Opportunity Commission in those days was beneficial to the cause of civil rights?

R: Oh, absolutely--tremendously beneficial. I think it was a good bit of the part of educating the nation along with the upheaval which was then beginning on the part of SNCC, SCLC, and other groups in the South.

B: Related to that, sir, you played a major part--perhaps the major part--in organizing the March on Washington in 1963.

R: Yes.

B: What sort of thinking went into deciding to have such a march?

R: The decision to have that march was based on the fact that Mr. Randolph foresaw that the coming problem was an economic one, that we were well on the way to getting the nation to face up to the moral question. Therefore that march was designed to bring economic pressure on the job question. It was called "The March for Jobs and Freedom."

However, while the march was being prepared, you will recall that the administration proposed a civil rights bill.

B: Then the planning for the march predated the civil rights proposal. The planning must have begun back in late '62.

R: That's right, it did. In fact, the idea was conceived in '61, but we were waiting for things to congeal so that we could get everybody that we wanted to participate. That took almost a year and a half to do that.

B: You mean labor groups and such?

R: Labor groups and some civil rights groups who weren't convinced in '61 when we first thought about it that it was the right thing to do.

B: Were you also waiting for the kind of climate that was created by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's work in the South?

R: Well, we were waiting not only for SCLC but for SNCC, SCLC, the Voter project--a number of things. Then Mr. Randolph said, well, he felt the time had come, that we ought to do it in the summer of '63--late summer.

B: I hate to keep interrupting you, but I think a question is appropriate here, and I hope it doesn't sound rude or disrespectful. So far as the public sees, you and Mr. Randolph worked together in an awful lot of things like this. Is it really a partnership, or where is the dominance in the pair?

R: Mr. Randolph, like Dr. King, is an extraordinarily marvelous and great man. But neither Dr. King nor Mr. Randolph really has much organizational ability. They are great dreamers. I don't think Mr. Randolph could have organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters if he hadn't had certain key people around him who did the dotting of I's and crossing of T's. And, of course, a part of his extraordinary greatness is that nobody knows better than he does that he can't organize. Therefore what he has always done is to go out and work with someone who is deeply concerned about organizational detail. And I began working with Mr. Randolph in 1941 as the director of youth for the original March on Washington which did not have to take place. Therefore over the years he came to have faith in my ability to do this sort of thing. But he's the one who conceived the idea.

Another interesting thing. Mr. Randolph refuses to raise money. He always jokes and says, "Well, you can raise the money. Don't worry." Which means that we often left Roy Wilkins holding the bill.

I was going to say--

B: Yes, please carry on, sir.

R: When President Kennedy and the Administration introduced what became the Civil Rights Bill of '64, the urgency of that bill obscured the basic reason for the March.

B: You mean the economic reason?

R: Yes, economic reasons. And when the congressmen came down the steps at the March, the young people in the front began to scream, "Pass the bill. Pass the bill, pass the bill." And by that time the March had become a call for the passage of civil rights legislation, per se, as against what it had really conceived to do, which was to raise the economic question.

However, I don't think that that took anything from the March. I think it may, in fact, have helped it. But in this regard both the Vice President and President were very distressed and did not want the March to take place and in fact urged us not to have the March.

B: I understand there were conversations to that effect. Did you talk face-to-face with Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Johnson about this?

R: No, Mr. Randolph did. I did not. The decision was that a small group should go. Therefore since Mr. Randolph and I represented the same tendency, he went and I didn't.

B: The Administration appears to have feared that the march would get out of control; that there would be violence which was--

R: Yes, they did.

B: Right in your department as the chief organizer, did you ever fear that that could happen?

R: No, I didn't. Let me say that the very fact that we took some of the

steps we took indicated that we conceived of it as a theoretical possibility. And precisely because we thought it was theoretically possible, we did everything we could to see that it would not happen.

B: Did this involve screening the participants as much as you could, and having marshals and so forth?

R: No. When you have that many participants, you cannot screen them. What we did was to screen the signs which they carried. We did not permit anybody to carry any sign at all--only the signs we provided, and placards. We also used great numbers of Negro policemen from the major cities along the eastern coast all the way from Richmond to Boston, and had thousands of them there who knew a great deal about crowd control. We also sat with the government officials--every department of government--in Washington, and the federal government, and made certain that--.

It was our request that the liquor stores be closed; it was our request that the traffic be limited. We saw to it that there were very definite places for transportation. We sent out thousands and thousands of copies of two different little booklets telling people where to go, what to bring, etc. We set up our own welfare establishment in case anybody got lost or was in trouble. And with a quarter of a million people coming in, I think we spent less than $500 in emergencies, so that people were really very, very disciplined as a result of the fact that all of these things were done nationally. Then of course we had six different organizations working at the local level.

And people came with leaders. Every bus that came in had a particular leader, and he had certain very important things to do, and did them rather well.

B: After the March was over, a group of the leaders went to the White House to meet with Mr. Kennedy and others. Did you go?

R: No, I did not, because I had so many things to finish up.

B: Getting everybody out of town must have been a first-class job.

R: That's right. And they met really quite early. In fact, they didn't meet after the March. They met around 11:30--

B: Was it that early?

R: Yes.

B: I thought it was after the speeches.

R: No, before.

B: By that time I guess it was pretty obvious it was going to be a peaceful demonstration.

R: Well, yes. The only disorder that was attempted was attempted on the part of the American Nazis. The police simply surrounded them as they came across the bridge and sent them back.

B: Shortly after that, sir, comes the assassination of President Kennedy. On that occasion, in which Mr. Johnson becomes President, did you by any chance have any fear that there would be a let-up in civil rights?

R: Curiously enough, Johnson's behavior as Vice President caused me to write an article two days after Kennedy's assassination, in which I said that I didn't think people ought to be fearful; that Truman had a fairly atrocious record as a senator, but that in fact it was Truman who began to open up, with the commission he appointed, a real federal concern in the civil rights question; that under some pressure from Randolph he had integrated the Armed Forces; and that perhaps a Southerner would be able to do more than a Yankee, particularly with a Boston accent, to get some things done in Congress that no one else

had. And I'm happy to say that as far as I'm concerned I believe that President Johnson will go down in history as having done more for civil rights than any single President who ever lived--and more for civil rights, not only in terms of civil rights, but that his education bill, which has now made it possible for us to almost double the black students in colleges. We have more black students in colleges than we had anticipated would be there by 1975 as a result of President Johnson's educational bill. There are now 400,000 Negroes in colleges in the United States. So that I'm glad to say that the prediction I made at that time proved to be prophetic.

B: Were you one of the Negro leaders who was called by President Johnson shortly after the assassination?

R: Yes.

B: What did he say on that occasion?

R: He explained that he needed our help, essentially what the whole thing was about, that he hoped that we would trust him, that he was deeply concerned to deal with these matters. Essentially he wanted two things before he left office: one was that there would be world peace everywhere; and that all men in the United States would have the rights and privileges and the responsibilities of citizenship.

B: Was this a phone call, sir, or a meeting in the White House?

R: I believe, if I'm not mistaken, Cliff Alexander called about to people. It could have been a telegram, but I doubt it.

B: Did the President call on you for more direct help in getting what was now to be the Civil Rights Bill of '64 through Congress?

R: Yes. It was interesting. He urged us to keep up the pressure, and said that he would do his part of the job if we did ours. I said