

Interview with Richard Arrington, city councilman in Birmingham, July 18, 1974, conducted by Jack Bass ~~and Walter de Vries~~, transcribed by Linda Killen.

Jack Bass: Let me ask you first just a little bit about your own background and how you got involved politically.

Arrington: Well, I'm a late comer to the political scene. By training I'm a biologist all of my degrees, bachelor's through doctorate being in the area of biology. Entered into college administration about five or six years ago serving as academic dean at <sup>Miles</sup> Mills College after serving as chairman of the natural science division. I came to the center here, Alabama Center for Higher Education, in '70 and sort of got into the political arena without any planning. I was approached by a group of young blacks that was interested in trying to run some people for offices here in the city in the city election. They were particularly interested in trying to support what they considered to be new faces. People with new ways of thinking. And so I was contacted one night while sitting here in my office working. Just received a phone call from a friend of mine and asked if I'd come to a meeting. And I was asked if I would agree to run for. . . . Frankly, I was asked to agree to run for mayor that year. I said no and then I was asked if I'd run for city council. So I did and I ran and that was in '71. That was really my first effort at any political office. I had qualified to run for the state board of education about two years prior to that time, only to learn after qualifying that the law does not allow an educator to run for the state board of education unless he has been out of education for at least five years. So I had to withdraw.

J.B.: Did you have support of the Progressive Democrats of Jefferson County?

Arrington: I was endorsed on the ballot of the Progressive Democrats when the ballot came out. I did not consult with the Progressive Democratic Council at the time that I entered the race. However, my feeling was that I thought I was in a position that I would get support from the Progressive Democratic Council. It turns out I was right. I could have been wrong, but I did not feel at the time that the Council could afford to not endorse me. But anyway, I was supported. I did get the endorsement.

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

Arrington: I'm 39 years old.

J.B.: Tell me a little about your experience on council? Did you have any prior political experience at all? [Any] party activities?

Arrington: No, I had none at all. I think I was becoming more and more aware of the need for blacks, particularly some of the younger blacks and some who have sort of reaped some of the benefits of all the blacks in terms of getting education and some of the other benefits that blacks are enjoying as they move to the middle class. I think I was becoming increasingly sensitive to the need for us to become involved in the political situation and what the political situation means for blacks. And the hope that it holds for blacks in terms of achieving what I consider to be full equality and freedom for black people in this country. But I had never before participated in the political race. In fact I don't believe I had ever even worked in a political race for a candidate. I sort of kept an interest in it as a voter and that was about it.

J.B.: What happened after you got in that council race? How did

you campaign?

Arrington: Well, I was at somewhat of an advantage. I had just come from the position as academic dean at Mills College. And so I wasn't completely unknown here in the Birmingham area. Having served as academic dean at Mills College at which time, of course, Lucius Pitts was president of Mills College and was very active in this community and widely recognized as sort of a black leader in this community. I had worked with Lucius Pitts so I had gotten quite a bit of exposure to citizen groups in the community. So I wasn't unknown. I had taken the responsibility at the time the black citizens in Birmingham first approached the city government and power structure in this city to do something about police brutality in this city and all of this eventually resulted in the formation of the community action committee, the ONB, which you may have heard something about. Which is a biracial committee here that deals with problems here and I think it's made some significant strides in helping to alleviate some of the tensions, racial tensions and deal with some of the problems in this community. I, at that time, was asked by Dr Pitts to serve as a person who drafted most of the documents that were sent to the group and so I got in on some of those meetings. So I was among what was called the 21 concerned black citizens who did go before the city government, representatives of the city government and people in the power structure here in this town to ask them to do something about some of the problems effecting black folks, which we felt that they could do something about. So what I'm saying is that I had had some exposure to some of the leaders here, limited exposure. I was known from my work as an educator particularly because I was connected with Mills College here in Birmingham. So I

