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WHITNEY M. YOUNG, JR., ORAL HISTORY, INTERVIEW I

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Gift of Personal Statement

By Whitney M. Young, Jr.

to the

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Signed by Mrs. Whitney M. Young, Jr., on November 27, 1972

Accepted by Harry Middleton for the Archivist of the United States on December 11, 1972

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78705

ACCESSION NUMBER 73-29

Narrator: Whitney M. Young, Jr.

Biographical information: Social work adminstr.; b. Lincoln Ridge, Ky., July 31, 1921; B.S., Ky. State Coll., 1941; student Mass. Inst. Tech., 1942-43; M.A., U. Minn., 1947; student Harvard, 1960-61; LL.D. (hon.) N.C.A. and T. Coll., 1961; Indsl. relations and vocational guidance dir. St. Paul Urban League, 1947-50; exec. sec. Omaha Urban League, 1950- 53; dean Sch. Social Work, Atlanta U., 1954-60; exec. dir. Nat. Urban League, N.Y.C 1961 --- ; instr. Sch. Social Work, U. Neb., 1950-58; frequent lectr. Mem. Presidents Com. Youth Employment; nat. adv. council AFL-CIO Community Services Com.; adv. bd. N.Y. Sch. Social Work, Columbia; adv. com. to sec. health, edn and welfare.

General topic of interview: Discusses his relationship with President Johnson and his role as Executive Director of the Urban League.

INTERVIEWEE: WHITNEY YOUNG, JR.

INTERVIEWER: THOMAS HARRISON BAKER

June 18, 1969

B: This is the interview with Whitney M. Young, Jr. of the Urban League. Mr. Young, do you recall when you first met or knew anything about Lyndon Johnson?

Y: I first met Mr. Johnson when he was in the Senate as the Majority Leader. I had occasion to appear for testimony on several bills at which he was present and to talk with him about various legislation.

B: Would that have included the '57 Civil Rights Bill?

Y: That's right.

B: Had you formed an opinion of Mr. Johnson then, or had you classified him in regard to Civil Rights?

Y: No, I still was a little bit in doubt. I had some clues that Mr. Johnson was a man who had a feeling tone and some understanding of the problems of the poor. His style, his language, and some of his review of his own experiences led me to believe that basically he was a man with compassion, and with a concern. At that point I must confess though, I felt that I was dealing with him as a mass group, as one had learned to expect Southerners to respond to civil rights issues.

B: Did your opinion change any by his activity in supporting the '57 Bill?

Y: Not so much. That was not the occasion upon which I really began to know that we had a strong supporter in Lyndon Johnson for civil rights. At that point, I still felt he was rising to the leadership role of the Senate. In that role he was making certain compromises and concessions in order to facilitate legislation. So, I saw it more as a manifestation of his skill in trying to process legislation than I did as a manifestation of any real conviction on the issue of civil rights.

B: Did it bother you any that Mr. Johnson was on the Democratic ticket in 1960?

Y: That really came as quite a surprise, particularly after the rather competitive and sometimes heated dialogue with John Kennedy, and the fact that I thought that Lyndon Johnson, himself, would feel that he had a more powerful and persuasive role to play as the Senate leader, and that this in fact would probably be a step down in terms of power--which I always felt that Mr. Johnson didn't particularly retreat from wanting power. I wasn't overly disturbed about it however, because I have always--well, I've made

the statement many times that some of the best liberals I know are reconstructed Southerners. I'm a Southerner myself, and I know that Southerners--I have yet to see a single Southerner who didn't have the capacity to like, if not love, and feel very close to individual black people, though the problem of acceptance of the group was difficult.

I've also observed that people, when their base, their constituency, changes they can sometimes be honest with their own feelings when they aren't concerned about running from a particular geographic area. I suppose we'll always recall the experience of Hugo Black. All of us in civil rights were greatly distressed at his proposed appointment, particularly when it was revealed that he was formerly a member of the Klan. And yet he went on, as is now well known, to become one of the great liberals and fighters for civil rights. And there have been many other cases of people Judge Waties Waring and Ralph McGill, Ivan Allen at the present time, who one time was a rigid segregationist, turned out to be not just a great Southern mayor but one of the greatest mayors of the land.

