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Interviewee: Charles Johnson

Interviewer: Susan Glisson

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[The recording begins mid-sentence.]

J: ...in Atlanta, and one of the things that I noticed consistently in getting involved with campaigns at the early stages was that whenever someone would think about running for office, one of the first things they would do would [be to] go to the Southern Regional Council [SRC] for demographic data, in terms of voting trends, population data, and that sort of thing, to just map out a strategy based on that. So that was my first knowledge of the Council as a source of information pertinent to voting. I had previously been aware of the Voter Education Project [VEP]. I knew about the Voter Education Project, but did not know about the Southern Regional Council. I knew about the Voter Education Project in the 1960s, I guess. It's just something you learned about in the 1960s. I got to know John Lewis, and that was something that he had been involved in. That was my earliest awareness of it. And then, much later, probably in the late 1970s, I was contacted by some board members who asked me to consider becoming general counsel. I was a practicing lawyer in Atlanta and I didn't realize I had a family connection, but these board members let me know that one of the founders of the Council, when it was changed from the Commission of Interracial Cooperation to the Southern Regional Council, the first president was my grandfather. I think that this was part of the lure that these folks were holding out to me. So, that's how I first became aware of it, back in that time.

G: So, you became general counsel in the late 1970s?

J: I'm sorry, I guess it was the late 1980s.

G: Do you serve in that capacity now?

J: I'm president.

G: You're president.

J: That's right, I'm completing the first year of my second two-year term.

G: All right, so full-circle, in terms of the \_\_\_\_.

J: That's right.

G: Have you had a chance to go back and reflect on and discover what your grandfather's contributions were?

J: A little. I did some research on the occasion of the eightieth-anniversary observance, which was two years ago, because I knew that I was going to be called upon to do a president's report at that time and I wanted to try to set some context. So, I did some things like, I looked at John Egerton's book.

G: *Speak Now Against the Day*.

J: *Speak Now Against the Day*, which I thoroughly enjoyed. It was eye-opening to me, and then I shared it with my father and he just couldn't put it down. He knew a lot of the people, obviously, that I didn't know, who were mentioned in the book. I looked at John Egerton's book [and] I looked at the piece that was done by this gentleman [Robert J. Norrell; professor of history at University of Tennessee]. I looked at a thesis that was done by Patrick Gilpin about my grandfather, it had a chapter about the Southern Regional Council, and some from other pieces. That's kind of how I became aware of the context, I guess.

G: You mentioned, when we first began to talk, about the legacy of the Southern Regional Council. What do you see as that legacy?

J: There are many parts to the legacy. One part of the legacy is that it is regarded as one of the early interracial organizations in the South. In the hindsight of eighty years, it seems hard to imagine that something interracial would have been that unique, but that's what I am given to understand is a major part of the legacy. That's been interpreted a number of different ways. Let me digress: when I was involved in the school desegregation case in Cobb County, Georgia, I was looking for an organization to sponsor some investigations into quality of education. What are the criteria for quality of education? How do you measure it? What standards would you impose? How do you measure the attainment of quality of education in Cobb County in schools that are predominantly black versus not. The organizations that I identified as possible sponsors were the Atlanta Urban League and the Southern Regional Council. When I presented those two organizations to other counsel in the case, I was fascinated, because the counsel representing the principal group of plaintiffs in that case expressed a preference for the Southern Regional Council. They thought the Atlanta Urban League was a black organization and the Southern Regional Council was a white organization, and so therefore, as a white organization they would have more credibility. I found that interesting. [laughing] That was somebody's perception. Granted, it's not all that common to find anybody who has a perception of the Southern Regional Council, but to have *that* perception is interesting. But it perceives itself as having an interracial background. Maybe that has something to do with the fact that the Council didn't have its black executive until the 1990s, but the interracial thing is a part of it.

The things that I have read have suggested that the Council was not necessarily

the most cutting-edge civil rights organization in the sense that it came relatively late to the desegregation agenda. It appears that, for the longest time, the agenda of the Council was about eliminating the most flagrant of abuses in terms of terrorism, racial violence, lynching, and in terms of economic conditions and documenting economic disparities. Once desegregation took hold as a leading agenda, certainly in the late 1940s, early 1950s, the Council got on that bandwagon and became a respected voice, a voice that could be relied on for, not just advocacy, but for information. [It was] just a reliable source of data, as opposed to necessarily a shrill voice. I think of it as a think-tank for the movement. You know, there is this strain. There is this belief among certain folks that if people just knew the information, then all the problems would be solved. It isn't necessarily the case, but there is this persistent belief nevertheless that providing information to people will cause hearts and minds to change, and their poor institutions and practices to change. That's part of the legacy, but it's a civil rights legacy. That's important to articulate today for a number of reasons. I don't think that there's a general consensus on whether there is a civil rights thrust or a need for a civil rights thrust today, but if there were, what it would mean [and] what direction it would take. One of the things that I would like to see the Southern Regional Council do is to be in the forefront of determining the answer to that question and carrying it forward.

