVIEW # A-107

INTERVIEWEE : Aaron Henry

INTERVIEWER : Jack Bass

DATE OF INTERVIEW : 2 April 1974

RESTRICTIONS : None

Interview with Aaron Henry, Clarksdale, Mississippi, April 2, 1974,
conducted by Jack Bass ~~and Walter De Vries~~, transcribed by Linda Killen.
Henry is president of Mississippi NAACP and chairman of the loyalist
faction of the Mississippi Democratic party.

Henry: --to where some people are, to where perhaps these people are
Jack Bass: And you think these intimacies between individuals of both
races goe both ways?

Henry: Sure.

J.B.: You're how old now?

Henry: 52. [Interruption in tape.] I've been called worse names by
better men.

J.B.: Okay, but in the NAACP you're what?

Henry: I served as president of Mississippi state conference of the
NAACP.

J.B.: Since when?

Henry: Since 1960. I serve as president of the *local* branch of
the NAACP since 1952. Served on the national board of directors of the
NAACP. This is my third three year term, for nine years. And this
year I served as chairman of Willy Stone's southeast other 5th region
of the NAACP, which includes North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia,
Tennessee, Florida and Alabama.

[Interruption in tape.]

J.B.: --the loyalist faction of the Democratic party in your opinion.

Henry: In the loyalist faction there are Democrats and there are
ex-Democrats. [Laughter.]

J.B.: In the loyalist faction view. In the Democratic party of Missi-
ssippi that is recognized by the Democratic party of the United States,
your title is what?

Henry: I serve as chairman of the party and chairman of the executive committee of the party.

J.B.: What is it like in Mississippi now politically compared to what it was like when you got started? Twenty years ago, right?

Henry: Well, when you say you got started. . . . I really became a member of NAACP as a senior in high school back in '41. Graduated in June of '42.

J.B.: You a native of Clarksdale?

Henry: I was born in this county. I was born on Flowers brothers plantation. My parents moved into the town of Clarksdale for better educational opportunities for me and my sister. from the genesis of time that you remember Mississippi has grown from an era where whites were automatically superior to an era where superiority is not necessarily reflected in whiteness. Of course being white does give one a head start. But there are several blacks who outrank whites in various areas of relationship. And I think in terms of change from then to now, I think the biggest change is in attitudinal relations. You were over at Charlie Sullivan's before you came here. Charlie picked up the phone and said "Aaron, this is Charlie. Tell a friend of our how to get to your house." Well now Charlie Sullivan is a former lieutenant governor of this state, former district attorney from this area. There was a time, say ten years ago or more, when he would say "Aaron, this is Mr Charlie." But it's. . . no. . . as I say, the way one responds to the other today as compared to then is grossly different.

J.B.: And you told me earlier that there was a time when he prosecuted you--

Henry: Oh sure, Charlie put me in jail. *like* everybody else.

He was district attorney. That was his job. I was violating

laws that I didn't feel were just laws. And in that context, the discipline of the movement demands that you be willing to pay the cost for violating laws, you know, that you don't feel are just. So I don't believe one without penalty can afford to obey only those laws that he believes in. But if he's willing to pay the penalty for the laws he violates, you know, I think that that compensates for a conscious difference between the two.

J.B.: What were the type of laws involved in those cases?

Henry: Well, *I was* ~~which meant that you~~ ~~were~~ advocating to people, particularly black people, not to patronize certain stores in the community because they didn't hire blacks. You were guilty of parading without a permit as they called it at that time. Which meant that you had invoked what is a traditional first amendment right of carrying a pickett sign in front of a business and in front of an individual. Frankly, we picketted Charlie Sullivan himself, as district attorney for this county. Because of the fact that he was instrumental in getting affidavits against us who were involved in the picketing. This was the kind of stuff, largely, that I was involved on the opposite side from Charlie.

J.B.: How did you feel toward him then?

Henry: Oh, well, I just said Charlie was a law man, you know. That the fracas between blacks and whites at that time was underscored that whites are in the master role, blacks are in the servant role. And consequently the master-servant role prevailed. You know, I've had to deal with Charlie on the question of involvement in the Democratic party and trying to be sure that rules and regulations that were set up by *in the Democratic party* then would no longer be in vogue. We had a series of deposition sessions where our lawyers were present and his lawyer and him were present and consequently there was

this kind of . Really, my attitude about Charlie and many other whites who I feel have turned a corner. . . . I don't think that I've changed. I think that they've changed their way of action that accommodates my position. ~~More than~~ ~~has really made this~~ ~~turning the corner, you know, situation.~~ Regardless of how bad they've been, when they convince me or some of the others of us, that they are no longer a part of what they used to be, then I'm for forgiving what their past has been. Because you see if blacks continue to hold against whites all of the charges that they are guilty of in terms of their negation of the black community. . . . If we continue to hold that as an issue of hatred, an issue of confrontation, then we're never going to get over this situation of racial injustice and racial bigotry. So if ten years ago you had come here you would have found a couple people outside with shotguns and maybe one man inside. You know, the house had been bombed and all. Knocked the store down a couple time. And of course we responded to the *Chels* in these areas. But I would say within the last four or five years there has been, in my mind, no real concern about being dealt with physically in a way that would deprive me of life or limb.

J.B.: How much fear did you feel, say ten years ago?