B: Sir, you became Executive Director of the Urban League at the same time Mr. Johnson became Vice President. Did this throw you closer together--particularly his position on the Commission on Equal Employment Opportunities?

Y: There were three things that happened right away to sort of endear Mr. Johnson to me. Upon my appointment a few weeks afterwards, Roy Wilkins, of the NAACP, had a reception for me in the hotel here, and Lyndon Johnson heard about it, was in town, and personally came over to welcome me in my new job.

Secondly, we had several meetings very early, just the two of us, and then with others around his responsibilities heading the President's Commission. I was impressed with what he said and the kind of people he was getting around him and the determination that he exhibited to make this a much more effective Commission and to really do something. He immediately put a black man on, if you recall--a fellow named Hobart Taylor--as the chief staff person for that Commission.

Now the third thing was, I came on the job in October and in November I was having our most important event, our Equal Opportunity Day Dinner, and I asked Mr. Johnson to come and speak and he agreed. This was a meeting at the Waldorf with some 1500 people, the biggest businessmen in the country and labor leaders, black people and church people and what have you. And he came and he made a speech that made mine sound like the moderate!

B: I guess it might be appropriate to mention here that in the last year of his Presidency, Mr. Johnson surprised everyone and showed up at that dinner, too, in '68.

Y: That's right. And it was really a beautiful gesture on his part, and it gave us a chance to say--and the people really said it by their spontaneous enthusiastic reception. There was a

room of 2000 people and there was hardly a dry eye in the place; there were no boos; there was nothing but enthusiastic cheers. It gave us a real opportunity to say "Thanks" to what we all feel has been the greatest leadership job in civil rights done by any President.

B: Back in the Vice Presidential years, did Mr. Johnson really ask you for your advice on things to do? I know that the Urban League was beginning then under your direction, the new thrust, the new ideas. Did you really share ideas?

Y: Yes. I suppose we visited on the phone at least once a week and in person at least once a month. He did share with me some of his frustrations that I think have been generally assumed at being more or less under reins and under check, not having as much say-so as he would like to have in the general policy making of the country. He was scrupulously ethical and loyal to John Kennedy in any kind of group meeting, but you sort of sensed it in individual meetings when he was pressed to do certain things that he would sort of indicate that, after all, he was not the President of the United States. For a man who had had great power and had great energy, I did sense in him a bit of restlessness and some annoyance at what he felt was failure to make maximum use of his skills and his energies by the Administration.

B: Was his frustration directed particularly at President Kennedy or more at, say, Attorney General Robert Kennedy or some of the other staff members?

Y: I would say they were sort of lumped together. You sort of thought of them as the clique or the clan, the Eastern Establishment. I guess the more unkind characterizations have been the Mafia group that they were called by many of the press. So he really felt, I think, that he was boxed in by a whole lot of individuals whose style and whose accents he felt, I think, that President Kennedy felt more comfortable with and did not really make maximum use of his. I think also there was--he became philosophical about it, President Johnson--and it was directed more at the system, that historically the role of the Vice President had not been one of major influence. I think he did feel that it would be changed under John Kennedy, especially since he had been such a strong influence within the Senate, that he would be used more.

B: Did Mr. Johnson play a major role in drafting civil rights proposals in '63?

Y: Yes. He played a very key role and was actually more supportive of some of the measures than some of the Administration, the other Kennedy people, were. Initially we had seven or eight titles, and there were any number of the members of the Administration who were trying very hard to get us to cut down the number and take out certain ones like, oh, the Public Accommodations Bill, and Title VI particularly, dealing with withholding of federal funds. It was their opinion, even after the March on Washington, that this was just impossible and it would hurt our chances of getting some other titles if we didn't drop those.

Mr. Johnson didn't feel that way.

B: This was one of the frustrations you mentioned?

Y: Yes. I think Mr. Johnson had a little more confidence in the mood of the country than did Mr. Kennedy at that point. And being a Southerner, and I think being probably a little closer to the people, put him in a position to be a little more accurate about that mood.