wasn't completely unknown. When I entered the race I got quite a bit of support. First of all, financial support. I got what I thought was good financial support, contributions, mainly from the white community. About \$7- 8,000 I raised in soliciting campaign funds. \$6,000 of that came from people in the white community and they were mainly people who had had an interest in Mills college and who I had known at Mills College. I got some help from the local Democratic party in the run off. . . I did. . . the county party. . . some financial help. And I got some assistance and some advice, particularly once I made it to the run off, from veteran politicians, particularly David Vann, who is now on the Birmingham city council and who was also running for office at that time. Made certain suggestions. But in the general election, in a field of about nearly 30 candidates, I ran third in that field. That was in the general election. Behind two of the incumbents. I failed by about. . . somewhere less than 3,000 votes of winning without going into a run off. I still feel that I would have won except about 6,000 votes were obviously invalidated because you had, in our system. . . for the city council you must vote for 5 people or the machine doesn't register your vote. And it has been projected, based on comparisons made in the mayor's race and in the council race that possibly some 16,000 votes were invalidated. And the differences showed up mainly in predominantly black boxes. I, of course, got my strongest support in predominately black boxes so I felt that I lost quite a few votes in that race.

J.B.: Let me ask you one more thing about your background. Are you a native of Birmingham?

Arrington: Well, I consider myself to be, but I'm originally from Livingston, Alabama, which is down in the black belt area. My father and

mother were sharecroppers down in Liverston, Alabama, which is about one hundred and some odd miles southwest of Birmingham. When I was four years old my dad and mom moved to Birmingham to work. My dad took a job in the steel mills here in Birmingham where he is, incidentally, still working. And so since four years of age I've been living in the Birmingham area. So I sort of consider myself a native of Birmingham because I grew up here. I went to elementary and high school and even through undergraduate school here in Birmingham. And the only time I ever left this city for any length of time has been when I've gone off to school to study and I've always come back here.

J.B.: How do you assess Operation New Birmingham?

Arrington: Well, I think it has done some good things here. I alluded to that a moment ago when I was talking about the CAC committee. Operation New Birmingham, of course, is unquestionably a powerful organization here because it has the leading civic figures and businessmen and so forth in the community on Operation New Birmingham. So I think it has done some good things here. I think it has been. . . I think it has made a few awkward moves that it should not have made and it has put a sort of bitter taste in the mouths of some of the citizens, particularly in the minority community. I tend to think that if you try to weigh the pluses and the minuses, the negatives, that Operation New Birmingham certainly has done more good for the city than it has done harm. I think right now. . . a couple of things that people dislike. A number of people, particularly blacks, dislike about Operation New Birmingham. One was the role that Operation New Birmingham played in the last city election. Through the organization called. . . the acronym was BAG. . . I can't even remember what that stands for. . . .

J.B.: Birmingham Action Group.

Arrington: Yeah, Birmingham Action Group. And despite all the denials that have been made by officials of Operation New Birmingham about their role, I think it is pretty obvious to anybody who bothers to look into it that Operation New Birmingham did indeed play a role in re-electing the incumbents. Now that, in and of itself, was not so bad, but I think it was the tactics that were used. Which was in a very subtle sense an appeal back to, you know, the racist appeal, racist feelings or emotions. And people resent that about Operation New Birmingham and I think that resentment was reflected in the demand a citizen made recently that Operation New Birmingham be taken out of the community participation plan the city government had come up with, or the mayor's office had come up with. But I think that Operation New Birmingham has played an important role in helping this city to move along. Now, again, the problem with Operation New Birmingham is that I think it wants to define when, where and at what pace progress and change will be made in this community. And it has been composed, largely, of people of upper income. Some middle income people. But mainly people who are identified as being in the power structure. So it has not, in the past, been inclusive enough. I think it's taken some steps to try to correct that. Secondly, I think it's overly sensitive to criticism. Apparently so many people, in Operation New Birmingham, feel that they never do anything wrong. Whatever Operation New Birmingham supports, that's it. That is obviously not true.

J.B.: How valid is the criticism that Operation New Birmingham is overly concerned with image as opposed to substance?