G: Well, it's certainly in a position to do that historically. A couple of things that your discourse prompted in me, one of those is talking a little bit more about understanding part of its legacy as being an interracial organization in the South and yet knowing that there are perceptions of it as being a white organization. I wonder if you could talk about how it expressed its interracial character. Did that evolve over time? For instance, did the role of African Americans or women in the organization change over time?

J: Well, see, I've come to my involvement with the Council recently. So, I don't know the dynamics of what it was in the 1950s. I've heard stories of the studies that were done to support desegregation in the South. I've heard of the labor-climate reports that were done and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives that was founded. I've heard about the state Community Relations Commissions that were associated with the Council, which were of a grassroots kind of network. One of the things I have seen and been a part of is the change in the structure of the organization away from being a membership organization to one that it is characterized instead by a self-perpetuating board, which I have some things to say about, but I'm losing sight of your question. I think that the Council, for the longest time, for many people it was probably personified by its director, who, when I came to the Council, was **Steve Suits**. There are issues to sort through when you look at a civil rights organization with a white executive. A question, as well, does that mean it's a missionary society? So, you have an integrated staff, a white executive, and the white executive is articulating the

vision and the mission, etc. Meanwhile, there had been strong black and female board members all along who [were] headstrong **and put in the direction** of the organization. So, there's been that tension there all along.

G: The other thing you talked about is [the Council's] seeming to come late to the segregation efforts. Do you see it in its historic role, maybe not now, as being more reactive than proactive?

J: I say that with benefit of hindsight, because although we can say the Council came late, there weren't many people who came before the Council. I mean, it wasn't the first. Once the Council got on board, it was still very much at the cutting-edge. I mean, it was still long before a consensus developed in favor of a desegregation agenda. I would say that those folks who were talking about desegregation, you're talking about the lawyers of the NAACP, they didn't embrace that as a strategic focus until the late 1940s.

G: Which one of your previous directors pointed out in a history that I read.

J: It was really after World War II that was kind of [brought up]. You had the folks at the NAACP who were articulating this as early as World War I, but as something that was aspirational. I gather that segregation was seen as so entrenched that those folks that saw desegregation as a goal saw it as relatively unattainable, it was a long-term goal, and that there were more things that they could do something about in a short term. That issue, that positioning, was short-lived in the life of the organization. I gather that by the late 1940s, early 1950s, that was not an issue for the Council. Since then, I would not say that, in that sense, the Council had been reactive at all.

G: How do you think that the Council functioned in terms of being a supportive system for mass black-activist organizations?

J: I think that's what it did historically. I think that's a part of what the local Community Relations Commissions were about. My impression is that that was a major focus, and it was effective in that sense. A lot of folks that I have known, who were so significant with the direct-action movement at some point, directly or indirectly, had some sort of support through the Council, but I would say that is historic. I'm speaking past tense.

G: You mentioned that you had some knowledge of the Voter Education Project.

J: [Yes].

G: What was your impression of the VEP's work? Had it accomplished what it set out to do?

J: Well, from hindsight, it changed the South. I had the impression that it literally changed the South. The South is where most black elected officials are in the country, and the growth has been dramatic from the Voting Rights Act and since the activities of the VEP. That work has been absolutely transformative.

G: If I mention some personalities, would you share impressions of them? Vernon Jordan?

J: [Laughing.] Which Vernon Jordan, I guess I should say?

G: I guess the VEP Vernon Jordan.

J: Well, see, all I know is that he was an executive director of the VEP. I don't know much of the details of his work as director, and I don't know at what point I learned that that was something that he did. The person that I associated with VEP was John Lewis, and I know that there was Wiley Branton, but John is the person whose name I associate with the VEP.

G: Had Vernon Jordan had any association with the council since the VEP?