B: Did you and Mr. Johnson discuss in these years the events in the South, particularly what Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference were doing?

Y: I don't recall a great deal of discussion on specifics. I do know that we discussed the possibility of certain methods resulting in a counter kind of reaction, and I can remember on many occasions pointing out that the old, old methods had been used for so long and had proven ineffective that people who found the newer methods of confrontation distasteful had only themselves to blame for not going along with the more polite and more reasonable kinds of appeals that organizations like the Urban League and people like myself had made. So I was in no position to criticize the methods as long as they were not violent, as long as my methods hadn't worked.

B: Was Mr. Johnson then reluctant to encourage you in planning the March on Washington in '63?

Y: No. I think we were able to convince Mr. Johnson--and he saw it--and we convinced him before we did Mr. Kennedy--that this would be a very healthy sort of way of expressing the pent-up emotions and that the alternative to letting people have this kind of collective display of their feelings would be engaging in much more undisciplined kinds of activities around the country.

B: I know that many members of the Administration feared that it would get out of control, the March would get out of control.

Y: That's right. I never could understand this. I tried to point out to the Administration then that if black people were violent people inherently, then we would have been violent long before now--or else we have the longest time fuse known to man. We certainly have had the provocations, but the whole history of violence in this country, black people have usually been the victims and they've not been the prosecutors of it, and that we are by nature a people whose leadership has come from the churches and who have a great faith in ourselves and in our system. Given the way we were organizing it, at no point did I feel of panic and anxiety that members of the Administration seemed to feel.

B: That same year, indeed about the same time, you announced your concept of a domestic Marshall Plan. Had you discussed this in advance with Mr. Johnson?

Y: Yes--not in too specific details. I did share with him the memorandum that our Board worked on for almost six or eight months leading up to the announcement and then later there was a magazine article on it in the New York Times and then later in my book, To Be Equal, which went into it more in detail. Mr. Johnson is mentioned in the book as a person who seemed to understand the concept. I think Mr. Johnson understood this--I've always felt that when he talked about the Great Society he was serious. But there were two reasons for it.

I think he saw the Great Society as sort of a monument. In a way it would be going a step beyond what his great hero Franklin Roosevelt did. I've always felt that if it hadn't been for the Viet Nam war--which is one of the ironical bits of fate--that Mr. Johnson would have made America the Great Society. He had all of the skills and the conviction, the dedication, the motivation that was needed in the domestic area, that could have mobilized the people, could have gotten the resources, could have made them see this as an investment. So he understood that we were talking about an investment and not an expenditure and a way of tapping great potential.

B: Is there a direct connection between your ideas and Mr. Johnson's anti-poverty plans, which are very similar? Is this the kind of thing that you had discussed?

Y: Yes. I was involved in the Poverty Program, the planning of it, from the very start--even when John Kennedy was in, and more so when President Johnson came in. I'd say a lot of our ideas really constituted some of the same concepts of the Marshall Plan. It was programmed, by this point, 1969, it was supposed to be around eight billion dollars. And I think it would have been, but here again I think the war intervened.

B: Right after the assassination of President Kennedy, I know you had a conference very shortly with Mr. Johnson. I gather you did not need any reassuring on his stand on, say, the Civil Rights Bill. But what did you discuss there?

Y: The press got to me immediately after the assassination, and I remember my first comment when asked about how did I feel about Lyndon Johnson as the President. I said, "I had always felt that if ever I turned on the radio and heard the President of the United States speaking with a deep Southern accent that I would panic. But I did not feel that way at all." In fact I felt, by that time, that Lyndon Johnson would do exactly what he did, but the next day he did call me and we talked at some length on the phone and then two or three days later I met with him. He was not, at that point, trying to get unity as much as he was saying, "I need your help." And he was giving full recognition to the shock of the country and the possibly anxiety people might have about a Southerner being President. He wanted very much to convey that not only did we not have to worry but he wanted to do far more than any other President.

B: Did he offer you a position in the Administration then or anytime fairly soon? It was

rumored, for example, that you were offered the Deputy Directorship of the War on Poverty.