Arrington: I think number one priority is image. It has done some things of substance, but Operation New Birmingham had, first of all, to try to change the image of this city. And it has done that. And

it has worked to do that. So I think that's a valid criticism. Now, I think if also you look at the progress we've made, you'll see that there are certainly some positive things--

J.B.: What would be some of these positive things?

Arrington: Well, I feel that, to a large extent, we have opened our. . . first of all. . . communication. Operation New Birmingham honestly gets the credit, I think, for that. And Operation New Birmingham did take the lead, at the request of the black citizens, the black citizens group that was called 21 concerned citizens, to set up some mechanism whereby there could be some discussions held, problems. That in itself, for Birmingham, represented a significant change in posture. Secondly, Operation New Birmingham has worked to help getting blacks placed on boards, some of the boards. Now here I must say that I think Operation New Birmingham takes too much of the credit. In some of its literature it takes credit for just about every black that was appointed to a board. And being a member of the Birmingham city council, I know that that is not the case at all. We have a council that's sensitive to blacks being on boards because of the black political power here in this community. But Operation New Birmingham has certainly moved to support the efforts to get the black judge in the city of Birmingham and I don't question that it did swing some votes on the council that were necessary to get a black judge elected. Places like the personnel board, a three member board that's very powerful in this city, controlling personnel policy for cities over 5,000 in this county. Operation New Birmingham got the first black appointed there and I think this was really as a direct result of Operation New Birmingham. Operation New Birmingham has gone out to try to involve the community, at least provide a channel

through which members of the community, particularly in minority community, could at least present problems to city government or present problems to, say, Operation New Birmingham. For example, concern about food stamps, distribution of food stamps to the poor. Operation New Birmingham has certainly worked in that area. It is working some in the area of education. It has not done a lot there, but it is beginning to work there. It has worked some in the area of police-community relations and trying to get black police officers employed in. . . more particularly, recruiting them to take the examination to increase the number of blacks on the Birmingham police force. I think Operation New Birmingham has played an important role in that. So things of that sort, Operation New Birmingham certainly has helped in work in this area.

J.B.: Can you explain to me what happened in so far as that last city election? Particularly . . . . Well, let me tell you what I know. As I understand it. . . . Two things, and I'm particularly interested in one. One, I understand that the Progressive Democrats did not endorse . . . endorsed a biracial slate even though there were some additional black candidates. And that this had an adverse effect in the black community toward them. Two, that subsequent to the election, one of the incumbent councilmen died and that U.C. Clemon, who had been the next highest vote getting candidate was considered but passed over in favor of a white candidate as replacement.

Arrington: Yeah, well, before I deal with those let me say. . . . One thing you have to know about Birmingham, and I guess this relates more to the earlier question than to the two you've just raised. Is that as we look at the progress here in this city and we look at the role, say, of ONB, you will see that we are still a city that's dealing

very much with tokenism, particularly in the area of employment. I think Operation New Birmingham, again, going back to that question, has helped, for example, to get blacks into positions in banks, in junior management positions and to open up a few other jobs here, opportunities. But we're still very much on a sort of tokenism level. We have not moved away from that yet here in this city. And I think that also sort of represents the policy of Operation New Birmingham. It has wanted to say who the black leaders are going to be in this town and they have appointed blacks with whom they could deal, they felt they could deal. And that could mean a number of things. As leaders. And they have been in a position to do this, I don't know for how long they will still be in that position. But they have been in a position to, as I say, appoint certain people as leaders because Operation New Birmingham in effect represents the power structure. Any black could say he's a leader but when he has problems he's got to deal with these people who make up the power structure. And if the power structure does not recognize him, does not sit down with him, so to speak, he is effect not really a leader unless he has behind him some sort of very strong support such as only say Martin Luther King has had in recent years. But back to your other question about the last election. Now let me see if I can zero in. What was your first question?

J.B.: I think if referred to Progressive Democrats in Jefferson County and their endorsement policy and the effect of that in the black community.

