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G: This is Susan Glisson and I'm here in Atlanta, Georgia with Ed Brown. It's July 1, 2002 and we're here to talk about the Southern Regional Council. Thank you so much for your time.

B: Sure, no problem.

G: If you would tell me again, I know we just talked about it a little bit, but how you came to know about the Southern Regional Council and how you came to be involved with them.

B: I came to know about the Southern Regional Council because of my involvement in the civil rights movement. In fact, there was this kind of relationship between the council and its affiliate human relations groups around the South supporting the civil rights movement's activities, particularly voter registration activities. Many of the groups that I worked with were beneficiaries of grants that were made available to them to do voter registration by the then Voter Education Project which was a formal part of the Southern Regional Council.

G: Were you working with a particular Voter Education Project that was sponsored by SRC?

B: No. I was working with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and many of the affiliate organizations, local organizations it worked with. They were beneficiaries of grants that were made to them by Southern Regional Council.

G: So in your recollection, the VEP project did fund some SNCC projects?

B: It didn't fund SNCC directly. It funded the local groups that we worked with that were doing voter registration activity. They applied and received grant funds in order to do voter registration work. That work often time involved canvassing, people to go down to register, involved transporting them down to register, those kinds of activities.

G: Do you have any sense of how SRC decided which projects were going to get funded?

B: I have no idea.

G: Do you think that the groups that you worked with or SNCC had some sense that there were restrictions that came with the money? That there were strings that came with the money in terms of the kinds of activities that you could do?

B: On the basis of the proposal or request that we made, we had some idea of what it is that we could do. When we have had a sense of those things which are clearly beyond the limits and scope of what the voter registration project was doing, but for the most part, we kind of defined what we were doing and what our objective was, and they had responded on the basis of that to whatever requests we had made.

G: Could you talk about some of the obstacles that existed to voter registration in the South and what are some of the things that you did to try to overcome those?

B: Part of what you had, the major obstacles was that the activity was being conducted under what was virtually a reign of terror. You had the problem of helping people overcome the issue of fear that **futility** people from going down to the polls to register. So I think that was a major obstacle that we faced and in facing it of course, you put yourself at risk. I think that part of the SRC=s program at the time was the development of these Human Relations Commissions in various states and they became support mechanisms for change within those states. For the most part, these were very elitist organizations, they were not organizations that had a mass constituency at all. They were for the most part the intellectuals, would-be intellectuals, people who were inclined to be progressive in terms of their attitudes on race. The SRC provided a fulcrum for being able to demonstrate their support for the kinds of changes that were being sought. I think that in terms of some of these overcoming the obstacles, it was really a matter of trying to, I mean you had to have a very broad kind of view about what it was that you were doing. It=s not simply just kind of

picking up a handful of people without seeing whether it **will** turn down in terms of registering. You had to be concerned with all aspects of other people=s lives and what they were doing, which was what the organizing meant. The one thing that was very helpful in my opinion and that helped lay the groundwork for the passing of the **six and five** Voting Rights Act was the ability to keep records in terms of whatever was happening, whether or not it was an issue in terms of involved violent confrontation or resistance of any kind, or whether or not you met with some success.

G: So the Human Relations Councils that the SRC set up acted as a sort of intermediary between groups like SNCC or some of the groups you were working with?

B: No. They were not intermediaries so much as they provided the people who were inclined to be supportive of the movement. It gave them a home to go to, particularly southerners.

G: White and Black?

B: White and Black. That was important because you didn=t have very much racial interaction at all, and the fact that there was a place that Blacks and Whites could come together at whatever level, it was a very, very important contribution that I think it made.

G: I guess I=m trying to think in terms of the function, like a day to day thing. How might it have worked to bring people together? Were there dinners?

B: Meetings of various kinds, some were topographical. There was the issue of being able to hold meetings where there was a mutuality in terms of concern about an issue and therefore people would form alliances across racial lines as a support **for** people.

G: Did those councils then act as conduits for the VEP money or was that a separate [thing]?

B: It was a separate thing.

G: Okay. Why do you suppose the SRC was so well positioned to be a conduit for the VEP?