Y: I was offered several jobs by Mr. Johnson. He's talked to me--his people have--about cabinet positions, about heading OEO, on a variety of occasions. On every occasion I was only able to resist his arm-twisting by reminding him that I felt and was able to prove to him that I was better able to serve both his own objectives and the country's objectives in my present spot, that it was a unique position and one from which I could exercise a maximum influence and and control, and I thought it would be unwise if all of the black leadership that had talent or abilities were to leave and go with the Administration. That some of us needed to be outside.

B: There aren't many people that have been able to resist that kind of pressure.

Y: I know! He's a very persuasive man.

B: There are some ideas of yours which have not shown up in the anti-poverty plans. For example I believe at one time you advocated a kind of public works for employment and in your most recent book Beyond Racism, you have some ideas like the Neighborhood Development Corporation and the Council of Social Advisers and the Executive Vice President for Domestic Development. Had you discussed this kind of thing with Mr. Johnson?

Y: Yes, some of these had been discussed. I remember on any number of occasions we used to mutually deplore what we felt was the lack of coordination of all of the efforts, first just within the federal government--how each department had its own poverty operation. Labor was doing something for the hardcore, and Agriculture, and OEO, and Health Education and Welfare. But there was nobody coordinating this so as to avoid duplication and overlap and competitiveness. As a result you not only had lack of coordination that he wanted so much, but you also had much duplication and many people who were not being served. We talked about how could such a position be established. I think he really had hoped that the OEO director would be able to do it, but this was a little unrealistic. He didn't have cabinet status and you can't expect other cabinet members to be coordinated by their peers. This is what has led me to believe that there has to be either the Vice President, or somebody so designated, has to be given that kind of authority.

B: For a time Mr. Humphrey, under Mr. Johnson, seemed to have, at least in theory, that authority.

Y: Yes he did, but I think here again Mr. Johnson, after smarting under the restrictions of being a Vice President, because of his own personality and drive, found himself probably doing some of the same things to Mr. Humphrey because he was a man who wanted to stay on top of everything and who had a fantastic memory and ability to absorb facts about

so many things. I just never felt he really unleashed the authority for domestic planning to Mr. Humphrey, and by the time he was forced to by the pressures of international events there wasn't any resources.

B: Sir, did Mr. Johnson's opinion on this kind of thing change toward the end of his Presidency? For example, you praised the Kerner Report highly and Mr. Johnson's public response to it was cool, to put it as mildly as possible.

Y: I think that was a mistake on the part of Mr. Johnson. I think it was a spontaneous thing. I've always felt that what he was really reacting to was not so much what the Kerner Commission Report said but how it failed to acknowledge the many things he had done, that had been accomplished, under his administration in the domestic area. The Kerner Commission on that point, and probably consciously, because they wanted to concentrate on what was still missing rather than what we had. But I think Mr. Johnson took it personally. I think that was a part of his lack of enthusiasm for the Report.

But the other thing was, I think the term racism sort of shook him up as it has practically everybody. The reason being as I tried to explain in my book, Beyond Racism, that they misinterpreted it. They thought of it as meaning a vile, vulgar, bigot type who wanted to go around lynching black people, which most white people certainly don't want to do. But that really wasn't the meaning of it. It had to do with how institutions had historically ignored or discriminated against, or people had conducted themselves in a way that suggested they felt superiority over other people.

But I think Mr. Johnson, with his natural political and public relations instincts, felt that this term--this kind of indictment--just wasn't the best way to sell something. He couldn't have disagreed with the findings because in his own speeches many, many times he has pointed out that the real agitators are not Communist-trained infiltrators, but they are rats and poverty and all of this. He had said most of the things that are in that report.

B: Was Mr. Johnson discouraged and frustrated by the increase in black militancy, and black separatism?

Y: Initially he was, and I think he always took it rather personally if he himself were attacked. I know that he was greatly concerned and curious about Dr. King particularly, and some of Dr. King's remarks, because he had a great deal of respect for Dr. King. I don't think he clearly understood how strongly Dr. King felt about Viet Nam, for example.

B: Did you find yourself having to explain Dr. King to Mr. Johnson?

Y: Yes, I did.

