

This is an interview with Johnny Ford, mayor of Tuskegee, Alabama, conducted in Tuskegee on July 11, 1974 by Jack Bass and Walter De Vries. Transcribed by Sarah Geer.

Jack Bass: I wonder if you could just give us briefly a little bit about your own background. I understand you grew up in Tuskegee.

Johnny Ford: Yeah. Why don't I just give you a resume on background?

J.B.: Fine. And you were involved in Robert Kennedy's presidential campaign, is that correct?

Ford: Yeah. I worked in New York City for about I went to New York City in 1964 and worked for the Boy Scouts of America. Through scouting I met Robert Kennedy and Beth Steiveson. I worked with Earl Graves, who was an administrative assistant. And when he announced his candidacy he asked me to join his staff, New York City staff, and to also work on his campaign at the And I worked in advance strategy. normally perceived the senator in the primaries, Indiana, Nebraska, Oregon, California, of course, New York, the one that never came off. Campaign got us out across the country.

J.B.: Why did you decide to come back here?

Ford: Like many young people who grow up in the South, the illusion about you want to get away, go up North, other places. I was basically felt the same idea and concept. But while in New York and away from the South I always had that deep-down feeling that I wanted to come back home. It was a feeling. And finally, after the senator's death, it really

(Interruption in recording.) . . . the senator's death, you know, it kind of really took the interest out of it. And then, of course, we went to work for Vice-President Humphrey and Muskie ticket. And, of course, after that unfortunate defeat in November of '68, I guess, I came back home for Christmas. And during that vacation I was offered a position here as Model Cities director, and I saw that as a chance to really get away from it. I just really thought, for a while, maybe, I would get away for a while. But, you know, I had . . . this is home for me, growing up here. I kind of went to New York to learn some things and get some experience, and when I got them I wanted to come on back here and put them to work. So I came back in February of 1969. I've been back ever since. About . . . we worked about two years here as Model Cities director, developing plans to improve the city, physically, socially and economically. Most of the plans that we're carrying out now in our administration are plans that we were able to develop some four or five years ago through our planning staff. But that was a rewarding experience. And after getting the plans developed and getting our program funded, I went into . . . got involved more actively in politics and helping some of the other local blacks get elected, working in their various campaigns. And I worked briefly with the United States Department of Justice, for about a year, to get some experience inside the federal government and find out how it works. And finally I resigned from that post to run for mayor in April of '72.

J.B.: What'd you do for the Justice Department?

Ford: I was the state supervisor for the state . . . for the community relations service. As you know, that agency grew out of the civil rights act of 1964. And our basic role was to try to bring about voluntary

compliance with federal law, working with other agencies of government, other agencies within the Justice Department, through local

J.B.: What year was that?

Ford: '71 and '72. We were headquartered in Montgomery to serve the state. But basically that's it. I ran for mayor and . . . well, I guess I announced my candidacy in April, '72. The election was in August. August 12, '72. We had a run-off, and the final election was September 12, I think. Was sworn in on October 7 . . . (Interruption in recording.) You ask the questions, all right?

J.B.: Is mayor a full time job here?

Ford: Yes. We are a mayor-council form of government. The mayor and council members are elected at large, serve four year terms, and it's called a strong mayor form of government. The mayor presides at city council governmental meetings. In the case of a tie he has a second vote in order to always keep government functioning. It is a full time job for mayor. Serves as mayor, chief executive, chief administrative officer and budget officer for the city, as well as superintendant of our utility system. We own our own water, electricity . . . water, sewer and electrical system. Annual budgets from all departments, including our utility system, is about six million dollars a year, and we have about two hundred and seventy, seventy-five employees, so it's a full time job.

J.B.: What's the population?

Ford: About twelve thousand. Aerial view of our city is kind of spread out. We're a college town. Tuskegee Institute. And we have a very large Veteran's Administration hospital. About twelve thousand.

J.B.: So far, have you been able to do as mayor what you wanted to?

Ford: Not all of the things. We have been able to make a good start, I think. Our priorities have been industrial and commercial development. As I indicated to you earlier, the things that we started planning four years ago, we found it wise to get elected mayor in order to be able to carry out those plans, and make them, you know, a reality. Economic development, as I indicated, has been our priority. Heretofore, the city had not been able to get industrial expansion. All cities and counties in the state of Alabama, except Tuskegee, have been able . . . have not been interested in industry. So we've done some things industry-wise. We've got nine million dollars of new industry under construction and being developed. That'll mean two or three thousand jobs for common people. We feel that is a significant break-through,=developing a million dollar airport which will do much to help us aviation-wise. We've worked with a local corporation here, Economic Development Corporation, to develop a . . . the first black owned and managed Holiday Inn, which will be the first of a series of hotel-motel facilities which will be needed when Congress designates Tuskegee Institute as a national historical site for black education and accomplishment. We have been working on that a long time, Tuskegee Institute being the home of Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver. We anticipate, once it becomes a national shrine, some fifty or sixty thousand tourists. Tourism is big business, and that's one area we really hope to pursue. Some of the other things that we've been able to do over the last year is we've got a half million dollar industrial park that's under construction now. Been able to build about four million dollars in . . . well, about seven million dollars in total, in new public housing for low income people. Some of them are still

under construction. Others have been completed. We have a . . . we are in the process now of developing a 5.2 million dollar sewage disposal system, which will enable our city to grow from twelve thousand to fifteen thousand, in the future. We are in the process of developing a ninety acre city lake to a recreational spot for tourism and things of that sort. In addition to that, programs for health, social services. Programs for the mentally retarded. Day care programs, recreational programs. Expand our police department. All of these kind of things, we've had some success. Over the last year and a half, under this administration, we've been able to attract about twelve million dollars in federal programs, and state programs as well. We've been able to attract quite a bit of resources. We're well on our way, I think, in accomplishing some of the things that we set out to do. There're still an awful lot to do. You'll never be able to do all that you want to do, and I think that one of the most rewarding things about this whole effort is being able to ride around in your town and see folks who, a year ago, were hanging out on the corner jobless, now are tax-paying citizens who afford their own homes and take care of their own families and meet their responsibilities. Who have jobs and have dignity. It's kind of what it's all about. Our priority has been economic development for our people, and these new industries. Had about a couple million, oh, about three million dollars in new shopping areas have developed. The new shopping areas have done much to keep money in town, and also it creates some new jobs. These things have helped a lot. Also, I think what we've tried to do is bring about some attitudinal changes to instill some pride in all of our citizens, black or white. To try to be the kind of government which will be responsive

to the needs of all of our citizens, and particularly those who are poor and disadvantaged, who have traditionally not had government being responsive to their needs. So I think that we have brought about some attitudinal change, as well, from the standpoint that we've tried to be a fair government to all of our people. I think that has done much to cause many of our people to work . . . to want to work closer together and . . . Of course, we have our problems like all other cities. I think we've made some starts.