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B: I think that there were a lot of people who either out of their own moral kind of convictions or their revulsion in terms of what was happening really felt that the movement, they may have disagreed with some of the tactics, the goals and the objectives were worthy of being supportive. It was a safe place for a lot of Whites to basically go and to a lesser degree for Blacks to go. I think that it was a matter where people said if these people are supporting it, these look like pretty good people, they=re not just crazy, they=re not radical kind of riffraffs, and maybe that=s the vehicle to try to work with in terms of bringing about these changes.

G: Did you have any sense of the SRC being uneasy with African Americans seizing the initiative in terms of mass activism?

B: I think that came a little later on. I think a little later on they were not particularly easy about working with... particularly as [in the] movement people became more radical and less inclined to agree with the methodology that was being used. That came a little later.

G: Can you remember what time frame that might have been or what specific methodologies might have been seen as threatening?

B: I think that happened sometime after 1964, 1965. Certainly when we got into the political aspect of things where Blacks were demanding Black elected officials. SRC was not necessarily demanding Black elected officials, as a matter of fact at one point in time they were more inclined to be supportive of White candidates who came from heavily populated Black political jurisdictions because they felt that would translate into more change than the issue of just having another Black or a few more Blacks as Black office holders. So you had these two tracts.

G: What do you suppose prodded them to... At some point, they became receptive to the idea of Black elected officials?

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B: I don't know that they ever became completely accepting of it. I think as they became more accepting of it, I think that it was better **of** accepting a reality. I can remember long and involved discussions on tactical strategy about whether or not it made most sense for Blacks to support moderate Whites rather than radical Blacks.

G: And the conclusion that SNCC came to was to support...

B: SNCC was always kind of out there on the wing. SNCC was supportive not only of radical Blacks, SNCC was really much more interested in supporting independent Black politics. I want **us** to understand SRC=s relationship to the political leadership of the country, and I want **us** to understand its relationship in terms of its own political agenda. I think that it served their purpose and their agenda a lot better to be seen as not supporting independent Black politics, but more reformist kind of moderate White Democratic politics.

G: You just raised two really interesting issues I think to explore. One is the SRC=s relationship to political administrators, to the presidential administrations that I guess probably at the time you were there Kennedy and then maybe Johnson...

B: Both Kennedy and Johnson.

G: And then the SRC=s own political agenda. Could you talk more about those two areas?

B: I think that certainly the VEP as part of the SRC owes part of its **earth** I think to the initiative of the Kennedys, principally Bobby Kennedy, who encouraged them to, I mean there was an interest on the part of the Kennedys you understand. Their thing was to get Blacks off the street.

G: They didn't like direct action.

B: No. Voter education and that kind of thing served a dual purpose. One, it dampened down some of the rhetoric and some of the volatility in terms of street demonstrations. It also served in, I mean

Jack Kennedy had won in the South by a very narrow margin. The largest reservoir of untapped voters that did not participate in his original election were Blacks. So to the degree in which you could force the Black participation was the degree in which you could further enhance his possibilities in terms of his reelection effort, increasing his margin of victory.

G: Did the Kennedy administration come to SRC and suggest the creation of this kind of work?

B: I don't know who came to who, but I do know that there were several meetings in which Bobby Kennedy basically voiced a desire to see much of the energy and action going into a conventional political process as opposed to these political processes which challenged the system, mainly the **FDP**. In 1964, you're head of **FDP**, in 1965, you're head of the challenge of the fire of congressional women, Fanny Lou Hamer and all that challenging these **interested** congressmen. The following year you had the formation of an independent political party in Alabama and if for no other reason that these things were nuisances that the time when Kennedy was trying to put forward his agenda through what was basically a Republican **Dixie-crat** congress, the only issues he had to address was how are you out here supporting all these people for challenging us and then you come to us in terms of wanting to help with your agenda. I think that to some extent, they understood the value of having SRC in trying to exercise that kind of strategy.

G: And being a more sort of moderating kind of influence.

B: [Yes].

G: What do you think the SRC=s political agenda was?

B: I think SRC=s political agenda was that it wanted to see gradual change. It was not interested in ruptures. It wanted to see gradual change. It wanted to see good southern Whites come to the floor and basically set the agenda in terms of their region.

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G: But you didn't get a sense that it necessarily wanted a lot of active Black participation in shaping them?