Arrington: Yeah. Well, in Birmingham we still, unfortunately, we still play, particularly in the black community, endorsement politics. Many blacks in this community and this county as a whole look for political

leadership. When they're going to go to the polls they look mainly for a ballot. And since the Progressive Democratic Council has been the only organized black political structure in this county, they have, of course, had the corner on the black vote. And blacks have looked for them to distribute their ballots. The marked ballots which are distributed through the churches and through the civic leagues. And I would say that most blacks here have, for years, voted the Progressive Democratic Council ballot, whatever marked ballot there was. This time. . . by this time I mean the last city election. . . the Progressive Democratic Council sort of shirked its responsibility, or abdicated, is my feeling, in that it came out. . . with five seats available, it endorsed 10 folk. In effect, said vote for any five. This was sort of a cop out. I have not been able to fully understand it yet. I was at the Council meeting the night that the screening committee came in with the recommendation and more or less railroaded it, ramrodded it through. It did make quite a few blacks unhappy. They were displeased. I think it sort of served to shake up the Council a bit because some of the black ministers, a group called the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, came out with its own ballot and carried a large portion of the black vote. Went for that ballot instead of the Progressive Democratic ballot. I don't know if the Progressive Democratic Council has gotten over that.

J.B.: Let me ask you a question? Was Arthur Shores on the latter ballot?

Arrington: No, he was not. And for that reason he did not. . . in a number of predominantly black boxes, he did not, you know, run among the top vote getters. And this resulted in Arthur having to go into the run off. Now if you followed the run off. . . Arthur was, of course, a

natural winner in the run off. He could not help but win, in my opinion. You had to vote for three people then. I think that according to the white community in Birmingham that Arthur was by far the most acceptable of the blacks running. He was perhaps. . . . Well, let me just say he was, in my opinion, for white voters, the most acceptable person. And he still had a strong base of support in the black community even though some blacks were a bit <sup>disenchanted</sup> ~~disenchanted~~ with Arthur for their own, different reasons and had not voted for him in the other election. So I think Arthur was just a natural. Of all the people running in the run off, he was sure to win a seat. I do not think. . . it was necessary for Arthur to band together with the two white incumbents under the BAG ticket. The advantage of that, I think, was to the other incumbents and not to Arthur Shores. But he did not get as strong support in the general election from blacks as he had got. Even in the run off he did not. He has run strongly in black boxes. I think it all relates back, again, to the Progressive Democratic Council in the first place. And some people, you know, of course. . . some people were perhaps unhappy. . . . They did not feel that Mr Shores had taken the stand he should have taken. Why this came up after serving six or seven years on the council, I don't know. But that's the way the political situation is.

J.B.: The other question related to the aftermath.

Arrington: What was that now?

J.B.: When the vacancy occurred.

Arrington: Well, when the vacancy occurred, some of us pushed for U. W. Clemons and U. W., of course, was the next in line in terms of the number of votes he got. However, met with strong opposition. Most of this was done quietly, but being on the council, being in meetings behind

closed doors, I know about a lot of the opposition that goes on. There was, of course, a lot of opposition to U. W. Clemon. We got letters from white attorneys in this town who were opposed to him. And I don't know, U.W. did not run strongly in the white boxes, even those that are supposed to be liberal in this town. I don't know whether it's because of his image as an attorney who fights segregation cases here or what it is. But he is obviously a very capable young man as was two or three of the black incumbents who ran. Very bright, very able young people. But anyway, when it came down to a vote, when the council began, when we began polling the council on filling the vacancy, U. W. Clemon was more or less eliminated on the first informal poll we took as councilman. He simply did not have enough votes among the members of the council. Now to what extent this is the result of pressure from other people on the council members, I don't know. Because a lot of this kind of thing is done quietly. Many people who might bring pressure, say, to keep U. W. Clemon off the council or to keep council members from voting for U. W. Clemon of course were not coming to me to say it. They would not even bother to say anything to me. I think they feel it would be futile. So, many times when pressure is being applied I never feel it directly. It is applied on council members who, I would assume, support positions taken by certain organizations, organizations in the community. But he did not have the votes. It really came down to a minister. . . . started talking about a black. . . . Rev J. L. Wynne [?], a black minister. And he was sort of in the running. He was more acceptable to members of the city council in the discussions we had than say U. W. Clemon was. Some of the council members, including some who are considered to be liberal, who are generally liberal in their view points, were dissatisfied with the type of race