Walter De Vries: Were the expectations of the blacks . . . how have you been able to meet those, in terms of public services?

Ford: Well . . .

W.D.V.: Is there any gap between the expectation and what you've been able to perform in the last eighteen months?

Ford: I think we've been able to exceed expectations. At least, that's what people say. I don't know. I've learned to say I'm not really satisfied. (?) But, of course, you always have that feeling where some people expect black elected officials to do more than what a white one would be expected to do. Of course, you sometimes have to do that in order to satisfy people. But I've come to learn you can't satisfy everybody anyway, so you just do as best as you can. And as far as really meeting expectations, I think that we have been able, in this administration, to deal with the fact that it's been a full time administration. And we've been able to solve problems. We've been able to give better services. You know, you name it, whether it's picking up the trash or keeping the streets clean, or police protection, fire protection, programs for the elderly, programs for the children, paving streets, putting up four hundred

new street lights, medical services, a new public health center, you know. I think that's what people can see and feel are improvements in the quality of services. I think that . . . I grew up in this town, and I can remember a lot of . . . I can remember when only a small section of the city received services. But now, that's not our policy. Our policy is to provide services as they're needed, regardless of what the community is or who's involved. So I think that it's not for me to say whether or not we've been able to meet the expectations. I think that only time will tell, as for how the people themselves feel. But I personally think we . . . our city now . . . I know one thing. It's costing us much more to run the city than what it did, because of increasing costs of delivering services. So, I don't know. I don't know whether or not we are really expectations.

W.D.V.: Are you paying for the increasing cost by additional property taxes? Have you had to raise taxes?

Ford: Well, the state of Alabama is doing, in general, is re-appraising all property, and county government handles that. They handle the ad valorem tax structure in Alabama.

W.D.V.: What's your tax base?

Ford: And we just get a portion of it. Our tax structure . . . base, is based primarily upon privilege license . . . occupational taxes. Well, privilege license, for business to operate on. Water and sewer and electrical fees which people pay for services. We get some from beverages, alcoholic beverages. Taxes from . . . basically, in Alabama, municipalities rely upon their privilege taxes. Of course, we get some ad valorem tax, beverages, utility fees. Those are basically it as far as taxes are . . .

sales tax.

W.D.V.: Have you had to raise those in the last two years?

Ford: We have . . . yeah, we've changed our . . . we've made an adjustment in our privilege license, which had been . . . had not been adjusted in, say, five or six years. We've levied a tobacco tax, I think. We plan to charge . . . we plan to change our tax structure on to . . . on the method of taxation on the wholesalers right now. The wholesalers are charged a flat fee. We're going to do it, in the future we're going to deal with it on a percentage of their gross. We have not had to raise an awful lot of taxes. We made some tax adjustments. Things like revenue sharing have helped us some, and federal grants. We . . . as I indicated, Macon County is a community of some \$26,000 and approximately \$50,000,000 in federal resources come in here each year. Per capita, percentage wise, that's one of . . . we are one of the highest federally supported communities of the nation. And because of these various federal programs for . . . you know, for recreation, for transportation, for health, and for social services, consequently we have been able to do some things that most communities have not been able to do for their citizens, because we have aggressively sought these federal resources. However, we have had to make some tax adjustments. Revenue sharing has helped us some. We get about a quarter of a million dollars a year in revenue sharing, which supplements our city budget some. But, by and large, we have not had to raise our present taxes a lot.

W.D.V.: What proportion, say, of the Macon County budget is federal, state and local ?

Ford: Our utility budget is about 1.5. General government is about 1. . . . about 1.5, too, I guess. General government. And our federal programs is

about two million, okay? So out of six million would come a third of it. Our federal . . . our city is a Model City, just like Raleigh, you know, and Durham. Well, Raleigh is a Model City, so that consequently we have been asking about two million dollars a year, and we get it from HUD. And, of course, we use that money to match other various grants. But operational-wise, we get about two million dollars from the federal government. Now, there are other programs, as I indicated, which come from various agencies, such as day care, such as health programs, which . . . we take that two million and we match, you know . . . some of the grants are fifty-fifty, some are twenty-five-seventy-five, and we kind of stretch it out that way. But we average about two million dollars a year that we've kept for operational purposes from HUD for our federal programs. So I guess we would kind of include that in as

W.D.V.: So at least a third is federal? That'd be about/the highest in the country, wouldn't it?

Ford: Percentage-wise

W.D.V.: For operational

Ford: Percentage-wise, as I indicated to you, percentage-wise, and per capita, we do have . . . I don't know , probably the highest federal support of any community. And it's not because we're getting any special favors from the government. Simply because five years ago we started developing an aggressive program development team. And with our man in Washington's service, what we do is, as soon as they discover the resources available, we get our proposals ready, we get our applications in, and if the money's made available we're there. It's just kind of aggressive seeking of resources to meet your needs. There're some sixteen . . . well, there were about thirteen hundred domestic programs available, so we just kind of have What we've done is, I have

on my staff, planning and development staff, which in turn works with planners and developers within the major agencies in the city. The Health Department, Welfare Department, Tuskegee Institute. And the planners, you know, they all work together and coordinate, and they develop programs and they channel everything through City Hall and we stay right on top of it. But the whole grantsmanship game has been one of where those cities who get their applications in . . . well, all cities have problems, I mean, you know. All towns have problems. It's just a question of working and getting your proposals in and following up on them, so that . . . that's the only way you can get things done. Federal government, you know, is . . . you know, the system just has/works^{not}. It's just too slow and it's just too archaic, and therefore, you know, we don't get all of our programs funded, but we just . . . we apply for so much, you know, just about everything . . . that we get a pretty good percentage.