B: No.

G: Do you think they had more easy dealing with LBJ?

B: I don't know as much about what their relationship was with LBJ frankly. There were southern politicians who they may not necessarily have embraced them wholeheartedly but felt that they work with **them**. **It wasn't Tenison Eastland**, but you could... what's his name, used to be... his wife ended up being... **Barlux**. **The deal with Hale Barlux**. **Hale Barlux** was not a **bilboe**. On the margins you could make some kind of gains and some kind of headway with **Hale Barlux**.

G: Some scholars have argued that after a period of relative impotency, the newly revived SRC kind of got a shot in the arm from the civil rights movement. In other words, they talk about the SRC being reactive rather than proactive, that it tended to follow rather than to lead. Would you say that's an accurate assessment?

B: Only partly. I think that it was reactive in terms of the civil rights movement and this, that, and the other, but I think that it never saw itself as the kind of activist organization that CORE was or SNCC was or whatever. Never saw that as its role. They were much more inclined toward wanting to be conciliatory and work these things out on the basis of reason and pragmatic necessity and what is their moral vision as opposed to... Certainly at one point, everybody felt that SNCC and CORE that if they weren't communist, they were the closest thing you could come to being a communist without being one. You had that as an element as well. You had liberal Whites who might have been inclined to be supportive of the Civil Rights agenda, but who had to some extent squared that with their notions about foreign influences and all this other kind of stuff.

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G: And SRC=s trying to walk between those groups. Do you think that it should be given more credit for its role in the emergence of the civil rights movement?

B: No. They had enough people around in terms of claiming credit for the civil rights movement. The civil rights movement was a very interesting kind of phenomenon. It really was a movement that was born and supported in its beginnings by African Americans. Nobody told us kids to go down to the county in Greensborough, that grew from dynamics within the community itself. That whole **war** just really kind of swept us out. There were good sociological and background reasons which have not been fully explored about why then as opposed to a generation earlier or a generation later. But I don=t think... I don=t want to end up saying that they were not given credit for doing that because I don=t think the credit was theirs to take, it wasn=t for them to have. If there ever was a genuine movement that really kind of sprung from within in terms of trying to change an external situation, it was true of the civil rights movement. When you had to live in a critical period from about 1958 to about 1961 or 1962, **had to** view it and see it in context, for the most part it was a movement of first generation urban and first generation college trained. It later broadened up to a more inclusive in terms of some other elements as well, but I think that the backdrop in terms of the civil rights movement has more to do with the terror that was in the South and the **sum of their** terror than it had to do with **Paul McJoseph**.

G: You think the SRC could have done more than it did?

B: Oh sure. I think in any organizations which kind of later became it could=ve done a lot more. After awhile, it slid off into the kind of socioeconomic focus in terms of its activities, but it certainly, with regard to serving as an advocate for the changes, I think it could have done more. That=s not to take anything away from them, there are a lot of people who could have done a lot more

than they did. People who credit the Black church of being in the forefront, in the bulwark of the movement, that=s because they don=t really understand. The Black church divided on this issue too. That=s why you end up with two division of the church. You=ve got the so-called Progressive Baptists and you have the Southern Baptists. People don=t remember how even somebody like Martin Luther King was treated by some of his Baptists, his fellow Baptists. So the idea that somehow there was a unanimity with regard to the support of the movement, it=s just not true. I think there=s something that operated then, **it may** still be operating now, between southerners and northerners in terms of their perceptions of the whole issue at the time and even subsequently _____. There was a feeling that people misunderstood the South, that there were really were good White southerners here and they really did not understand that. I think part of SRC=s mission, I don=t remember reading about it but I was just thinking about it, was to demonstrate that truth. Everybody is not spewing venom and hatred with regard to Negroes or Black folks. Like I said it was **part** of their focus for people to separate themselves from the old South and to call it New South.

G: Are there some things that you would have wished that they would do that they didn=t do?