U. W. Clemons ran. The fact that he criticized the city. They felt that some of the criticism was unjustified. So he was just. . . . He really, in my opinion, only had strong support from about two or three council members when it came to selecting a person. Mr Harring [?], who was a white. . . appointed. . . was more or less a compromise person, candidate. We had sort of deadlocked on people. Rev Ware [Wynn?], on one hand a black minister, and on the other hand a white business man that was considered to be conservative. And we could not break the deadlock. And so Mr Harring was more or less the compromise candidate. He was sort of acceptable to everybody because he's the county Democratic committee chairman and had worked with both groups and had kept more or less low profile. So he was sort of a compromise candidate.

J.B.: What effect do you think it's going to have. . . the increase from three to 15 blacks in the legislature? Both in Jefferson county and state wide.

Arrington: I think it's going to have some significant impact in changing the whole political situation in the state legislature. I think, first of all, it's going to make the state legislature more sensitive to some black concerns and to problems that may relate specifically to black community, but at least the concerns that the black community would have. I think personally that the blacks just going down from Jefferson county will mean that I will be a bit more influential as a local black elected official. I have felt in the past, in dealing with the Jefferson county legislative delegation. . . when we dealt with matters that effected us locally, and of course we have to go to the state legislature for almost everything. We have no home rule. I felt that I could contribute almost nothing to it in trying to deal

with the white legislators from this county. And that if we wanted to get something over, even if it was something that fell under my committee-- I was chairman of my committee--that it did very little good for me to go down and try to deal with these legislators.

J.B.: Which committee was this?

Arrington: The transportation and communication committee. Even when trying to get the bill amended on the transit authority or what have you, I simply felt I did not have enough influence and was not acceptable enough to the white legislators from this district. That will be changed--

J.B.: Did many of those white legislators have the endorsement of the Progressive Democratic?

Arrington: In the past I would suppose quite a number of them have had the endorsement.

J.B.: But even so you didn't find them very responsive?

Arrington: As a black, no. Somehow in this town. . . I don't know how much this has changed now, but because I raised some issues that I felt needed to be raised, particularly police brutality and this kind of thing. . . for some folk, I guess that makes. . . you know, I'm the kind of guy. . . at that time. . . just sort of keep hands off. All I'm saying is that. . . . I'm not saying it was just because I was black. I think maybe Arthur Shores, who is also black, going to the state legislative delegation, I mean the Jefferson county legislative delegation, would have had much more influence as a member of the Progressive Democratic Council and as a recognized black. One who has been in this community all the time. One who's posture is more or less acceptable to whites here. Would have had much more influence. That may mean that he is perhaps a much better politician than I am. But, now

with the blacks in there I will certainly have quite a bit of influence on the legislative delegation. Because most of the blacks elected are friends of mine, people I worked with. I worked in their elections and so forth. So it will have some impact there. Not only for me but for other black locally elected officials. And I think we're going to see some change in the way the legislature does business. Particularly when it comes to matters that relate to blacks or particular concerns of blacks.

J.B.: Do you think this new legislature will result in granting home rule in Alabama?

Arrington: I doubt it. I don't think so. As much as we'd like to have home rule, I don't think so. Even when I look at the Jefferson county delegation, I don't think we're going to see home rule. The push for home rule comes mainly from a city like Birmingham and maybe the largest urban areas. We have a lot of smaller cities that usually sort of gang up on the big cities. The mayors' conference. The mayors from the smaller cities and so forth. And some of these representatives to the state legislature represent not only Birmingham but in some cases, the way our lines are drawn, they also represent some of the smaller cities. And so that is going to serve to sort of minimize some of the strength that Birmingham might wield among the delegation.