Henry: Well, you know, I don't really know. I just know this, that it's not whether or not you're afraid but it's what do you do when you are afraid. Now my activity ten years ago is the same as it is now. Continuing to try to convince as many members of the total community as I could that there was a situation of a one way structure where all men were men, where nobody was inferior to another. This is pretty much the line that I learned from the NAACP when I first became involved in it, which was further structured by my years of identity, close association with Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, those kind of activity. I've

Never known a time when I didn't feel as I do now. That in the question of violence I was certainly much more concerned about if it effected my family, my children, my wife, myself. Then the guards that we had. As soon as my wife got to the point where she felt comfortable with them not being here, then I was very happy to say "We don't need you anymore." Because I would just like to not have to have somebody with me everywhere I go. Now I still maintain one bit of caution. I guess you would call it domestic caution. Because my wife insists that I don't travel by myself, you know, around in the car. She'd rather have somebody there tell a story So just to be sure her mental attitude is not all stirred up about me driving by myself, I capitulated to that. I don't drive alone. But other than that I don't have any. . . .

J.B.: You said you've always felt the same way you feel now.

Henry: Yeah.

J.B.: How is that? What is that?

Henry: Well, that mankind is placed on this earth by a diety that we all are bound to respect. And that although we find ourselves to be the grandsons of former slaves and the grandsons of former slave owners, but neither of us had, really, anything to do with that period of our nation's history. And it is our responsibility, because those scars still remain, to bind up the wounds of that era. And that's what I think I'm about every day and that's what I'd like to see everybody about everyday, to help erase the years of ~~de~~ dehumanization that has taken place in America for some time. But you see, where some of us get lost in chronology. . . . Many of us think that segregation has been with us for a long, long time. Well, Mississippi didn't have segregation until 1890. From 1865 to 1876 was the free-est period which blacks have ever witnessed in America and particularly in

Mississippi. It was after the Tilden-Hayes compromise, the presidential race of 1876 where Rutherford Hayes *Told* the southerners that "If you'll make me president I'll remove the troops from the South and turn the blacks back over into the hands of the white landowners." Now between 1865 and 1876 Mississippi sent two blacks to the Senate of the United States--Bruce and Revals. The fact that the constitutional convention in Mississippi did not meet until 1890 and it was in 1890 that the Jim Crow laws were written into our structure. From 1865 until 1890-- ~~1865 to 1876~~--you had black and white kids going to school together, you had no segregation. Because the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments had just passed and all of these were about black rights in the black community. And it was really 1890, when we finally got around to making segregation legal. It was really 1896 before the Supreme Court took a position on separate and equal. That was in the Plussy vs Ferguson case that grew out of Louisiana in regard to a dining room car on a train where a black refused to sit behind a curtain. And this case came before the United States Supreme Court and it there ruled that separate but equal was legal. And from 1896 until 1954 we lived with that doctrine in this country.

J.B.: With that historical perspective, how do you compare the administration of Richard Nixon. . . . How do you compare it in contrast to this Tilden-Hayes decision.

Henry: Well, to me it's quite an analogy. I think Mr Nixon became president by playing to the base, biased prejudice of white America. You see, of the votes that Richard Nixon got for president, 65% of those votes. . . well, 65% of the vote in the country went to Richard Nixon. Of the other 35% that was left, 25% of that that went to George McGovern was black. George McGovern got less than 10% of the white vote in this country. So, you see, every time Nixon used the word busing that was

nothing but a code word for nigger. Everytime he used welfarism, permissiveness. You see, it gave Americans who felt chagrined to say that they were for segregation of the races, segregation forever, and all that bull. . . . But when he gave them a convenient umbrella under which to stand and say "I'm against busing," well, what they're really saying. . . . It ain't the bus, it's who's on the damn bus. It's us. That's, you know, that's the question about busing. And if they were busing nothing but white kids, there'd be no problem. See, busing has been used as a tool for getting children to school as long as the public school system has been a part of America. But as long as they were using busing to maintain segregation, there was nothing wrong with busing. And now that we're using busing to effect integration, then the president and everybody--not everybody--the president and several other people get the impression that busing is so wrong. It's really an issue that is attempting to return America to the days when segregation, when racial segregation had a legal foundation in this country. If we return to the neighborhood school idea with housing as segregated as it is, with many of the larger cities where whites have moved to the suburbs, etc. . . . If there is not the tool of busing, black children and white children again are going to be separated. You don't learn from books. You don't learn from movies. You don't learn from osmosis that other people are just like you. Except you have the opportunity of dealing man to man or person to person with them meeting ~~[meeting?]~~. White boys get the idea that they're better than black boys because they are separated from black boys. And they don't have any way of comparing their ability with black children. And of course black children begin to feel that they are less than white children because they have no positive way of identifying their abilities with white children. And the textbook structure of this nation so ignores the black contributions that it helped make America the kind of country

that it is today. That the textbooks expose the virtues of the whites and either plays down or absents the activities of blacks. So consequently, without models, without heroes, without persons of black stature for black kids to look up to, they are going to be brainwashed by the textbooks of this country that only white men have been involved in building America the way it is. It's subtle. But if you look at the elementary books of your and my time where Dick and Jane was always white, you know. There was no blacks involved in any of the primary books that were around when you were in grammar school or when I was in grammar school. The nearest thing you had to it was little black Sambo. And of course black Sambo was always a buffoon. He was a very unsavory character. And as long as these are the kind of models we are going to give children to emulate, you're bound to get a master-servant philosophy, you're bound to justify Gunnar Myrdal's position in American Dilemma when he says that when you separate children from others because of their race, that you commit an act that is calculated to warp their minds in a manner never likely to be undone. And the warping of the mind suggests to the white child that he's better than the black child; suggests to the black child that he's less than the white child. And consequently this master-servant thing prevails.

J.B.: How do you characterize race relations in Mississippi today?

Henry: Well, I characterize them as being better than they were 20 years ago, but not nearly as good as they got to become.

J.B.: If Charlie Sullivan had been elected governor, would the conflict between the two so-called Democratic parties in Mississippi be resolved?