B: The SRC? I don=t think about it a lot because it doesn=t do much good to think about it. When you look at the fact that you have people who were killed and brutalized in the South and the national administration as much as the country took the attitude well, you know, and accepting of that fact. Not really a conscientious kind of demonstration of outrage and a conscientious demonstration that something had to be done then, not next week, not next year, whatever, but then. **Which then** began to set up another kind of thing because while the country and everybody including SRC or whatever might be outraged about **Cheney, Goodman, and Schwerna**, there

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was not the same degree of outrage that was demonstrated when Sammy Young was killed and when B what=s his name over in **Hopas** County... several of them were killed. You would hope that people would have moved to the forefront in terms of voicing their non-acceptance because see civil rights workers had raised the issue of the protection of civil rights workers who were doing this kind of work. So there was nobody to **challenge** Kennedy, Kennedys and nobody else. That lack of stepping forward and kind of that lack of moral fiber that you would look to an organization like SRC or others just was not forthcoming.

G: You mentioned a minute ago about the SRC moving into more towards socioeconomic kinds of concerns. Did you see that as a retreat from racial justice or a re-conceptualization of how to achieve it?

B: I think it was something that was probably necessary on the one hand to do, but at the same time, I think it had the affect of being a strategy that lessened the possibilities for conflict between the civil rights groups and SRC. At one point in time, one got the impression or the feeling that SRC was an organization looking for a mission.

G: Who were some of the dominant personalities that you were aware of at the time?

B: **In** SRC? George Esser was a major figure.

G: What were his contributions to the organization?

B: I think George, and particularly because of George=s relationship with **Unders**, was able to make that transition from the traditional SRC role to a more expansive role where other people, I don=t know that they would have been able to do that. People who also were important, Les Dunbar was absolutely important. In terms of the voting rights thing was Vernon, Vernon was Mr. voting rights.

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G: What strengths did he bring to the project?

B: Vernon was very, very important in terms of being able to get the SRC to separate the voting from the other kinds of activities. He had a very good handle on what local groups ought to be doing and could be doing in relationship with voter rights kinds of activities. I say this because, and Vernon will probably wonder what has come over me because we have had our share of arguments and disputes or whatever, but I do give Vernon a lot of credit in terms of the voter education project. In my mind, he was Mr. voter education. I think a lot of people looked to John as kind of being Mr. voter education, but I really think it was more Vernon and the first director of it was from Arkansas, Wiley Branton. I think that they were the thought process and the whole people who understood it enough both from the local end as well as this end to be put together the effective strategy that allowed for it to work.

G: Were you around when VEP was revived in 1966?

B: Was I around? Lord have mercy, yes indeed. I got tricked into running VEP.

G: Tell me about that, how did you get tricked?

B: There was a fellow named **Clarence Coleman** who used to be a vice president at the Urban League. Vernon had moved on and had moved to the Urban League. **Clarence** was retiring. Vernon basically talked **Clarence** into coming down to be a caretaker until such time as VEP was resuscitated. **Clarence** being a good guy said okay. **Clarence** then of course needed staff and **Clarence** said to me, he said look man, why don't you come over here and help me run this thing? You seem to know something about it. I did that and within a matter of months **Clarence** said look man, I really want to retire. I retired because I wanted to retire. You run this thing. It was a matter of trying to pick it up off the ground and resuscitate it, but the dynamics had changed.

G: How so?

B: Part of it was because of our own success, part of it was because we kind of talked ourselves out of a job as they say. At the time, the Progressive stance in terms of voting rights was the Motor Voter bill. The Motor Voter bill looked liked it was on the fast track in terms of being passed. Even if the federal legislation didn=t accept it, there was enough state support for people saying yeah, well, they have the Motor Voter, which then displaced what people saw as being the need for VEP, which had much more of a protest activist kind of tradition. What are you going to do **at the** VEP if you got Motor Voter? All you gotta do is go out, get your license, and you can sign up. There was another thing, and this is where this whole business of whether or not you elect Black **liberal** officials or White moderate officials came in. I was doing Steve Suitts= tenure. Steve was much, much, much in favor of saying look, all we need to do is not worry about whether or not we elect Black officials. What we really need to do is to elect moderate Whites who come from constituencies, jurisdictions where you have 30 percent or more of African Americans and therefore you can have a wider impact. In some sense he was right, but I think he misunderstood the dynamics of the moment. Blacks are not interested in having Whites represent them anymore. They want to represent themselves. It came down to a question of whether you=re going to elect the Black guy or whether you=re going to elect the moderate White guy. You come in here saying you ought to elect a moderate White guy, cuts the ground off from under you. If I=m not mistaken, I think he did a long paper on that. Nonetheless, there are enough people who are hard-headed enough that said no, we don=t want to do that. The emphasis remained on electing more Blacks as opposed to what others tried. I think to a large extent, people then began to question what was the agenda then of SRC. This is coupled with the fact that SRC was also very slow to embrace

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many of the kinds of development projects and focuses on the movement at the time. I remember there was the new communities and they lent lip service to it. A guy named **Harry Bouey**.