J.B.: What's your reaction to those black office holders who endorsed George Wallace?

Arrington: Well, I guess I'm somewhat puzzled by it, to be very honest. I've not talked with the mayor down in Tuskegee, John Ford, about that. Though I've talked with him about a lot of things. Not about that. But I have talked at some length with Jay Cooper, who is a good friend of mine, down in Pritchard. Even up to the recent meeting of the

executive Democratic committee. I'm a member of the executive Democratic committee here in the state. And of course at that meeting Jay came out, of course, endorsing the Wallace slate, so to speak and there was really a fight between the Wallace and the Vance slate for control of the Democratic party. And I've talked with Jay. But I am puzzled by it. You see, people say to me that Mr Wallace of course has changed. I don't know that he has. . . . He has an opportunity to appoint blacks to boards. He still does not do it. You know, recently he made one appointment. He appointed the president of my board here, Dr Simpson, to the ETV board. But Mr Wallace has not appointed blacks to boards though he must make about 1,000 appointments. And he still has not done it. That is not any indication of a man who has changed as far as I'm concerned. Secondly, I look at things like the order handed down by Judge Johnson about hiring black troopers. And Wallace has done everything possible, I think, to sort of serve as an obstacle to that, increasing the number of blacks. The people who support Wallace would argue that. . . and Mr Wallace's supporters also argued . . . . Blacks who endorse him argue and his other supporters argue that if blacks would vote for him and give him some support he in turn would do more for blacks. Of course I guess I'm one of those people who argues that if he wants black votes he ought to do more for blacks. So I guess it's a question of who makes the move first. I do think that if you carefully analyze the predominantly black boxes in this state last time, you're going to find there has been some exaggeration by the news media about the amount of black support Wallace received.

J.B.: Have you done any such analysis or seen any?

Arrington: I've only looked at the brief analysis done by Henry

O. Jackson, on the Birmingham World. He has analyzed several of the

predominantly large black boxes there.

J.B.: What did he come up with?

Arrington: He noted that Wallace got less than 10% of the votes in those boxes.

J.B.: I talked to one person who said he did his own state wide analysis and said 12%. I've heard others say 7.

Arrington: Well, Henry Jackson took what I thought was a good cross section of boxes, black boxes, and on that analysis. . . I remember it was less than 10%. So I do think that's somewhat misleading. I think it's good for Mr Wallace's image, you know, his national image. It is not necessary for him to openly fan the fires of racism any more. Because I don't think there's anybody. . . Wallace is so powerful in Alabama. . . I don't think there's anybody who is really to the right of him or who. . . . I just don't even think he's threatened in terms of losing his political strength. What he had to do, I feel, was to try to slowly pull in more black voters. Carefully do this by not being openly offensive to blacks. But still he has not given up very much in terms of trying to get blacks more involved in the political process.

J.B.: What would he have to do that would indicate to you that he has changed?

Arrington: I think he would have to begin to appoint some blacks to some positions where decisions were made, on boards. I think he would have to begin to do some of that. I think he would have to at least adopt some sort of sensible policy at the state level or encourage or support some sort of sensible policy for increasing black employment. Rather than always appearing to be opposed to it. Or still making it necessary for blacks to have to go to court to try to get employment opportunities

opened up in state agencies. Just about all these things that blacks can point to or Wallace can point to in the way of progress that blacks have made have come not as a result of any leadership from Mr Wallace in this area, any sensible leadership in this area. It has come instead as a result of court action in most of the cases. Mr Wallace. . . in my opinion Mr Wallace and Mr Nixon are very much alike in this respect in their politics. There's not much difference in it except Mr Wallace was once so openly racist that a lot of people that consider themselves to be respectable would not want to openly embrace him. They could not, even though they shared his viewpoints. But they wanted to be respectable, so they couldn't openly embrace a man who was considered national wide--maybe even international in some senses--to be racist. I think Mr Nixon has been able to cloak racism. Give it a cloak of respectability. He would never stand in the school house door, but he certainly is against busing and he certainly has taken some other postures as far as school desegregation goes. He would never say no to hiring blacks, but he's against quotas and so forth and programs that have proved effective in the federal government in increasing the black employment. So it's the same sort of thing but in one place it's sugar coated and the other place it wasn't. Now maybe Mr Wallace is moving more toward the center where he's going to sugar coat what I consider to be his racist view.