Henry: I think so. You see, during the time when Charlie was lieutenant governor when there were meetings of what you consider the loyalist Democratic party--and I'm damn proud to be called a loyalist. Of course the newspapers have to label us something to keep us straight, I guess.

So, you know, we'll forgive you for that. But the fact that Charlie is one of the people that attended both sides' meetings, to try to be sure that he had identification with the leadership of both incidents. And I feel that Charlie had the confidence of many of us who are in leadership roles in the Democratic party in Mississippi. And certainly, in my person relationship with Charlie Sullivan I believe that. . . . And I found Charlie, now, to be a, you know, reasonable individual and I think we could have worked out the difficulties and gone forward. Now really. . . the big reason why we can't get that done now is really not because of Bill Waller. It's really because of Jim Eastland. You see, it's not to Jim Eastland's benefit to foster racial harmony in the state because Eastland has built his total political empire on discord among the races. And once he no longer has that to carry him forward, then there's no need to continue to rely on a man of Jim Eastland's persuasion. And Charlie Sullivan, or rather Bill Waller, happens to be the captive of the palace guard. James O. Eastland made Bill Waller governor and therefore it becomes not what Bill himself wants to do. I think Bill Waller the man, as I've known him, he too would like to work toward bringing the two groups together. But Bill Waller does not have the permission of his prima donna, the man who made him governor, to do that. Because to do that would work to the disadvantage of Senator Eastland.

J.B.: Why would it be to Senator Eastland's disadvantage to bring the two groups together?

Henry: Well, you see it would be to Senator Eastland's disadvantage because he has lived with the hate the black as a part of his total philosophical basis. He spoke many times about how he carried civil rights bills around in his back pockets for years. There's no way for Eastland to overcome his past image and become acceptable to blacks.

Eastland can forget it. And if anybody ran against Eastland of any prominence, they in all probability would pick up a great majority of the black vote. And if he had any strength in the white community, Eastland would no longer be senator. You know, Gil Carmichael damn near got in last time. If Nixon had put his arm around Gil Carmichael once Eastland would have been gone. But Nixon, the Republican president. Gil Carmichael, a Republican running for the senate in Mississippi. Yet Nixon threw his support to James Eastland. And, you know, in that regard I consider both of them the same kind of racist.

J.B.: Why couldn't Eastland change the same way that you've said some of these other people have come around the corner, turned the corner?

Henry: Why? I don't know. But I just know he hasn't.

J.B.: I'm not questioning whether he has. I'm asking whether he could.

Henry: I doubt if he can. I think that his age prohibits it. Eastland is 69 or something like that. There ain't no way in the world you're going to change a man that old.

J.B.: How about Strom Thurman?

Henry: I don't know really whether Strom changed or not. I think Strom began to deal in a political permissive kind of activity. I think Strom was a Republican of convenience and moved, you know, in that direction. Certainly there are a couple of strong civil rights people who now have gravitated toward Strom Thurman. However I think it was a dishonest move, you know, to begin with. I don't think that Eastland, in the plantation tsar philosophy that he has could pull a Strom Thurman and still be held up by his peers in the plantation world that so pervades the delta in Mississippi. I just think that Eastland's a lost cause.

J.B.: Do you think Eastland is capable or incapable of sitting down at a table with you and discussing across the board political issues that need

to be resolved?

Henry: Well, if you're speaking about discussing them man to man, no. He's incapable of that. Eastland still feels that somehow God endowed him with something that he didn't give black men.

J.B.: Is that the big problem in so far as his resolving the situation?

Henry: I think it is.

J.B.: To what extent were you involved in Charles Evers' campaign in '71?

Henry: Very much.

J.B.: You know it could be argued. . . somebody suggested it could be argued. . . . You said that Eastland was responsible for Bill Waller being elected governor. *Other* suggested that Charles Evers is responsible for Waller being elected governor.

Henry: Well, I would say Charles probably helped some. But the financing, the public relations firm was all a part of Eastland's move. Now I know Charles was expressive to some degree. But I don't think that the moves by Charles was very significant.

J.B.: Well, for example in the second primary, you said that you supported Sullivan.

Henry: Yeah.

J.B.: But Charles Evers, as I understand it, advocated publicly that blacks boycott the second primary. So was there a conflict between the two of you on that decision?

Henry: Oh yeah. . . We differ on it too. We're the best friends. He's one of the closest friends I have, but certainly we differ.

J.B.: Looking back at it now after the election is over, what strategy do you think he should have followed in so far as the best interests of blacks in Mississippi is concerned?

Henry: That's you know really hard to say. It's hard really for me to say

definitely that Charlie Sullivan would have done many of the things that I feel he would have done, you know. I know that Charlie and Bill are-- Charles Evers and Bill Waller--are much closer ~~than~~ . And I would feel that Waller' move is not so much pro-Charles but it is the continued devisiveness of white America to divide the black really. And if he could get me and Charlie fighting at each other then. . . . Certainly Charlie has a following. So do I have a following. And there would be a *split* black community if Charlie and I were stupid enough to fall for that kind of reasoning.

J.B.: How about the first primary recognition of Charles Evers that black support swung?

Henry: I don't think that got anywhere.

J.B.: Do you feel that blacks basically voted in the second primary or that more boycotted in respect to that recommendation. I was looking at some voting statistics, just in the ~~county~~ ^{counties} that had more than 50% black registration, and the majority of them voted less than 50%.

Henry: Sure, sure, right. As regards to what the white percentage was. You'll find that the voting percentage throughout America is something like 36%. For everybody who's registered. . . .

J.B.: It was a fall off in black, heavy black counties.