J: Well, we just presented an award to him this year with our Wiley Branton Vanguard Award. This year [was] when we paid tribute to those folks who were involved in the desegregation at the University of Georgia. [There's] that connection you made that before Vernon went to the VEP he was Georgia field representative for the NAACP, and before that he was a law clerk for Donald Hollowell, right out of law school and before he passed the bar. Don Hollowell was working on the University of Georgia case representing Charlene Hunter and Hamilton Holmes [black plaintiffs who desegregated University of Georgia]. Something that isn't widely known, although it is in published reports, [is that] one of the things that made the difference in that case, *Holmes v. Danner*, was a piece of research that Vernon did. As I understand it, one of the issues of fact was that they were saying they don't admit transfer students; University of Georgia didn't admit transfer students. Charlayne Hunter was enrolled at Wayne State [University; in Detroit], or some institution in Michigan, in journalism. It was asserted in the lawsuit, no, we only admit beginning students. Vernon, as the lowly law clerk, was dispatched to go rummage through the files at the University of Georgia and the Board of Regents. He found the file of a young woman named **Brumby**, who was a female journalism student who had transferred from somewhere to the University of Georgia, whose facts were exactly those of Charlayne Hunter. That made a big difference in that case, so that's just one little impression of Vernon. So, he was very thorough from an early age.

G: What about John Lewis?

- J: Well, John is somebody I've known for a while. I probably met John in 1967. I had an internship with the Metropolitan \_\_\_\_\_ Research Center in New York, which is an institute on urban problems headed by Kenneth Clark. At that same time, John Lewis had a fellowship there. The summer of 1967, John came to the office where I was working and said, I'm going down to Atlanta for an SCLC Conference, do you want to go? That was my first visit to Atlanta. So because of John Lewis, my introduction to Atlanta was through the civil rights movement. I got to meet, at the SCLC, luminaries who were active in the convention and, of course, John took me by the SNCC offices and I got to meet the people who were at the SNCC office at that time. He was very generous, a very personally generous individual. Then, in 1980, I was a part of a group called Good Government Atlanta that was seeking to change the tone of Atlanta politics. We set out to recruit people to run for public office at the city level. I was successful in talking John Lewis into running for city council. He ran against a white council member. He ran city-wide and was very successful, only by that time he had already been declared a living saint by *Time* magazine. He went on to become a leading voice for financial disclosure [and] ethics on the Atlanta City Council at a time when it needed such a voice. He was one of the early coalition-builders, in the sense that he was a city-wide office-holder. Before, I think, he was on council, he was already a co-chair on something called the Black-Jewish Coalition in Atlanta, so he had very strong ties to the Jewish community early on, stronger than most black elected officials, that's for sure. If you look at 1985, when it looked like Wyche Fowler [U.S. Senator, 1990-96], who was the congressman from Atlanta, was going to not seek reelection, he was going to run for the Senate, and so his seat is going to be vacant. Some people in the black community who were close to Wyche approached me about running for the seat and I ran, and John also ran. [laughing.] So, this good friend of mine and I were [running]. I will never say I ran against John Lewis, I will say we both ran for the same position and I got to know him well in that capacity as well. That was the race in which there was a field of eleven candidates, eight Democrats and three Republicans. I came in third in the primary behind John Lewis and Julian Bond. There was a run-off between John and Julian. John will say that he was elected because of the job I did in softening Julian up, because John had been an elected official on the local level and had a local presence for the five or six years prior to that, while Julian was a state legislator who had a very high absentee-rate and spent his time on the national lecture circuit. So, I pointed out his record to people, and I do recall getting a lot of calls from John's campaign manager giving me information about Julian that he wanted me to run with. [laughing.] He wanted me to share [information] that John wasn't going to share. He had to be very careful with that. So, that's not necessarily an SRC story.
- G: But it's interesting. I guess to maybe segue back to the SRC, it's a good segue. The person that I think of as the most affected by, maybe in a negative way, the rhetoric of Black Power, is John Lewis. I wonder if you have any impression of

how the SRC responded to those initiatives.