J.B.: If you apply for a program, and then you . . . when you're working on trying to get funding approved, who do you work through in Washington? The senators or the congressmen? Is it Stanley Scott? How do you operate on that base?

Ford: Stan. Before Stan, Bob Brown. But Stan's is our man in Washington, from the standpoint that He has been invaluable, Stan and John Calhoun of the staff, has been invaluable as far as following up and helping us get various programs through. And simply what they do is if we run into some kind of a problem with a various agency, they don't necessarily use their clout, but they try to offer service from the standpoint of trying to work with the agencies, that minorities and communities can get their programs through. And to see that . . . they also are there to make sure that our

programs are treated fairly. As I indicated earlier, we don't receive any special favors. All we do is . . . we just have been getting the same type of recognition and the same type of results that white communities have been getting all this time. There was a time when some communities got things funded and other communities couldn't, so now it's a question of treating everybody fair, treating everybody on an equal basis. Our concept is if everything is going to be called . . . if the shots are going to be called on a fair and judicial basis, then we don't worry, we'll get our share. It's just that simple. But Stan Scott has been invaluable. Also, we have a man in Washington service, John Dingle Associates, who have offices in Washington and they follow up on our various proposals and our programs, and they're there to help walk them through. And our planners here work with them in Washington. They handle that end of it.

W.D.V.: Is that the congressman from Detroit?

Ford: No, no,,no, no. This is a private firm that we have . . . our man in Washington service.

W.D.V.: But they represent you before the federal government?

Ford: Yeah, yeah. We have a contract with them to be our man . . . called the Man in Washington Service. What they do is, they kind of follow up on our programs, you know, when we submit. And they walk them through. They're there if something has to be changed. There's no nonsense of sending it back down here. They're there on the scene, kind of thing. In addition to that, we have very close working relationships with our delegation. Senator Sparkman, Senator Jim Allen, our Congressman Nickels, and all the congressmen in the Alabama delegation. Of course, we keep . . . when we run into any problems, it's just a question of picking up the phone and . . . and their staffs as

well. We work as a team with their staffs of our congressional delegations as well. So it's a combined effort. We try to explore every effort to try to , you know, to try to win when it comes to getting resources for our community. And, really, that's what it's all about.

J.B.: How do you compare with other cities and counties getting state appropriations? Non-restricted funds?

Ford: Non-restricted?

J.B.: Non-restricted. In other words, for instance, the general fund. How do you compare with other people in getting appropriations? Aren't most of the state appropriations already earmarked?

Ford: Well, as you know, most of them are. However, they have discretionary grants as well, especially when it comes to revenue sharing. The governor spends that the way he wants to, really. But I'd say, even with state resources, we also share a high degree of success. We have developed a very good working relationship with the governor's office and state government. Here again, agencies . . . to give you an example, some of the programs we, you know, programs like day care, mentally retarded, recreational programs, law enforcement programs, right down the list. Here again, it's taking the same kind of initiative at the state level. First thing we did was develop a good working relationship with the governor and his staff. And, you know, when I was first elected mayor I went to see the governor, and the thing that I talked to him about was that I wanted to see that Tuskegee got its fair share of resources. I wanted Tuskegee to get everything that other towns get, and are entitled to. I wanted our city to be treated fairly. And that's exactly what has happened over the last couple of years. As I indicated, though, we have been able to get more than our share, not because of any special favors

but because of, you know, being aggressive and being there on the scene. As you know . . . I'll give you an example of what I'm talking about. The fiscal year ended June 30. Well, you know, the last two weeks of June we were able to get eight out of ten programs funded, you know, because many agencies, at the last minute they have money left over, they don't know what to do with it. And so, you know, some cat calls you up and say, "Hey, man, there's so much, so if you get an application in tomorrow you'll have it, you know." So keep tooled up for that thing. Just in the last two months of June, you know, we got funding for the EPA, funding from Action, from mental health, you know. Eight out of ten grants we just developed overnight. So, I . . . we do . . . as I indicated, we still are not satisfied. There's still an awful lot that must be done, and can be got. So we're trying to continue to improve our relationship with the state government, try to do more of that.

J.B.: When you met with the governor after you were elected, was that your first meeting with him?

Ford: Yeah. I . . . I met with the governor in, I guess, November of '6 . . . I mean, of '72. First time I had had a meeting with him.

J.B.: What was his response?

Ford: Very, very . . . I just . . . very amiable. Very cordial. And out of that first meeting we developed a very good friendship, very good working relationship with his staff out there. So out of that first meeting it has gone to a good relationship.

J.B.: You worked . . . you said you worked in the Humphrey-Muskie campaign in '68 but you endorsed Nixon in '72. Is that . . . am I correct on that?

Ford: Oh, yeah. Right.

J.B.: What was the basis of that?

Ford: The basis for my endorsement of the president was, number one, I was part of the administration, as I indicated to you earlier. I worked for United States Department of Justice, so I was a part of the administration. While serving as a part of the administration, I had a chance to become knowledgeable of the various programs that were available. In particular, programs which would benefit minority communities. So therefore my decision was one based upon the fact that there was some good programs presented by the administration, and it was just a question of knowing how to get to them and be able to carry them out. Secondly, I made the decision because the Democratic candidate was not, you know, it's no reflection on him, just not my cup of tea, not my choice. And so it was a practical decision, really. It wasn't an emotional one. Of the two candidates I'm a fellow who, when it comes to parties, I don't have strong party lines. I'm a Democrat, but I'm more concerned about individuals, in most instances, platforms. Especially when I make decisions becomes politics, I sometimes do what I think is in the best interest of my community. So, basically, I supported the administration. And it was more so the administration than the president. I don't . . . I've never had a close working relationship with the president. I don't know the president. I've come to know him since, but before I endorsed him, it was just a question of my supporting the administration which I had been a part of. Of course, none of us were familiar with Watergate, any of those things, at that point. I was working as a part of the administration. We didn't realize any of those things existed at that point. But, it's a decision I made, you know. I made it. I'm not sorry I did it. I did what I thought was in the best interests of

my community at that particular time.