J.B.: How would you feel if Wallace were on the Democratic national ticket in '76?

Arrington: I wouldn't be happy about it but I. . . I assume you're talking about in the vice presidential thing. A candidate for vice president. I would support him. I'm much more interested in who is running for president than I am vice president. And I am slowly coming to realize political realities of the situation. I don't always like them. That's

why I assume I will never be a good politician. Some of the compromises I think they call for are sort of unacceptable to me. So I can never be ambitious in that respect, political. But I think I would support it in spite of Mr Wallace, assuming that there's a presidential candidate that I. . . .

J.B.: Would you be interested in attending the convention as a delegate?

Arrington: No, I'm not interested in attending as a delegate. I have become involved over the last couple of years more and more in politics. I ran for the county Democratic executive committee for my district. I ran simply because I want blacks to have more voice. I ran for the state Democratic executive committee for my district. I was successful in both of those races. I don't think that's necessarily good from my own viewpoint. Being a member of the city council, I think that implies enough involvement for me. But I wanted blacks to have increased representation and I felt that I could win those races when no other black in my district could win. So I ran. I think the situation in this state is changing. I think there are a lot of young blacks coming along. We're going to see some of them in the legislature, we're going to see more of them in local government. They're going to be better prepared than blacks have been in the past. And we're going to begin to see the impact of that. We're going to see them more active in party politics. Different executive committees and so forth. This is the way I think it all ought to be. And really I guess I'm more interested in that than I am in anything else. Getting some of the young, capable blacks involved not only on the political scene but involved in Birmingham in terms of who sits on these boards and who sits on these

committees, like the ONB committees. One of the criticisms I had of blacks in this town is that the blacks who have been identified as leaders in this community have not reached out and recruited young, capable blacks. They have not passed leadership on. They have taken the leadership. . . if they have been considered to be leaders, they have taken the leadership and held it close to their chest, so to speak, and I don't think they have always been as responsive as they should be. But the important thing a leader must always do, I think, is reach out and bring into the fold other young, capable people. And this is particularly true of the black community. We must identify young blacks who have that potential. And we must bring them in. And if we don't give them that recognition, there's no way in the world that we can expect the white power structure to give them that recognition. I think we're moving that way and that's what I'm particularly interested in, politically, in civic affairs, and all. But it's a tough row.

J.B.: Do you see the national Democratic party of Alabama remaining a viable force?

Arrington: NDPA? No, I frankly do not. I think NDPA has a few strong holds. How long they will hold on to those in rural Alabama, I do not know. I know <sup>Cashen</sup>~~Cashion~~ well. I've talked with him quite often. But I don't think it's a strong force. I frankly do not. Now I think it played an important role. I think it influenced some of the policies made by the regular Democrats in this state. I think when the NDPA came on the scene and racist, it made the regular Democrats more sensitive to moving to try to include blacks, get blacks involved. But I just don't see in the long run that that's going to be viable.

J.B.: Looking ahead, what black organizations do you project as

having the most political influence in this state? What we understand and keep hearing is that the Alabama Democratic conference remains the strongest single black political organization.