- J: Well, you know, I don't know a lot about that. You know, in retrospect, what is really interesting, the work that John did through the VEP established Black Power where it counted. It wasn't just talk; it was about being able to elect policy-makers. You know, Maynard Jackson [first black mayor of Atlanta] is fond of saying that people who could really make change are elected officials. Through the VEP, John put elected officials in place. I don't know any place where they were majority in a state legislature or anything like that, but the result was that large groups of people who had been unrepresented became represented. Executives and legislators at large all of a sudden had to sit up and take notice. Georgia is an example; it's a state with a substantial black caucus in the House and the Senate that's a result of the black vote. Georgia has already had a black chief justice, it's got a black attorney general, [and] it's got a black commissioner of labor. That's a product of the work that John, Vernon, and Wiley Branton did in establishing a foundation of black voting strength. I have a vague awareness of people being pushed aside within SNCC [like] John, Julian, and Stokely [Carmichael] and all that, but forty years later, who's had the impact? I think history has vindicated John, in that sense.
- G: Well, it's an interesting time in the national history, and certainly in Georgia history. We just had an interesting election, a repudiation of a Democratic governor. It's been a hundred years since Georgia's had a Republican?
- J: [It's been] 130 years. This is the first Republican Governor since the invention of the telephone.
- G: I'm a native Georgian, so I perceive that at least one of those factors is a backlash on the [Confederate] flag [situation]. I understand there's something about teachers, probably something about 9/11 [referring to September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks] factored into that, and maybe some other factors.
- J: Well, there's something about 9/11 that factors into it in the Senate race; I'm not sure about the Governor's race.
- G: With its historic mission and in the transitional period now, how does an organization like the SRC work in an environment that is going through these kinds of changes?
- J: Well, if you're talking about an environment that is unsympathetic to progressive causes, that's our historic role. The question becomes, are we prepared to assume once again a historic role? Because if we thought we were in any kind of position of power...I don't know if we ever thought that; we thought that the decision-makers were somewhat more sympathetic that we expected they're

going to be now. But there are a lot of changes we're going through. I don't think we know what the meaning of the election in Georgia is, or the election nationally. Yes, there's a racial dimension to the election in Georgia in a lot of ways. This governor who just got turned out of office embraced enthusiastically and aggressively, with all the authority of his office, the issue of the flag. He embraced it when his predecessor tried to embrace it and was repudiated and backed off. Zell Miller [Governor of GA, U.S. Senator, 1996-2003] tried to raise the issue of changing the flag, and then he saw what it was going to mean and he backed off. Roy Barnes [Governor of GA, 1996-2000] took a different approach, and I think that's one of the things that he has suffered for. But the flag is a symbol. I've got a real question about the value of spending too much time focused on symbolic issues. The flag says a lot of things and it's a surrogate for other issues. We had known for forty years that there is a realignment that is taking place in this country and in the South ever since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. You know, that's when the South started to go Republican. This is just a part of that in a lot of ways. The growing Republican strength in Georgia probably had its beginning then. In a sense, this is just a culmination of it. Party identification, particularly in the South, has become a surrogate for race. The margin of victory and the core voting strength of the Democratic party is the black vote. [The] Democratic party is something that is historic in the rural South, in the rural-white South, but the growth in the white vote is suburban and certainly not farm-based. So the Republican party now is becoming more and more sort of a different race.

Meanwhile, the work of the Council, really the fact that there is change in administration or direction of the country really should not change the work of the Council; the challenge remains the same. In terms of some of the changes that have been taking place, and the Council has sought to address itself to some of those changes, it has sought to be proactive. For example, it has sought to address the changing meaning of race given the change in demographics in the South. There is the base for real hope, it seems to me. One of the things that the election did is to remind blacks of their minority status. One of the things you do, if you are a minority, is to seek coalitions, and if the coalitions that the blacks have been a part of traditionally have been less effective than they could have been, then maybe that is a sign that we need to be more imaginative in the way we structure coalitions. A natural source of coalitions, it seems to me, is other groups of disaffected people such as new immigrants. Now, just because that's a natural source doesn't mean that it's necessarily going to happen, and if quick action isn't taken to make it happen, then the opportunity will be lost. Hispanics, for example, could just as easily become a Republican voting bloc. **Party isn't as significant as part of a voting bloc that votes, that is, antithetical to black interests.** So, it's not necessarily an accomplished fact that multi-racial coalitions are going to emerge in the South, and if decisive action isn't taken quickly, it won't happen.

G: Can you see the SRC now being involved in those kinds of actions?

J: I see the SRC is involved, and the SRC is on the vanguard there. There are not a lot of groups that are exploring that possibility. One of the challenges for us is, while we've embraced that as a strategy in the multi-racial partnerships, I don't think we can embrace it to the exclusion...I mean, for its own sake. As far as I'm concerned, our work has still got to reflect that legacy.

G: It still has to be progressive?

J: Yes, and, frankly, where I'm even more concerned with preserving the progressive thrust is when we start embracing youth empowerment. Youth do not vote, and, as far as I'm concerned, if youth were to vote, that doesn't mean they would vote for progressive causes. So, it seems to me that our work ought to be about more than just who's voting.

G: [You want to make people] educated and informed.

J: Exactly. Then again, the issues around voting issues haven't gone away, they're not solved, and yet, as we sit here on November 26, 2002, there is no work that the SRC is doing that focuses on voting-rights work. It is only a by-product of youth empowerment work, the by-product of the partnership work, and there isn't a voting rights thrust *per se*. I think we need to get back to that.