Henry: I'd say probably so but I would think it would be because neither man--you know, both men were somewhat moderate in their approach and neither man really turned the black community on or off. And you'll find people generally vote their dislikes, vote the cat out, you know, rather than vote the man in. And since Bill and Charlie, neither one played the race issue hardly at all, you know, in the campaign. There was really no villian for the black community to attack.

J.B.: Which was a new situation in Mississippi?

Henry: Yeah, right.

J.B.: How do you assess Waller as governor?

Henry: I think he's a stumbling, bumbling failure. You know. And I think that because Waller finds himself dictated to by so many people and particularly Senator Eastland that prevents him from doing, you know, a lot of things he'd really like to. Now on a man to man basis, Bill and I get along all right. I see him when I want to. He calls me; I call him. And we deal with issues that neither one of us feel very strongly about. But I guess it's good for his profile to have a public press image of being very anti-Aaron Henry. I don't *have one* ~~one~~ of being very anti-Bill Waller. I just. . . when Bill gets off on the wrong track I tell him. And I would be just as willing to respond to him when he does something good, but I just haven't found that opportunity yet.

J.B.: How do you assess the whole Charles Evers campaign? We get two responses usually. One is that it had the result of really bringing about enthusiasm in the black community, really getting people interested in the campaign and out to vote. The other one is a negative response that it tended to take attention away from local candidates, diverted resources from local candidates, ~~ad~~ therefore didn't have a positive effect.

Henry: I think it had a positive effect. I don't know of any resources that it usurped from local candidates. Because most of Charlie's money was raised out of state. And the local areas were not, you know, assessed or bound to contribute. And I think that in the campaign they ran, it did serve as an adrenalin builder, shall we say, for many of the other campaigns that did exist.

J.B.: Okay, that was the strategy for '71. What sort of strategy for '75 do you see on the part of black politics in Mississippi?

Henry: Well I don't think times really have changed that much. I think

that for blacks to get very exercised over *the* elections then there's going to have to be somebody that they feel strongly for or strongly against. You know. Blacks are just like whites. The turn out will be. . . . They will respond to what they feel their psychic interests or responses are. If it's a ram rootin' tootin' campaign, the candidates charge everybody, you know, get everybody worked up, okay. But if the candidates play low key, the voters are going to play low key.

J.B.: Do you see, though, a third party effort again on the part of blacks, an independent party effort? Or do you see more of an attempt to move into one of the two major parties?

Henry: I see the independent strategy to a certain extent having validity. Very much so. I do feel that most people who run as an independent are actually allied with the Democratic party in Mississippi.

J.B.: What's your reaction to the role of blacks in the Republican party? Those who are active in the Republican party?

Henry: Fine! You know, we need somebody at every door. We need somebody to ~~come~~ ~~and~~ consult with everybody who can possibly be involved or in charge. See, as long as you and I live on this earth the leadership of the United States is either going to be in the hands of Democrats or Republicans. *Every* black inside the Republican council chambers is really good. Don't ever apologize.

J.B.: Do you see any sort of a move toward a black political caucus state wide developing in Mississippi?

Henry: I see an organization of black elected officials, ~~where in certain black community of [static]~~

I see no third party movement.

J.B.: No, I wasn't thinking so much of a third party, but of a caucus of blacks who are politically active, whether Republicans or Democrats,

who get together--

Henry: Yeah, I would say that would prevail within the association of black elected officials in the state. Whether they be Republican or Democrat, as long as they are elected officials. I think there is a tendency toward a cohesion, you're right.

J.B.: Do you see it extending beyond elected officials, though, blacks who are just politically active, such as yourself?

Henry: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

J.B.: But also people who are active in the Republican party but not elected officials.

Henry: Yeah. But I would think the elected officials would be the core. The rest of us would be supportive.

J.B.: You see this as something developing in the future?

Henry: Well, there is a black elected officials caucus of the state now that Robert Clark chairs. And several of us are always invited to the meetings who are involved in the political structure as persons who are not in an elected office but still very much involved.

J.B.: When do you think the conflict between the two Democratic factions-- if I may refer to them in that term--will be resolved?

Henry: When a Democrat is elected president.

J.B.: Why would it be resolved then?

Henry: Because at that point--you see, right now the amount of patronage is such that's involved is so small that the Democrats have it to deal with. And of course right now the Democrats are dealing with four groups. The Eastland-Stennis, Dave Bowen, ^{Sonny} ~~southern~~ Montgomery,

. They respond to force as to what you'd like to see us do here or who should be appointed there. ~~They file a legal bill~~

~~but at least they~~ . Now, if

you get somebody like Ted Kennedy or Sen^{ator} Mondale in the White House, the tendency, I would guess, is going to be toward not identifying with anybody who is not a part of the Democratic party that's recognized by the national convention. And of course this also means that the national party will live out its commitment to be true to its own rules and regulations. This is the rule right now. However without the head of state a Democrat to be sure that this rule is enforced there's nobody to sanction anybody, you see.

J.B.: That's the rule under which the effort was made to strip Eastland of his seniority?

Henry: Right.

J.B.: All right. The vote was what on that?

Henry: We lost by four votes.

J.B.: Was that in the judiciary committee ?

Henry: No, ~~It was in~~ the Senate.

J.B.: That was the Senate Democratic caucus.

Henry: That's right.

J.B.: All right. Am I correct then you're saying that if a Democrat is elected president you expect that patronage will be routed through the loyalist faction?

Henry: Right.

J.B.: Unless the issue is resolved?

Henry: Right.

J.B.: And if not, you'd consider it a sell out?

Henry: Noooo. If a Democrat becomes president and does not respond to the rules and regulations of the Democratic party then we would carry them to court to force them to abide by the rules of the party.