J.B.: And then this year, you endorsed Governor Wallace.

Ford: Right.

J.B.: And received some criticism.

Ford: Yeah.

J.B.: What was your . . . what's your response to criticism?

Ford: Well, you're going to receive criticism whatever you do, so I don't worry too much about that. My philosophy is, you do what you think is right, you do what you think is right in your heart. People can't respect your right to differ, right to do what you think is right, you know, I feel sorry for anybody who has that kind of a concept. But as I've said, the decision for me to vote for Governor Wallace for re-election was not a hard one for me, because of the candidates running - they were all white - of the candidates running, I felt he was the best qualified. I think that ought to be a rule of thumb when you vote or select a candidate. Secondly, over the last couple of years, in working as mayor of this city with the governor of this state, he has been fair. He has been judicious. Our city has gotten everything any other city had, that traditionally had not been the case in Alabama. 'Cause I know for every county in Alabama got industry and everything, except Macon County and Tuskegee. But over the last couple of years, the governor has been fair and judicious to our city. And that's all I can ask of any governor. Thirdly, I feel that, under the leadership of Governor Wallace, with his national stature, Alabama will get its fair share of federal resources and private resources. That's important, because if Alabama gets its share, more than its share, then Tuskegee is going to get its share. And, you know, so that's another rationale. And the final

one is that I don't always support the party or the candidates, but I'm a Democrat. I felt, certainly, that the governor will be the Democratic nominee and this particular time I intended to support the Democratic nominee. When it comes to politics, you know, I don't believe in being naive. It's a very practical thing as far as I'm concerned. In the final analysis, too, there's some things that I've got to do for my city and my people, and I need the governor's help. If . . . and he has demonstrated to me that he intends to be the governor of all the people. He still has a long way to go, in my opinion, but I think he's moving in the right direction. There're those who talk about the past. Well, you don't have to lecture to me about the past. I grew up in the civil rights movement. This is Tuskegee. I grew up here. I was going to demonstrations and marches and protests when I was ten years old, with my parents. So I grew up in the movement. As a college kid I protested and marched. So I . . . when it comes to it, I paid as much dues as anybody else in this country. But the point is, some of us have got to concentrate on the past, yet others must also concentrate on the future. I'd rather concentrate on the future, making Alabama and the South the kind of place where my children, and your children, can live in peace and harmony. And it's these kinds of things that you, you know, you just have to do what you think is right. Criticism. I ain't going to worry about getting criticized. You know, there are people right here in my city who don't understand many of the things I do. That's why the things that I do and decisions I make, I make them . . . these are personal decisions. It would have been, you know . . . just like my decision to vote for the governor was not a decision that I tried to go out and influence everybody else to

vote for the governor. Simply my decision, and I told people why I did it. Now, I wouldn't expect the man on the corner, or everybody, to understand that or do what I did, because what I do I do for a reason. I do what I think is necessary to insure the orderly progress of my city. And, you know . . . so criticism, you know, don't worry about criticism. In the final analysis it'll all pan out. I think that all of us who are involved in this whole effort are trying to bring about justice and equality for our people, we must pursue it from it various strategies. Some of us pursue it through the courts, or through education, through marching and picketing and demonstrating. Some of us must do it through politics. I've chosen the art of politics, trying to bring about change.

J.B.: How would you feel if George Wallace were elected president?

Ford: I think that's . . . I . . . I'm a fellow who does not give out his comments very easily. I have no comment on the presidential race at this particular point. I think that at the appropriate time I will be able to share my views with you, at this particular point. My number one choice as president, however, since you raise the question, is Edward Brooke.

My second choice would be Edward Kennedy. I wouldn't care to go in for . . . (?)

J.B.: The . . . how do you respond . . . this is criticism other people make of you. I'm just raising it as a question. But, you know, how do you respond to the criticism that, in effect, you've been charged - and I'm sure you've heard it - being opportunistic. You know, that you allowed George Wallace to use you to further his national ambitions in return for getting favorable treatment by the state and programs?

Ford: Well, as I indicated to you earlier, people are going to say what they want to say, and, especially the press, you know, the way they slant things.

I think that it's politicians, particularly blacks, in the political game, we must be wise enough to see opportunities, if you want to call it that. I need Governor Wallace's help to do what I've got to do for my city. If you call it opportunistic, so be it. As I've indicated to you earlier, what my reasons were for voting for the governor, that's that. And, you know, if anybody want to call it opportunistic, that's fine. But I think that in the final analysis . . . let me just say, in the final analysis, that there are a lot of people all over this country, especially, you know, you've got militants, black militants, up in New York and Chicago, and then you've got pseudo-liberal whites, who . . . do-gooders, who think they're the savior of black folks, who stand up and preach about what they're going to do to save poor black folks down in Alabama. And every time they talk about bad things in this country, Alabama is used as a whipping boy. It's the epitome of what's bad in this country. And I say to those pseudo-liberals and militants and whatever the hell else you want to call them, that like, man, you ought to take care of the problems up in New York and Chicago. We'll take care of problems in Alabama. 'Cause in the final analysis, some of us in Alabama are black and some of us are white, and we're going to differ, but in the final analysis we're all Alabamians, and I think that in the final analysis, it's the people of Alabama - both black and white - who are willing to put aside their differences, their bigotry and their hatred, and to work together, we're going to turn Alabama around and make it the kind of place where all of us can live in peace and harmony. So, you know, I don't worry too much about what the people say. You have to make up in your mind what you think is most important, and what's most important to me is being able to deliver the jobs and houses and resources for my people, rather than what

somebody say and the criticism. That's my gratification. That's the ego trip that I get out of it, being able to look into the eyes of a youngster knowing that he's got food to eat. You know. These are the gratifications that I get out of it. If you want to say that Governor Wallace is using me, well, I'm trying to use him as well. But, you know, you get called an Uncle Tom and, you know, you don't mind that. Booker T. Washington was known as one of the biggest Uncle Toms that ever lived. I feel that he had a good philosophy, and I'm trying to I think I admire his philosophy moreso than anyone else. Kind of pattern myself after him. But, you know

W.D.V.: What about the argument, though, that what the blacks need right now is political unity? What you've done is help break up unity which is needed in order to be politically effective.