G: That's when it's true. Let me ask you maybe just a couple of concluding questions. How would you sum up the strengths and weaknesses from your experience with the organization?

[End of side A1]

J: The strength is the legacy and history of the tradition, the name that [the Council] has established for itself. All those things in and of themselves had the potential to contribute momentum into the future. A major weakness is that it is dependent. It's like any other non-profit [organization], it depends for its work and for its ability to do its work on the willingness of others to support the work. For an organization that is oriented to change, there's a limited number of sources that you can go to get support for change. So, there becomes a challenge of, how do you go about sustaining the work? The Council needs to get the message out so that more folks are aware of what we do, and there may be folks who, once aware, may become willing to support. The challenge is to diversify its sources of support. The Council needs to identify, it seems to me, a means of being self-sustaining. Surely there are things we do for which there is a market, for which earned revenue is available. I think that the nature of

philanthropy has changed; philanthropy has retrenched. Philanthropy became retrenching ten years ago. Philanthropy is less a source of support for organizations like the Council. For that reason, and for the reason that organizations like the Council need to develop a level of independence so that they don't end up being beholden by anybody, you've got to develop a means to becoming self-sustaining, and that is a hard thing. That is a hard thing, it is something that non-profits are unaccustomed to doing. It runs counter to the non-profit culture, but it's an imperative.

G: What is the best description, do you think, for SRC's contribution to the African American freedom struggle in particular, and to the post-war South in general?

J: [I think the contribution is that] they registered two million black voters. [laughing] Isn't that about the right number?

G: I think so.

J: What was your question again?

G: What's the best way to describe the SRC's contributions?

J: Well, I would say that the most important contribution is that.

G: Registering the voters?

J: Yes.

G: What about to the post-war South in general, how did [the SRC] affect this region?

J: I think a whole lot follows from what I just expressed. When you register two million black voters, you're able to get Jimmy Carter's in Georgia and Bob Graham's in Florida. Policy-makers at the executive level, who may not be the most progressive in the world, but they're not the most reactionary in the world either. They become a moderating influence. I mean, blacks are not going to run society, but if mobilized, they can moderate the views and actions of those who do run society. That's an affect that they've had. There have been a lot of counter-trends and cross-trends. The way the Voting Rights Act has been interpreted has caused polarization in legislative bodies at the state and national level. The packing of districts, for example, has meant that you have these very black districts and these very white districts. So, you have these very liberal congressmen and state representatives, and these very reactionary congressmen and state representatives in adjacent districts. You've got John Lewis and Bob Barr [conservative Georgia congressman] or Newt Gingrich

[former Speaker of the House and leader of the 1994 “Republican Revolution”] in adjacent Congressional districts. That’s a result of the way the Voting Rights Act has been enforced by the Justice department. So, I think that says something about the emergence of people like Newt Gingrich and Bob Barr at the national level of spokespeople, but that’s not the Council, that’s the Justice Department that’s doing that, and particularly the Justice Department under Bush I [President George Herbert Walker Bush]. Underneath all that is the fact that there was always the reality of a black vote that was mobilized, that had to be dealt with, and as a result of the work of the Council through the VEP. That’s to me the most significant thing. It’s palpable [and] it’s something you can see. The rest of it is harder to see. It’s harder to see the growth of cooperatives and the effect its had on the lives of people, but you can see the effect. I live in Atlanta, I’ve lived in Atlanta for twenty or thirty years, and one of the things that drew me to Atlanta was, when I came to Atlanta, there was a fellow getting ready to run for mayor. I thought it would be interesting to be an observer, if not a participant in that. His name was Maynard Jackson and he was able to get elected, and get elected by the black vote. Nobody was elected by the black vote, and to be responsive to that vote, well, that’s the result of blacks having a vote. There are examples like that across the South. This voter-registration work has real significance and real impact, and I really long to find that next agenda item that we can adopt that will allow us to have the same kind of impact.

G: You’ve probably gone a long way to answering the last question, but why do you think it is that SRC’s contribution are so little-known?

J: The question I have, which is related, is, why has the Council gone out of its way to ensure that its work is little-known? I mean, it hasn’t sought attention for itself and I don’t know why. The contribution is little-known because I do not think the Council has sought to draw attention to itself and its role in the process, and why that is, I don’t know. I don’t understand that; I really don’t.

G: [Is there] anything else that I should have asked you that I didn’t?

J: I’m sure there is, [but] I can’t think of it at the moment. [laughing]

G: Thank you so much for your time.

J: Sure, thank you.

[End of interview]