G: Still in Mississippi?

B: Yeah. You hired **Harry**, I think he was a vice president of something or other, and he kind of took over the responsibility for the social kind of **performer**. It was rhetorical in terms of support, there was no real support. People were trying to work with small farmers and they said _____. And you had funders who were looking a vehicle that they would have confidence in to do that. One would have thought that SRC could have played a larger, more meaningful role in that development. It did not, of course. I think it left some ruffled feathers because it did not see the value of playing that kind of a role.

G: What period **was that** when that kind of transition was happening?

B: Mid 1970s going into the 1980s. It too had fallen on hard times. It fell on hard times itself.

G: Do you remember what the SRC=s response was to the emergence of Black Power?

B: I don=t remember specifically. It=s just basically on a lot of the people I know **who were going to vote**. There was a lawyer who was also with the ACLU who had...Chuck Morgan. He had been looked at _____ just before SRC was _____. There was a small group of people who kind of cooperated to share this certain kind of opinion and kind of reenforced each other, but I think it really had the effect of giving people a reason to doubt the genuineness of the various organizations. SRC went on and became involved in education and some other issues.

G: Did you get the sense that the roles of women in the organization or the roles of Blacks in the organization were changing in response to some of these challenges?

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B: I think that=s true, yeah. They brought in **Kenny Johnson** who became Steve=s deputy I believe. Have you talked to Charles Prejean?

G: I did on Thursday.

B: They=d bring in people from time to time. Some of the old people who had been schooled in terms of the earlier SRC, some of them moved on to other positions, other avenues or opportunities or whatever. It was going to be very hard for SRC simply to go out and replace those folks in the same mode that had existed. They were going to have to change the **same old standard**. It was just a matter where it kind of look like it lost its purpose again. We were doing **with** money the same thing that had been done I don=t know how many years ago where we give the Lillian Smith Award and this, that, and the other. Much more interested in my opinion of working with the end of Black and White southern intellectual. They saw them as being the people who formulated much in the way of policy and who could serve as advocates for a point of view.
[End of Tape A, side 1] ...probably one of the most historically significant movements.

G: The VEP project we=re talking about.

B: The VEP project. So initially that really has not been fully appreciated. When you think about the fact that prior to 1960, you didn=t have 100 Black elected officials in the South. Then to end up within a span of just about ten years when you end up with more Black elected officials, more Blacks registered to vote it=s quite a phenomenal kind of **deal**. Only thing that it compares to in my opinion was the movement of Black people after slavery to learn to read. After slavery, about 90 percent of Black folks couldn=t read and with one generation primarily again **of** dynamics that happened within the community, they had reduced illiteracy in terms of the Black community by 70

percent. It=s phenomenal. While people give a lot of credit to the **Rules and War Fund** and this, that, and the other, that was not the backbone of the movement. That movement was run by people in those local communities who created what were called normal schools and who triple-taxed themselves in order to support the schools. They bought and gave the property and built the school. They taxed themselves in terms of **being able to** operate in order to run the schools. These were local people, these were people who are their own resources raising money not only to buy the land, but to build a school and operate the school. It launched, in my opinion, the largest movement in terms of self-education, one of the largest movements that=s ever been launched. While I get into trouble with some of my more hardened nationalist friends and said you know, what I really would appreciate is I don=t mind Black people learning about Egypt, what I really would like to have them understand and appreciate is what their fore-bearers did here in dealing with this kind of arduous situation. I don=t even think scholars and academicians really understand the significance of that. Some of the more conservative ones have tried to seize upon the information to discredit so-called issue of government health and this, that, and the other. It doesn=t take anything away from what these people did that somehow, which I certainly don=t know and I don=t know anybody that=s really fathomed how did these poor Black people recently honestly accumulate 25 million acres of land between the beginning of the century and the end of WWII. These are lessons that I think are important for people to learn because it says what you can do, notwithstanding the fact that great pyramids were built in Egypt and all that kind of stuff. That is almost too far removed for them to really conceive and integrate into their own situation and how do you deal with it.