Ford: I think that when you say "unity," what blacks are beginning to realize . . . what blacks are beginning to realize and what a lot of folks don't give them credit for is that we as a people have to unify around issues. And those issues are resources and improving the quality of life for our people. Now, we don't have to unify around strategy, or tactics, as I have said to you, that there are many ways, as long as we are unified around the objective of trying to bring about justice and equality for our people, then we are learning just like all other folks in this country. The white folks ain't unified when it comes to issues. They use all kind of different strategies. And I think that black folks . . . I don't know who you all have been talking to, but black people are waking up in this country. A lot of them are realizing that we can't all come out of the same bag. Whoever the governor of this state is, somebody black has got to be in a position to relate to that man. We can't wait four years from now, till

my candidate, so to speak, gets elected. I don't give a damn who . . . who is governor or who is president or who is in control. Black people in this country, just like all other minorities and all other people in this country, must be able to have somebody who can relate to those candidates. Now, just . . . for example, all over the state, man, we get calls in here from various people. "Hey, talk to the governor for me about this, and we're trying to get this for our community." You know, and some cat. So I say, "Well, why don't you talk to him yourself, man. If you need it for your community, go talk to him." "Well, you know how that would look. You know, that's not. . . ." Well, what kind of . . . ? I think that's kind of hypocritical. I think those of us who are in a position of leadership have a responsibility to deliver goods and services for our community. So when you talk about unity, I think that in the final analysis, our people - like all other people in this country - are going to realize that we have to unify around issues, common issues, which affect our people. And we're talking about hunger and poverty in this country, you know, and these are issues that affect black folks. Don't give a damn whether I'm a Democrat or a Republican. Don't care if I'm a liberal or a militant. Unemployment, poor houses, the need for jobs, health care and diseases which are taking the lives of These are common problems. And around this issues I think we as a people have to unify. And I think that's . . . you know, some people aren't going to ever see it that way. There it is. That's the way I feel about it.

J.B.: Let me ask you this. In both cases of Nixon in '72 and Wallace in '74 , you had candidates who the majority of blacks in Alabama opposed. You also had candidates who, by almost . . . there was a pretty much general political concensus, were assured of victory. If there had been serious,

questionable opposition to either one, could that have affected your position?

Ford: Oh, that depends. As I indicated, if you think I'm politically naive . . . I don't know all about politics. I've just been in it for . . . well, I haven't been in it that long. But when it comes to politics, I try to look at a situation objectively, from an open mind. I told you what my reasons were for supporting the administration . . . (Interruption in tape. Side two.) . . . concerned, we've been working with . . . I . . . myself and our staff, we've been working for the governor for the last year or two, so when you got you . . . you know, I made up my mind a year ago, that in my opinion he's the best candidate for the post. Hell, that's that. It's no big thing. I mean, everybody blew it up to be a big thing. Especially when under the last administration, everybody in Alabama, all . . . you can check the record, all counties, and didn't get any industry or anything of that sort, and I went to the man and said, "Hey, man, want you to be fair to my town, just like everybody else." And that's what we got. We've got . . . you know, you don't worry about what politicians say. You worry about more . . . be more concerned about what they do, what they act, what they deliver. And so, it's just two examples, you know. So you can call it whatever you like, or surmise into it whatever you like.

J.B.: You talked about . . . you said that you basically accept the philosophy of Booker T. Washington. What . . . how do you express that philosophy? How do you characterize it?

Ford: Well, I think, you know, Booker T. Washington was known as an Uncle Tom from the standpoint of . . . you know, he wasn't very militant. He believed in working within the system. He believed in winning concessions

for his community. He was production oriented. He didn't preach violence or hatred or bigotry. He didn't preach racism. He encouraged good working relationships between all mankind. His philosophy was, "Cast down your buckets where you are." And he said to white people in the South, "Don't look to the north for outside resources to be . . . save you and to invest all your resources in." He said to black people in the South, "Don't run to the north or to the east and look to the north for your salvation." He said to both races, "Cast down your buckets where you are." "Let's work together and try to build a new South, a land for all of us, our people, to live in." And I think that's . . . basically, I . . . my philosophy is that there is some good in every man, and I try to look at it from a positive standpoint. There're a lot of shortcomings that people have. I think that there're also a glot of good in all people. And I think that . . . I just believe and have faith in human nature, that people in this country can solve their problems. And I think that they can^{be} solved around the table. I think they can be solved man to man, looking one another in the eye and dealing with them head on. Booker T. Washington's philosophy was to . . . to reach out and to work with and to try to help your fellow man. And, you know, that's really what we're trying to do in Tuskegee, to carry on that concept which he started so many years ago of reaching out and trying to get resources in here. To combine them with outside resources and local resources. Develop our town into the kind of community where we can all be proud of. And the kind of a town that can solve its problems. Solving problems is more or less what we are dedicated to here, trying to . . .

J.B.: Growing up in Tuskegee, did you become . . . in the process, was that becoming familiar with Booker T. Washington and his philosophy, or did that

come later when you were at college?

Ford: Well, we all . . . I grew up here, and went to school here . . .

J.B.: I know you did.

Ford: . . .up here, so I guess

J.B.: You went to school at the Institute?

Ford: No, I went to college at Knoxville College.

J.B.: I know, but at public schools here, was there an affiliation with . . . ?

Ford: Yeah. Tuskegee Institute High School. But I guess, you know, I was a youngster, you know. I don't guess I really realized what Booker T.