J.B.: Do the rules specify patronage?

Henry: Well, the rules specify that nobody who does not support the national Democratic party or the party's nominee for president and vice president in the last election has the right for participation within the Democratic party. They can't sit on the Democratic side of the aisle, they cannot organize Congress, you know. These are the rules of the party now.

J.B.: But suppose Sen Eastland supports the ticket? What then?

Henry: Nothing wrong with that. See when he supports the ticket he signs the loyalty oath, you know, that he's loyal to the party, that he identifies--

J.B.: Suppose he just endorses it without signing anything?

Henry: He can't do it. The oath is clear.

J.B.: This is in the national Democratic party rules, it says that you've got to sign an oath?

Henry: Yes sir. Every person who's a Democrat.

J.B.: In Congress, will have to sign the oath.

Henry: Everybody, if you intend to be involved in activities that relate to the Democratic party.

J.B.: Okay, now I believe you told me earlier that if they try to elect delegates in primaries it won't be valid unless there's a registration system of some sort.

Henry: Yes. Number one, I'm saying that in the request to elect delegates in an open primary ^{violates} ~~follows~~ the rules and regulations of the national Democratic party, you know, at this point. And it would also violate the philosophy of the party as we interpret it. Because the rules and regulations that govern the Mississippi Democratic party are on file with the Democratic national committee. They have been approved by the national Democratic committee. And only the Democratic national

committee can make a change in those rules. Which also means that in order for a rule change to get to the DNC our group would have to take it there. All four seats that are held on the Democratic national committee by Mississippians are in our group.

J.B.: Now those four are who?

Henry: Those four are Kathleen Pine [?], Charlie Evers, Patricia Derrian and Aaron Henry.

[End of side of tape.]

J.B.: --primary, to the next national Democratic convention in Mississippi, provided there is a means of party registration.

Henry: Right.

J.B.: Would not have to be a legislative act, not necessarily. It could be that you could go to the polls and sign a sheet of paper saying "I'm a Democrat."

Henry: No, no. The loyalty petition is spelled out.

J.B.: Okay then you'd have to sign a loyalty oath at the polls.

Henry: Yes.

J.B.: But you could do that. I mean it could be something done at the polls such as signing a loyalty oath.

Henry: Yes sir.

J.B.: And the loyalty oath would say that you support the nominees of the party for president and vice president. Does it say all the other candidates or just that?

Henry: That's going to be that [?] but it says that you support the rules and regulations of the national Democratic party. And the ~~longer~~ there ~~that~~ some people can't get by is that the rules and regulations of the national Democratic party now requires an affirmative action committee that has the responsibility of ~~seeing~~ seeing to it that women, youth, and

minorities are involved in the party processes.

J.B.: And if Sen Eastland signed such a note, then you say you'd baptism him and take him in.

Henry: Yeah, yeah. I have no desire to keep Eastland out. If he follows the same rules and regulations I do, let him in.

J.B.: Okay, and if he doesn't come in before the election, and if a Democratic president is elected, am I correct in interpreting what you said that the situation then will be that in order for Sen Eastland to have a hand in any control of the patronage that the conflict between-- if I may use again--the two factions has to first be resolved.

Henry: That's right.

J.B.: And therefore, because of that pressure on Sen Eastland, you think it will be resolved.

Henry: That's right. I think we came pretty close to getting together last time when we missed Eastland by four votes. If we had been able to get a majority vote on that issue, Eastland would not be sitting on the Democratic side of the aisle, would not hold the chairman of the judiciary committee, would not be president pro tem. The senator would be stripped of his powers in the Republican party. This is why Strom Thurman and Jim Eastland has different situations. See, Strom was tripped within the Republican party, in the Democratic party and he went to the Republican--

J.B.: No.

Henry: Yeah.

J.B.: No, he switched before he was stripped.

Henry: Well. . . okay. . . .

J.B.: That's all right.

Henry: Anyway, he became persona non grata within the Democratic party

and he became a martyr as far as the Republicans were concerned because he left the party and came to them. You're talking about Eastland remaining within the Democratic party.

J.B.: With all these factors, though, there's plenty of incentive for Eastland to want to get it resolved now, isn't there?

Henry: You know, I really don't think so. I don't think that Eastland feels that he personally can win or lose anything by the controversy being resolved. I think that--

J.B.: Where does Ken Dean fit in all this in that Congressional race over there?

Henry: Well, it's just another Congressional race. I don't put it as a very key factor.

J.B.: Well suppose he were to get elected because he got both loyalist support and regular support?

Henry: Well, he would be about like David Bowen. David Bowen got support from both groups. [And he ain't sitting over there on a hot spot.?)]

J.B.: You don't see him then in any position to--

Henry: Not any--

J.B.:--negotiate--

Henry: [Unclear.] I'd like to see a Democrat ~~kick~~ the Republican out. ~~For electoral~~ Support Ken and on his team and be working with him and all that. Not because I see his election as being any kind of great move toward healing the breach now.

J.B.: What sort of sentiment. . . . I mean I presume there are terms under which you would now accept an agreement.

Henry: Yeah. You see, I believe in negotiation. I certainly just don't happen to believe in unconditional surrender.

J.B.: So if he got elected and he were able to get the regulars to

accept terms that you would find acceptable, you would stick to those. . .
you would find that--

Henry: Of course if I was--

J.B.: Resolvable.

Henry: All I'm saying is that, that. . . .

J.B.: That that ain't going to happen.

Henry: Well, this doesn't give Ken that particular mantle. I think that the strongest man right now to be about to do that is Robert Straus who serves as chairman of the party. Bob happens to be a damn good personal friend of mine and he tried to make friendship with Waller. But Waller wouldn't even respond to his letters. And right now he's got a bad situation with Waller on the question of Waller ignoring him completely.