G: And that kind of **see**-changed for you as comparable to the **see**-change that VEP brought about.

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B: That=s right. I don=t see changing _____ **you wrote about**. Little common everyday people. I found, I had a picture here of **Hartman Turnbow, Holmes County**.

G: Amazing.

B: Absolutely amazing, amazing man.

G: There=s a really good book called *Forgotten Times*. I=m not going to remember the author=s name, but it=s about that period in the 1880s, 1890s when African Americans cleared the Mississippi delta and owned that land and managed that land, and how it was taken away. It=s a good book in terms of looking at some of that.

B: Yeah. Those are in my opinion, the real watersheds in terms of people being able to do something for themselves to make progress which then can be measured and seen in terms of its overall significance. I think that much of what came out of the 1960s may have benefitted me and a few people like me who were kind of in the take-off position, but for the bulk of folks it was one step or two steps removed from their reality, a little late in coming. Nonetheless, you do what you can when you can and that=s about it.

G: I have two last questions. The first is if you could sum up the strengths and weaknesses of the SRC as you saw them at the times that you were associated with them.

B: Weakness was hardly the weakness that was in the rest of the society. There was a lack... there was a subtler kind of former racism that existed which they had not come to grips with, and I think as a result of that did not have the vision to really see what the movement could become as an agent for transforming America. I think their vision was very, very short and narrow, I think it was primarily because they were not better equipt to deal with the intellectual moral of political

possibilities of both the group as African Americans or the movement to make it what it could become. You say you hope that was not the case, but it represents the potential for really transforming this country into becoming what I think people dreamed about and talked about, but were afraid to try to make a reality. I don't know, it may be the last time that we will see that kind of thing. It really could have concluded in the fulfillment of all those things that the constitution and all that stuff talked about, **to** transform this society. It did transform this society, but it could have done so in a more complete manner than it was able to. I think that we hope that we will see something like it come around again and hopefully we will be a little bit better prepared to embrace what it can become. I think it took a lot of courage [interruption] I think it took some courage even during that day, during that period of time, and **then to** stand up and just condemn the fact that the situation was not something that was to be dismissed. That it needed attention, it needed to be addressed. I think that we don't understand how resilient power is and how tough it is in terms of being able to change reality. If the SRC lesson, as the movement lesson teaches us anything, it should teach us that these are not things that can just simply be tampered with. **Black White** folks used to have a saying: **Can=t** touch and don=t tamper with. If you don=t tamper with it... It takes tenacity, it takes more tenacity than bravado in terms of dealing with these things. That=s precisely because we=re dealing with the lives of people, we=re dealing with the lives of women and children unborn so far that we have to bring a level of commitment and seriousness to it that is often times beyond what we even imagined what it should be. We can=t just simply say well... We can=t continue to give those people who are responsible for the situation the benefit of the doubt because the situation has existed as long as it has existed and still goes on and there is no doubt about the fact that it=s going to require a lot more, and we have to be up to the task to doing that.

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I think that it=s a matter with SRC or whomever. Simply to kind of talk about it, simply to kind of look at it well, we can reform it may not be enough. Sometimes some things can be fixed and you just have to through them out and start over again. I think that we have to... What happened is that **Franz Fenard** used to say that each generation defines its own kind of historical calling, and maybe historically SRC=s calling was just simply to kind of shake the tree maybe.

G: Shake the tree of segregation?

B: No, it=s the shake the tree in terms of integration really and say look, to its fellow southerners, this is wrong and hope that by way of reason they understand and therefore are motivated to change. Sometimes it=s not enough. Sometimes you have to cut the tree down. I think on this issue of race, it may be that we=ve got to look at how do we create a new social contract that will allow people to exist and live together. I don=t know how helpful this has been.

G: It has been incredibly helpful, I really appreciate your time.

B: No problem at all.

G: Thank you so much.

B: Appreciate it.

[End of interview]