Washington was talking about too much, later, really, I guess. But, well, I mean, all of men have some good concepts. Booker T. Washington, Marcus

Garvey, DeBois. You know, all of them had some good

J.B.: But where did you study about that? Was that at college, or later in New York?

Ford: It was in college, mostly, I guess.

J.B.: You went to college where? Fisk?

Ford: Knoxville College, Knoxville, Tennessee. But, you know, black history is studied in college.

J.B.: What was your major?

Ford; Political science and history. I really was planning to go into law, but when I finished college didn't have any money, so I went to New York.

But, anyway, I don't know. I think he has a good philosophy. All of these . . .

a lot of these . . . Malcolm X. has some good points. Elijah Mohammed had some good points.

. Of course, my greatest inspiration, I think, was Dr. Martin Luther King's philosophy of non-violence, and believing and fighting for justice and equality through non-violent effort.

I think that was very, very moving and inspirational leadership, not only for me but for a lot of black people in this country. Whites as well, I think. But, anyway, you know, there it is.

W.D.V.: Are there any recognizable statewide black political leaders?

Ford: Oh, yeah. In Alabama? Oh, yeah, man, we are blessed. We have Thomas Reed here, who is our black state legislator. Of course, you have A. J. Cooper, the mayor of Prichard, Alabama. Incidentally, we have eight mayors who are black in the state of Alabama. Of course, Dr. John Cashon, who is chairman of the national Democratic party of Alabama. He's not an elected official, but he, you know, he's head of NDPA.

J.B.: Are they still a viable force?

Ford: Huh?

J.B.: Are they still a viable force?

Ford: Well, you know, yeah. In Greene County and some . . . it provides us with an out, you know. For example, if we can't win the Democratic nomination, then we can always get on the NDPA. It has been very effective in that particular vein. And, of course, you remember the success that they won in Greene County. Yeah, I'd say they still are a viable force. And, of course, Joe Reed, chairman of the Alabama Democratic Conference. Here, again, he's not an elected official, but he has quite a bit of political clout in the state. But I think that Alabama has its share of astute black politicians. I think we compare favorable with other states.

J.B.: Is there any active association of black elected officials in Alabama?

Ford: Yes. We have . . . well, we have . . . there is an association of the black elected officials in Alabama, for which Thomas Reed, from Tuskegee, is president. And we also have the Alabama Conference of Black Mayors. The

eight of us have formed a conference which I co-chair. And the purpose of that is to . . . of our conference, to work together as mayors on common problems facing our community. Try to get . . . work together to get additional federal and state resources, deal with other problems that we have. This Alabama Conference of Black Mayors was instrumental in setting up a Southern Conference of Black Mayors, which consists of some fifty . . . well, it's about sixty black mayors now, throughout the South. So those are the basic . . . and, of course, the Alabama League of Municipalities is, you know, which is affiliated with the National League of Cities and U. S. Conference of Mayors. I serve on the executive committee of the Alabama League of Municipalities, which, of course, is made up . . . well, it's made up of mayors and city councilmen from over 350 municipalities in this state. And that is probably the state's most powerful elected officials organization.

J.B.: Do you anticipate there'll be a growing role of the Black Elected Officials Association? Particularly when you're getting . . . you know, the number of legislators are increasing, what, from three to fifteen.

Ford: Most definitely. They Because, you know, we as black elected officials, we have common problems. We're so new at this business of being elected officials, we You know, we have to come together and share our problems and try to learn from each other so that when we go out and compete with the white boys we can kind of have our stuff together. But I think that these associations have great . . . I don't, you know, I don't foresee the purpose of the associations being, you know, a racist group or anything of this sort. I . . . you know, that's not the purpose of them as I see it. The purpose is, as I've indicated, since we're so new at this business to really come together and learn from each other. Yeah, I think the associations

will grow. And then, of course, you know . . . within . . . we have the National Black Local Elected Officials, which, in essence, is a caucus, a black caucus, within the National League of Cities and the U. S. Conference of Mayors. Of course, in Alabama we have a black caucus within the Alabama League of Municipalities, all the black mayors and city councilmen.

W.D.V.: You must have had a set of receptions about what it would be to be to work with whites in government, when you came into this job. Did it work out the way you thought?

Ford: At what level?

W.D.V.: Well, both with the council as well as with the white voters.

Ford: Well, you know, I . . . if I can say, I grew up in the South in a segregated society, per se, and then, you know, I went away to college in an integrated school and then finally to New York. Worked there for about five years. So I, you know . . . you learn to work with everybody. Some people still feel that folks can't work together, blacks or whites. It don't make any difference. Everybody can work together. There's no problem. It's like . . . a kind of, you know, working in New York City. That provides . . . started out working in Harlem, from there to Bedford-Stuyvesant, from there to south Bronx, Spanish speaking element, there to Queens and then finally in mid-town Manhattan, in the Wall Street districts. It gave you a varied working experience. And then, of course, working in this . . . working when I came back here as Model Cities director, you know. The Model Cities director . . . the previous mayor, no reflection on him, he was not a learned man, which is . . . you know, you don't have to be a learned man, but because of that he did not have the outgoing personality or anything. And the Model Cities director, the position that I had previously, was one that

did, you know, most of the stuff for the city, really. And that was an experience. And then, of course, working for the federal government. That was a real key experience for me, going inside the federal government. That was one of the . . . see, I decided about five, six years ago that I wanted to run for mayor of this city. That's what I came back home to do, specifically. So first I worked in the city government, trying to get these plans and things approved, and then, secondly, I went into a . . . went into politics and I went into the federal government to find out how it worked, where the money was, who controlled various resources and how the system worked. And through . . . with that experience behind, you know, working at all levels of the government and the state government, federal government, then I came back to run for mayor. Kind of gave me some perception of the thing.

J.B.: What kind of governor do you think Alabama will elect after Wallace leaves the scene, say to run for the Senate or whatever else he might do to leave the scene?