Arrington: That is true. It does and I expect it will continue to be. You see that council, like the Progressive Democratic Council here in Jefferson County, which is an arm of that council, is again the only organization here that really has an organization or anything like a machine. In that it is owned and organized. When I look at the council here in Jefferson county, it's the only group in this county that's organized and has bloc captains, precinct captains, house units and all this. And I see a lot of people. . . and I meet with a lot of young black folk who are concerned and the young. . . including most of those who have just been elected to the state legislature. . . who have been dissatisfied with what the council has done and dissatisfied with the Democratic Conference, Joe Reed's group. But being dissatisfied is one thing. Then getting out there, organizing. . . . You know, being dissatisfied and complaining is one thing. And cussing them and saying what they're not doing. But to get out and organize. To do something about your dissatisfaction, say, is still another thing. And that is what we have not done. I think that the Democratic Conference headed by Joe Reed will still be the single most powerful political group here. I think however, as was indicated in the last meeting we had with the conference, that the conference is likely to undergo some changes. It's likely to be not quite as. . . well, I don't want to say conservative because it has not been conservative but. . . it's going to share some of its decision making power. A part of the criticism that the conference has been subjected to is that all of the decisions are

usually made by small groups of folk. Mainly Joe Reed, Arthur Shores, David Hood, about four or five people make all the decisions. For example, on the state level and the state Democratic party, there are three seats, at large seats by the conference itself. Three blacks are appointed. We have to have a mechanism whereby there is input, particularly by elected officials and others who are Democrats in this state as to who those three will be, rather than letting the decision be made by three or four people.

J.B.: How much potential is there for there to develop a strong black elected officials association? I understand one exists but that it is not particularly strong at this time.

Arrington: It is not particularly strong. It is fragmented. I don't know. The extent to which we can do that will depend on the response we get from groups like Joe Reed's. I mean it this way. When there were no black elected officials, none to make mention of, a very small number, the Progressive Democratic Council. . . that's not the group, the Democratic Conference which Joe Reed heads up, was certainly in a very strong position because it provided the only black political leadership there was in this state. With more and more blacks being elected to office, blacks do have somewhere else to look for leadership. They don't have to look just to that conference or just to the Progressive Democratic Council. And I think that Joe Reed and the Progressive Democratic Council and all of those of us who work with it, we have got to realize that. That we have got to give some consideration to the fact that there are a large number of black elected officials and they were elected in most cases mainly by the black vote and that they do then hold some claim to being, providing some black leadership. And that they ought to be doing it. Now if they might come together to do this,

I think they would undoubtedly be the strongest group. However, I think you're going to find that some of the black elected officials are very pro Alabama Democratic Conference and some are sort of anti. And as long as you've got that kind of fragmentation, the black elected officials will not be strong as a group. But we got a new group of black elected officials going to the state legislature.

J.B.: They're mostly younger people.

Arrington: Yeah, they're young and many of them have some anti Democratic Conference feeling. And it stems mainly from the fact that they feel two or three people have run it and have not shared the decision making power. Now we have got to respond to that and if we respond to it in a positive manner by saying that we are inclusive, by reaching out to bring these folk in and not send them back saying "We're here and if you want to be a part, come on in. We got it." You know. If we respond. . . and I said this to Joe Reed, I said it to the whole group when we met at the house just before the state Democratic executive committee meeting. If we intend to be representative, to continue to be representative, we have got to reach out and make sure these people know that they are welcome. That they can participate, that they can have something to say about what goes on.

J.B.: Is the main conflict an age. . . old vs young?

Arrington: Yeah, but I don't think it stems from that directly. I think it's related more to the way some of the older members think. They are more conservative. This is not unusual.

J.B.: Do you see yourself in a position to play a middle man role in that?

Arrington: I would like to be. I would like to be in that position

more than any other I can think of. I would like to be. I don't know

if I can do that at this time. On the political scene I guess people have suspicions about everybody who runs for political office. Some people feel, I'm sure, that my major interest is. . . every politician's main interest is to keep moving up. I don't have any political ambitions of that sort. I'm not running for [mayor] contrary to what people say. That does not mean I may not one day run for mayor. Does not mean I won't run in '75, though at this time I have no intentions of running. I try to analyze things and be realistic. I don't know, all I'm saying is that I'd like to play that role. I have tried, to some extent, to play that role. I am, I believe, more acceptable to--

[End of tape. End of interview.]