B: I assume when you were in Atlanta you were closely with Dr. King?

- Y: That's right, Dr. King and I were good friends. We have had our differences on to what extent should the civil rights movement become involved in the international affairs, particularly Viet Nam. I must confess I have changed somewhat in my own thinking now and feel maybe Dr. King was more right than probably I was, because it is hard to separate the war from the domestic problems in terms of resources of the country and of manpower and all this. But I used to have to keep telling President Johnson, whether it was Dr. King or whether he was booed or any black person said something, that he was not to take it personally. He seemed to feel you know what man has ever done more and that why doesn't everybody know this and why aren't they appreciative? I had to remind him that black people were like any other ethnic group, we ran the spectrum. We have as much right to have our crackpots as anybody else and if he could get rid of all the with crackpots, the Klan and the White Citizens Council, the John Birchers and the Minute Men, that I could get rid of the Black Panthers. But I felt if we believed in equality then we're going to have to give black people the right to have crackpots just like white people.
- B: Is the Viet Nam war one of the keys to this, too? Did this attitude of his increase when the war stand began to be criticized?
- Y: Yes, that was really the only thing that black people ever really became very critical of President Johnson on. Nobody could make a substantial argument that he hadn't done more until it got to the point that the monies were not forthcoming because of it. But I think President Johnson's attitude with regard to the war was first one of he felt he had been poorly advised. He had gotten into something that he was not an acknowledged expert on, that he had relied upon the advice largely of President Kennedy's appointees. Then to have some of that same camp become the most violent antagonists on it, I think was deeply disturbing to him because by the time those advisers were out of the picture, the number had escalated to the point where he was just sort of caught in the middle of this thing.
- B: Did he discuss this with you, in about those words that you just used?
- Y: No, not--well, you know, President Johnson was a very unusual fellow in a conversation. You'd go in with a specific item for the agenda but, depending on his most recent encounter or telephone call or something, you'd find yourself sort of listening.
- B: I suppose toward the end that was mostly Viet Nam?
- Y: That's right, it really was. And the very thought that anybody wanted peace more than he did was just terribly repulsive to him. The very thought that he didn't want to take that money and put it in the domestic program distressed him no end. I think it's now clear that he began to have real doubts about the war. I thought it took a tremendously big man to acknowledge--in part he really did acknowledge his failures.

B: Sir, the time is just about up here. Is there anything else that stands out that you feel should be said.

Y: I mentioned once before I think the innate compassionate nature of Mr. Johnson. It goes back to a point I was making earlier, the average Southerner, almost without exception, has had contacts with black people. And they know black people. They know the whole range of black people from principals of high schools and businessmen and college presidents right down to the more illiterate. So there is a response based upon feeling tone through actual contact.

The average Northerner--many of them never have contacts with black people, and when they do they are usually not their peers but people who are in very menial jobs. So their reaction to race is oftentimes academic and intellectual and not emotional.

Mr. Johnson brought this quality of emotion to the problem of race relations and was able to translate it to the group situation. I think this is responsible for his success and developed some real conviction and real sincerity. I now begin to feel that President Johnson has always been a liberal, but he was also a politician and he had to be elected from Texas. But the moment he was placed in the position of being President of all the people, I don't know anybody who exhibited a greater respect for the Constitution and the Bill of Rights as far as black people are concerned than did President Johnson. He was not always an easy man to talk to because, as I said, he was often filled with many things he wanted to talk about, but he was a down-to-earth person. I thought in many ways. I never had any trouble getting him. I never abused that, but he seemed appreciative. He did twist my arm on several occasions. He sent me to Viet Nam when I didn't want to go for the inspection trip. He put me on five Presidential Commissions, many of which I didn't want.

B: You went to Viet Nam twice, didn't you?

Y: Yes.

B: Both times at--

Y: No, the first time was privately supported by the Urban League, but the President--I did talk to him before I went and he made all the arrangements for security and made possible for me to see all the people I needed to see. The Ambassador had a luncheon for me, and I met with General Westmoreland, so I got all the courtesies.

B: Anything else, sir?

Y: I think that'll do it.

B: Thank you very much.