Ford: What kind of governor he is? Probably between Jed Beasley and William Baxley, two young progressive . . . they're pretty progressive young fellows. Very sharp. Know politics quite well. I think we will have a young progressive governor. I think Alabama . . . well, you see, what you're having, the South is changing. Everybody asks about, "Well, is Wallace changing?" you know. But you have . . . the whole South is changing. Attitudes in general are changing. Black folks are changing. White folks are changing.

J.B.: How are black folks changing?

Ford: Ten years . . . easy, man, ten years ago I was probably a black racist. You know, my folks taught me that all white folks are devils, you know. Man,

my dad said, "Man, you can't trust a . . ." Well, I won't call it . . . "You can't trust a white person as far as you can . . ." You know, that kind of ideology. And black people for so long have been mistreated by white folks. You know, that's segregation and bigotry. Ten years ago, man, you know, there was hatred among blacks just like there was hatred among whites. But now I think some of this is breaking down. A lot of it is breaking down, in fact. I think people now are beginning more and more to accept people as human beings, based upon their character rather than the color of their skin. I think that's good. I think . . . So it's been a tremendous educational process on behalf of blacks and whites. I think, of course, there are some blacks who are just now becoming proud of what they are, and the . . . being proud of their heritage. I think these are people who should always have been proud of our heritage and what we are, although it's been a very humble one. I think we ought to be proud of that. But some of our people have tried to . . . are using the awareness thing to get into a racist bag, a racist inversion bag. I mean, that's kind of unfortunate. We have fought so much for equal opportunities and equality in society. It'd be real tragic to try to get back into separatism and discrimination again. I don't think . . . That's my opinion. But I think that black people have changed. I think that many of our people are coming around, just like some people, some black people - not many of them - some people voted for white candidates. Some of them voted even for Wallace this time. Also, you have some white folks voting for black candidates. I think that's significant. In the last election, you had more blacks voting than ever before for white candidates, and more whites voting for black candidates. So it's changing. There's no . . . but it's got a long way to go. I mean,

you know, I'm not just saying that everything is pie in the sky. We've still got a long way to go. And I think that the South is much further ahead of the north, because traditionally the racist . . . even if it's because of geography, they have been closer. There has been a close proximity between the two races in the South over long periods of years than there has been in the north. Though it's been on a paternalistic, maternalistic kind of thing, a slave-master kind of thing, nevertheless there has been a physical closeness and association. And wherever there has been a closeness or association that gives you something to build on. Whereas in the north, everything is just a melting pot, where everybody has migrated in, and, you know, the black folks at night, they go back to Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, the white folks, they go to Long Island, Queens. So I think in the South we're going to demonstrate first to ourselves and then to the nation that the South is a new frontier in this country. We're going to demonstrate it to them, because I feel that the South is going to rise again. And this time when it rises it's going to be a whole new ball game. Blacks and whites are going to be on an equal basis this time. And that's all we're talking about, equality.

J.B.: All right, the old talk of there being a populist coalition being revived, poor blacks and poor whites getting together on political issues, do you see that coming?

Ford: I think you will see more and more of it coming, because I think, as I was talking, you know, when you were talking about unity, you know, black men unifying and . . . or blacks unifying and being hungry is for the birds. Just like . . . so I think that/^{what}we're going to see more and more is that people are goin to be beginning to unify around issues, that issues which affect poor blacks and whites, such as jobs and hunger and poverty. And I

think more and more we're going to see that kind of thing. I think that in the next election, for example, I think the voters are waking up. I think we'll see voters responding more and more to issues. I think that, yes, I think we will begin to see more and more of that. Because, especially . . . that's why you're seeing . . . you know, that's really why you're seeing the white folks vote for whites and whites vote for blacks, now, because they're voting for candidates who are talking about issues which affect . . . you know, that they are both interested in. And so what happens is that people become more concerned about the issue rather than the color of somebody's skin. And so I think more and more you're going to see that kind of

J.B.: Are there any black Republicans in Alabama to speak of?

Ford: I know a few. I think we got a few in town. Not many. There're some. Not many black Republicans. I don't imagine there're but . . . not many. For example, Macon County, you know, to give you an example of . . . here, it goes back to my pragmatic politics again. Macon County was the only county in Alabama that went Democrat, you know, in terms of re-election, that didn't support the president. You know, just like everybody makes such a damn fuss about supporting the administration. Hell, the damn whole country supported the administration, you know. Most people sneaked down to the polls and voted for him, you know. My problem is I'm just . . . not problem, my position is I'm just open, man. I just tell it like it is. I don't got nothing to hide, man. If I vote for somebody, I vote for him. If I support him, I support him. If I'm not, I'm not.

J.B.: What is the mayor's salary in Tuskegee?

Ford: 16,000, I think. 16,050, something like that. Not enough, but we can make it. I work and my wife works at the Social Work School. She makes about nine or ten thousand dollars. Something like that. So we're able to keep our,

you know, head above the water, But, now wait a minute. The mayor's salary is 12, and the superintendants salary is about 5, I guess. 4 or 5. I don't know.

J.B.: So the effect is combined. Are you thinking of running for any other office when you get finished with being mayor?

Ford: Oh, I don't know. I've . . . you know, there . . . at this particular point I just want to be a good mayor rather . . . we've got two more years to go in this term, and I probably will run for re-election. There's still probably some things that we want to get completed. The airport will be underway. Our industrial park will be completed. Tuskegee Institute will be a national historical site. Develop the lake into a recreational . . . build a new city hall, get new industry underway. One of my projects, one of the projects we're working on now is a . . . well, I can tell y'all now, I guess, because by the time this book comes out it'll be one way or the other, but we're working on a two hundred million dollar oil refinery that develops . . . everybody will want to know why I supported Governor Wallace and that'll really show them.. But, you know, there are several projects that we're still working on, that I'd like to see come a reality before I retire from politics. I don't anticipate any long political career, you know.

J.B.: How long before you see a statewide black elected official in Alabama?

Ford: Oh, next go around, next . . . '76.

J.B.: '76?

Ford: No, no. Wait a minute. When is . . . ?

J.B.: '78?