J.B.: And at this point you don't expect the question to be resolved before the convention in '76. But it might be. Is that it?

Henry: I don't expect it to be, but it might be, right.

J.B.: Why has Mississippi been able to elect only one black member of the legislature?

Henry: Well, it's largely due to the way the state's apportioned. The state has been carefully apportioned to make almost every district either a white majority district or very closely so. And of course the black population of Mississippi is now something like 37%, something like that. Well, you say, 1950, back then, the black population was 55, 54%. Then the demarcation lines we now have would not have resulted in a general all white situation, you know, if we had been allowed to vote. You see blacks didn't get the right to vote in Mississippi until 1965 upon the passage of the voter registration act, voter right bill, civil rights act. And at that point the white citizen council had been successful to a degree in helping the outmigration from the state to be

as big as it was. And as I say we've gone from black 55% down to 37% in the last 12-15 years. Blacks leave the state. So that's pretty much why, the way the lines are drawn.

J.B.: When was your house bombed?

Henry: Oh, '67 and '69. They shoot it up, when they get ready. They'll hit mine.

J.B.: How about the, it's a drugstore, right?

Henry: Yeah. The drugstore was bombed in '69.

J.B.: Have you ever felt like leaving? Lots of folks have left.

Henry: No. I think really the big reason why not is I had so many invitations to leave, shall we say, in the black community. Somebody's told to leave town and why don't you all run him out of town. And I just made up my mind that I got a right to live where my heart desires and my means can afford. Consequently I live here. Now I've had the opportunity to go into the federal government under Lyndon Johnson or John F. Kennedy. Into a position, you know, that they had an interest in me acquiring, but I just felt that. . . . See, maybe my philosophy's all wrong, but many others who grew up as I did. . . . See I'm a son of a tenant farmer. And tenant farming, that's the poorest blot that have existed in the state. I was , *after* World War II, able to somehow eke out a college education. And I know many of the people who were born on the plantation I was born on, some of them are still there .

. Well, I just feel that those of us who had an opportunity of gaining somekind of academic background have the obligation of remaining in the area to try to be of assistance to literally thousands of people who have not had that same advantage. And I know that Clarksdale will probably be a different town if I had not been mayor. It might have been for the better, I don't know. But I do know that many of the activities which

we've been involved in. . . . It has been a personal kind of allegiance, a personal kind of loyalty that so many people have been willing to identify with that. Attack the power structures of various communities throughout *this* county and throughout the state. Now I guess half the towns in Mississippi we've led picket lines. Been in many jails. But I would imagine somebody else would have done it if I hadn't, at the same time. But sometimes I feel that it might not have gotten done. Particularly in a nonviolent way, which creates far more lasting progress than does the violent confrontation.

J.B.: Where were you when Martin Luther King was killed?

Henry: In Memphis.

J.B.: You were in Memphis with him. Were you at the motel?

Henry: No, I'd gone to church.

J.B.: How'd you feel when you got the news?

Henry: Well, you know, heartbroken, of course. I had the same feeling when John Fitzgerald was killed. Just, you know, heart ache, real broken, real. . . . Wondering where do we go from here so to speak. How are we going to make *it*? . I had about the same response when Malcolm X was killed, when Martin was killed, John Fitzgerald. Same kind of thing. See I've had to live with it. So many people that I've worked closely with being killed. You know, I don't know what bullet got my name on it, you know. But I know one thing, I ain't going to get out of this life alive and I don't worry about that part of it.

J.B.: You got how many children?

Henry: Just one.

J.B.: Are you a ~~pharmacist~~^{[2]6} pharmacist?

Henry: Yes.

J.B.: I thought that was right, but I wasn't--

Henry: You got it right. I make my living rolling pills. You see the

ACP got one paid employee in this state, and that ain't me. Split.

[Got burnt?] I make my living behind the drug counter.

J.B.: Could John Bell Williams have prevented this split in the Democratic party? In '68.

Henry: No. I don't think. . . . He alone, no. In fact I don't think John Bell Williams. . . . See, really John Bell and I

~~has discipline.~~ And their faction of the party that I would say 25-30 of us have in our faction of the party. Now. If the executive committee of the Democratic party of Mississippi, after having carefully weighed the position, recommends that this is what we do to the state convention, this is what we're going to do. But I'm saying that neither John Bell nor Bill Waller has that kind of respect for the people.

J.B.: Several people have told us that one of the reasons there haven't been more blacks elected to the legislature is that too often. . . the problem of candidate selection.

Henry: Well, you know. Have you been to our state legislature? Saw it? Well, you know, the kind of jokers they got down there, black folks couldn't be much worse than they are. You know. Whites would have assess to more of whatever is there than a black would have. I think it's more of this kind of a situation where whites have generally always been there. I would feel that the support of blacks by blacks is becoming much more every election. You're going to find that whites are far more prejudiced against blacks than blacks are against whites. You will find blacks who are even willing to pass out candidates' cards to whites. But you won't find a single white in this state who will pass out cards for blacks. And I think it's a reflection really that blacks are freer than whites. Several ways. You know, they're freer to be involved in what their conscience dictates. Now I'm sure that there

are some whites who would like to. But I think they are engulfed in this thing called peer worship. I think they are engulfed in this thing about what this guy I play golf with will think about me if I ask him to vote for this black man. Whether my wife going to be kicked out of the bridge club. Whether their children are going to be told that daddy's a nigger lover. I think that this kind of intimidation of whites by other whites . . . far more of an issue as to why whites generally are afraid not to support whites where blacks feel very free to support blacks or whites.