Ford: Yeah, '78, I guess, is when we go again. '74. Yeah. Yeah. Next go around, we'll have somebody going for lieutenant governor. Well, let me

just say this. I see a person being elected to a statewide office who is well qualified and relates to all segments of the state and happens to be black. That's the kind of candidate it's going to have to be. The kind of candidate who happens to be black, but who can get bi-racial support. It's going to have to be that kind of candidate.

J.B.: You think by 1978, Alabama . . . enough white Alabamians will vote for a black who is qualified and has other qualifications, but in spite of being black, he'll get elected statewide?

Ford: Yes.

J.B.: What sort of office? Secretary of state or lieutenant governor?

Ford: Well, you've got several, you know. You got attorney general and lieutenant governor and, you know, . . . you've got all kinds of statewide offices. Treasurer. Auditor. Public Service Commission. I don't see any problem. No problem at all. As a matter of fact, Alabama is going to be a real leader in the South and the nation. I've got a lot of confidence in Alabama.

J.B.: What would the Republicans have to do to get some black support in Alabama?

Ford: What would they, the Republicans, have to do?

J.B.: Right. Alabama Republicans.

Ford: Oh, Alabama Republicans? Well, they got, as I said, Macon County is the only county that didn't go Republican last go-around. See, you know, you can be as naive as you want to, so . . . That's even more important why it was important for somebody to have a relationship with the administration.

You know, I'm not naive, not saying that that was a real , but I think that it just makes sense sometimes. But what I'm saying is that, hell,

they got . . . the Republicans got a lot of support last time, go around. Lot of black folks supported the administration. As I said, Macon County . . . I guess six or seven counties, hell, I guess about ten or fifteen of them were the majority black counties, so Republicans, you know, . . . a lot of folks didn't vote for McGovern. A lot of black folks didn't. Some of them did, . . . So I don't know what they'll have to do. You know, I'm a strong believer in the two-party concept. Floyd McKissick, who is Republican, and myself, who is a Democrat, we had a national organization called the National Committee for a Two-Party System in This Country. We had chapters in several states throughout the nation. And the purpose of the National Committee for a Two-Party System was to serve as an organization which brings together black Democrats and black Republicans, who can work together on common problems facing black people and poor people in this country. Otherwise, this organization provides a mechanism where we can come together on real common things, to kind of put aside our party affiliations for the moment. And the concept here is that on the Republican administration, if black Democrats work through those black Republicans who have a rapport for the Republican administration. Now, two years from now, the Two-Party System feels that if Democrats are in power then the black Republicans have to turn around and work through those black Democrats who have rapport with the Democratic administration. In other words, we must always have a mechanism whereby blacks can have a working relationship with the administration, whether it's Democratic or Republican. Because we have to look out for black people, first, as black people, regardless of whether you're Republican or Democrat. So . . .

J.B.: The Alabama Democratic Conference was organized at the time . . . it's

a relatively old organization in terms of contemporary politics, and was organized at the time when there were no elected black officials in Alabama, certainly only a handful, if any. In view of the change, now, where you're approaching . . . approaching two hundred black officials in this state, aren't you?

Ford: Right.

J.B.: Has that organization . . . do you think that organization is becoming or will become obsolete?

Ford: Well, I think it has a viable role and continuing place, especially because it's . . . Joe has a real . . . real good inroad into the Democratic . . . the Alabama . . . the Democratic party in Alabama, which is, you know . . . in a sense is a system. So I think it has a real viable role to play. I think that Joe Reed is to be commended for his long years of contribution to black politics in the state. I think he also will make . . . continue to make a role of great contribution in the future. And I say that out of sincerity. I'm sure his comments or his opinion of me won't be . . . , but I don't hold . . . you know, I don't hold things . . . we differ politically. Our strategies and our techniques differ, but we're still . . . you know, still brothers as far as I'm concerned. I think he'll . . . I mean, I think it will continue to have a great role. It has a well-organized structure, though they are not . . . you know, not elected officials, they have helped get many blacks elected. They've done much in many cases to win elections, turn elections around. So I think they have a role to play. However, don't feel that that is the sole . . . and I want to make it clear, I don't think that that is the sole spokesman for black people in this state, or that if that . . . that their tactics and their

strategy is the only approach that blacks ought to take. I think that the Alabama Conference of Black Mayors, for example, which is made up of mayors, and then I think the black caucus within the Alabama League of Municipalities, which consists of mayors and city councilmen throughout the state, so I, you know, I think that . . . then you have the black legislators, now, who will form a caucus of some sort.

J.B.: You think these competing black groups merely reflect, then, a maturing of the political process?

Ford: Yes. Maturing, yes. I don't think that we're necessarily competing with each other. As I indicated

J.B.: There's a danger of that, though, isn't there?

Ford: A danger of competing against each other?

J.B.: Right.

Ford. No. Only when you've got . . . only when you have leadership . . . only when . . . the only time there's a danger of black groups competing against each other is when the leadership ceases to be concerned about the common problems facing black people in a given situation. As long as the leadership concentrates on the common problems, as long as all the organizations are trying to work in their particular way to bring about the common . . . to meet the common goal, then there's no problem. But once you get somebody who goes on an ego trip, as an individual, and just because somebody differs with his philosophy then he starts competing or starts criticizing another organization or another individual, I think that's the danger. And I think that danger affects any . . . not only blacks, whites, anybody, when you've got that kind of a situation. But I think that it's healthy to have several groups working towards the . . . toward the common goal. I think that's

healthy, for more groups, coming out of the more bags, all working toward the common good, it's better for our people. We can't ever get hung up over one spokesman, or with one bag, you know, because once that happens, folks start taking you for granted. Just like it'd be foolish to have all the black folks in the Democratic party. I say that's nonsense. We need to have a viable two-party concept. We need to get more black folks in the Republican party, so that . . . you know, just like white folks will never lose, man, because they've got as many white Democrats as Republicans. You know, you've got to have that kind of balance to make this system work.

J.B.: Do you have any more questions? Anything you wanted to ask?

W.D.V.: Um-hmm. (No.)

Ford: Thank you.

(End of interview.)