J.B.: Are you saying then that blacks are more apt to judge a candidate on the basis of qualification than color than whites are?

Henry: No. Yeah, if he happens to be black. I don't thing that we've come to a point in Mississippi yet where any sizeable group of whites feel free to vote for a black even if Charles Drew was running for the custodian of the blood plasma bank whites in Mississippi would not vote for him.

J.B.: What do you think would have to happen for the Democrats to carry Mississippi again in a presidential election?

Henry: Well, with the majority vote being somewhere near 60% white or more in the state, I think you'd have to have a Democrat who would appeal to racial prejudice.

J.B.: You think that's the only way it could be done?

Henry: I think that's the only way you're going to carry Mississippi, yeah.

J.B.: What would be the reaction of blacks if George Wallace actively campaigned on behalf of the national Democratic ticket? Wasn't on it, but campaigned for it.

Henry: Well, depending on who was on the ticket. It would depend on

who was on the ticket. If it was Scoop Jackson, we'd have problems with it. If it were Fritz Mondale I think people would ignore the fact that Wallace supported it but would still vote for it. I'm talking about blacks, now.

J.B.: Same would apply to Kennedy?

Henry: Yeah.

J.B.: What would be the problem with Jackson?

Henry: Well, the problem with Scoop would be that Scoop has not been nearly involved in causes as either Kennedy or Mondale. He's voted right pretty much of the time. But there's no identification of Scoop in Selma or Montgomery as there was with Kennedy or Mondale. There was no Scoop Jackson at the Jackson massacre, you know, as there were Kennedy and Mondale. So I'm just saying that the credentials of Kennedy and Mondale in causes that effect minority or poor people is so much better than Scoop's.

J.B.: When we first started the interview you talked about you've seen a number of whites turn the corner. Do you think George Wallace has turned the corner?

Henry: No, I really don't. I think George's position is convenience in politics. I think George feels that he was pretty close to death one time and I think that in responding to that situation and also responding to the forward growth of the nation in a way that Wallace could not preach segregation, segregation, segregation forever on the street corners of Michigan today. And carry Michigan as he did four years ago.

And I think that Wallace will do or say anything that will gravitate the people towards Wallace. I think that if attending a ~~lecture~~ ^{lynching} on Saturday night would get people back in the Wallace column that's where you'd find him.

J.B.: Does that suggest then that you don't think Wallace is capable of turning that corner?

Henry: Yes.

J.B.: Is there anything we haven't covered that you want to comment on?

Henry: I'm your guinea pig. I'm just here to answer what you want to ask. I've been studied so damn many times, this is just one more experience in a long series of experiences.

J.B.: Let me ask you one more question about voter registration, black voter registration in Mississippi. Has it leveled off? In the last couple of years?

Henry: I would think so. However there are a few communities who still are trying to get federal registrars. But with the Nixon administration it's all but impossible to get federal registrars to come into a community where blacks feel they are having trouble, you know, trying to register to vote. I would say that because of the nonavailability of registrars that there would be a feeling that voter registration has leveled off.

J.B.: I heard some people comment in so far as blacks and political participation in Mississippi that . . . two candidates in an election and neither one particularly turns them on that staying home is a very respectable strategy.

Henry: Yeah. And I think that's, to some degree, what happened in the Waller-Charlie Sullivan race. This is one of the few times that a governor's race has been run without one or the other candidates taking a strong issue on race. I guess the more we get used to that, you know, the more we will respond to it. But it was a pretty lusterless, you know, campaign.

J.B.: Okay. I'm going to play devil's advocate a little bit. Didn't the opportunity exist, in effect, for blacks to elect a governor, to

swing the balance?

Henry: Well, I don't really remember what the difference in the vote was. I don't think you really can ever be sure of that phenomenon. You know. Because if a guy wins with eleven votes and the black community ended up supporting him. If he had not got the white votes he still would have lost. You have to always see the total equation rather than just part. When Waller was elected there was no gnashing of teeth or jumping off of buildings or coping out of the system by anybody. To many people Waller could have, you know, been a good man. Nobody really felt. . . not many people really thought that Waller was going to be a tyrant or anything like this.

J.B.: What was your reaction to his announcing Medger Evers day?

Henry: Well, my reaction to it really was. . . . I was there, you know, when it was announced. And Waller did not bring the proclamation himself. Waller sent it by a Negro aide to read. And, you know, I would have thought much more of it if he had done it himself. But, to me this was demeaning in a way, in that it appeared that he felt that the only way his office could do that was to send a black that the whites of the community had encouraged him to employ. See Waller has not employed a single black that the black community has recommended. All of the blacks that he has employed are blacks the whites want. So they're not our blacks, they're his blacks.

J.B.: Does Cleve McDowell fit into that category, too.

Henry: Well, in Waller's position, yes. You see, what Waller thought he could do with Cleve was to split the black community with Cleve on one side and the rest of us on the other. But it just so happens that us and Cleve have been involved in so many situations of human relations together that neither of us would ever take a negative position against the other.

J.B.: But he is an exception to your statement that--

Henry: Well, I'm also saying that Cleve was not recommended to Waller by blacks. Cleve was recommended to Waller by the Eastland faction which controls Sunflower Valley in which Eastland's plantation is in it. So, you know, I'm saying Cleve was not a black who was recommended by the black community. Cleve could have been, if Waller had asked, you know, the black community. I'm sure the black community would have supported Cleve. But, you know, as it turned out, Waller used Cleve as his witness against the black community in the Democratic party struggle. And this is where he and Cleve really fell out, because they'd asked Cleve--I flew into Chicago--he started talking about 15 ducks [floating?] in the river. The answer had nothing to do with the question. Waller apologized. Trying to make a fool out of me.

And he's pretty much found a way now to get rid of Cleve. Cleve wasn't the nigger that Waller thought he was.

J.B.: What kind of Democratic party do you see in Mississippi five years from now?

Henry: Well, as I say, it depends upon the national posture. And if, with Bob Straus' assistance and the Democrats recapture the White House, I can see the Democratic party that's not foreign from South Carolina, that's really not foreign from Florida. You know, I can see a Democratic party where there are blacks involved, intimately involved within the political savoir faire of the community, that have a genuine concern, interest and respect and position of importance with each other. And I don't think that race is going to be the strongest factor that compels people together.

[Interruption on tape.]

Politically, ^{white} ~~black~~ leadership in Mississippi just feels that it has to be the worst thing. You know, Jim Crow laws in this country had its genesis

in Mississippi and they lasted longer, you know, in this state than anywhere else. It's just something about our *state* that Mississippi destines ~~xxxxxxx~~ to be the last people to get aboard.

J.B.: When Robert Straus comes into Mississippi some of the regulars say, you know, "He really gives us more attention than them," meaning you. Does he ever come into Mississippi without your knowing it, knowing exactly where he's going and this sort of thing?

Henry: Well, you know, I'm privileged to his correspondence within Mississippi and his itinerary, you know . I've got no problem with Bob's actions at all. And of course I had no problems with Larry O'Brien's actions.

[Interruption in tape.]

J.B.: Looking back on the whole civil rights struggle from the beginning of your involvement, is there anything you'd do differently?

Henry: I don't think so. I've seen some people do some things differently that perhaps have gotten them faster and further there. You take the violence in Watts. Well, you wouldn't know Watts today if you were looking at it from a yesterday point of view because of the many improvements that Watts, California, has developed since the racial strife. But that's just not, you know, my way or philosophy of trying to erect improvements. I would rather have a situation where the former lieutenant governor of the state calls me and says "Aaron, this is Charlie." And we'd like to talk about a certain situation and see how we can get together on it. That's what I can, you know, call some real progress. And I'm a thorough integrationist. I don't believe blacks are going to make it by themselves. I don't believe whites are going to make it by themselves. I believe it takes us both. It takes both black and white keys on the piano to play the melody. And of course I have some difficulty with some of my friends about my strong, pro-

integrationist point of view rather than the black separatist point of view. I just simply don't see how you can wage a black separatist militant, violent war, when you don't have a single black in the national guard. I just don't see how you can wage that kind of violence. Around the table, I think that the question of both being vituperative with each other around the issues that you have to concern. . . .

That's my way of trying to resolve the problem. I realize that my way is not the only way. On everything there's two sides. Some things got three, four, five sides. I'm not so wedded to my method that I condemn all other methods. I just simply are not familiar with them. There are people who can make other methods work.

J.B.: How do you characterize the state of school desegregation in Mississippi? We've heard different interpretations of that.

Henry: Well, I think in terms of the public school being legally declared desegregated I think that most of them have. However I think that within the schools themselves there remains quite a bit of segregation. I know that within the teaching personnel, the administrative personnel, there is rank and file discrimination. And it looks like we've got another whole battle to fight. The damn war just ain't never over. The exodus of black administrators, replacing them with white administrators. And of course what bothers us about that more than really who's employed or who makes more money in that area is the role models they aren't getting. Black children don't see blacks in positions of leadership as white children see whites in positions of leadership. Black children are going to end up with a psychic response of inferiority. And that's really what this addition of blacks to positions of leadership really is all about. It's in terms of how do you educate the black child and the white child to be sure that each of them understands that there is no difference between them based upon the *color* in their

skin. That sometimes the principal is white, sometimes the principal is black. That both men can do a good job. But if everything you see in the leadership role is white, then whites are going to accept that as a position of superiority for white people and blacks are going to accept it as an indication that blacks are inferior. And this is really what we're trying to undo in a whole 3- or 400 years of public school education.

J.B.: I want to ask you one last question. What does the term southern strategy mean to you?

Henry: Well, the term southern strategy, to me, as it is personified by Mr Nixon, really means the reversal of the new society philosophies that Lyndon Johnson, after John Fitzgerald Kennedy was assassinated, was able to get through. I think that Nixon would like to see us go back as far as we can toward the days when segregation was a rule of thumb rather than where we are now where it is considered a situation of oddity. And the southern strategy merely means that the leadership of the country is going to be more responsive to the white community than it is to the black community. That the assistances that once were available to blacks. . . . You see, blacks have lost in the last ten years. We've lost the presidency where at one time we could, you know, call Lyndon or John Fitzgerald's private number any time of night. We had a Justice Department that was run by Bobby Kennedy, Katzenbach, Ramsey Clark, John Dorr [?], that you could find anywhere. We had the United States Supreme Court that many of us had no problem about going to jail anywhere because there was a Supreme Court in Washington. Well, the Supreme Court in Washington now is no guarantee that justice is going to prevail. There is a guarantee that what Mr Nixon desires is going to prevail. Not necessarily justice. And with the Congress of the United States, there was a time when we passed the 1957 Civil Rights

Act; we passed the 1960 Civil Rights Act; we passed the 1964 Public Accommodations Act, the 1965 Voter Rights Act; we passed the public housing bill; we passed OEO; we passed medicaid; we passed medicare; we passed federal aid to education; we passed the minimum wage. But now the federal government has in a way told us, what you got is what you're going to get. That we're not about to pass any more additional legislation to make life for the minorities and for the poor people easier in this country. And this is really where I feel that the southern strategy as espoused by Mr Nixon really takes root and this is really what it means.

[End of interview.]