

LOUIS MARTIN

EXIT INTERVIEW

EMILY SOAPES: [December] 10, 1980. The interviewer is Emily Soapes of the Presidential Papers Staff.

You had mentioned you hadn't been here long. I believe you were appointed in August of '78?

LOUIS MARTIN: Yes, I came right after Labor Day.

SOAPES: Well, it's been a little over two years. When you came, Mr. Martin, there was much concern that the administration had done a poor job or was perceived as having done a poor job of dealing with the black community. How did this affect your job right to begin with? Did you have to hit the ground running?

MARTIN: I was not really certain of what had preceded my coming. There was some controversy about the manner in which black affairs had been handled. I retired the first of '78. I had been a newspaper editor all my life. I'm from Chicago. I told them when I retired I'd have something to do with them. I came down and began working here in the Senate. While I was over there, I got calls occasionally from people over here asking questions about various candidates for the job. At the time I had no thought of taking the job myself, but in the course of several conversations in which I endorsed most of the candidates...in fact, the three, as I recall, all of them I thought eminently satisfactory, and I refused to differentiate one from another. One thing led to another and finally Ham, I saw him in a meeting at his office, suggested, "Why don't you talk to the President? Why don't you do it yourself?" The way they explained what they were trying to do. I was not too happy with the structure. Every President structures the White House like he wants it.

SOAPES: You mean with the access to the President?

MARTIN: Well, no, I didn't have any problem with that. I thought that the job they wanted done might best be done at the Democratic National Committee as we did it in the '60s. There are certain constraints and limitations on anybody working on the White House staff. You are ultimately much freer at the Democratic National Committee. They were ashamed to be in a position of wanting to have their hands on everything, so I guess their concern was--I don't know whether I want to call it control or not--they were concerned that the operations were more impeded than I thought. Anyway, one thing led to another, and I finally agreed to come on.

SOAPES: How were your duties spelled out to you? What kind of guidelines were you given?

MARTIN: Well, they basically asked me what did I do with LBJ and JFK, as far as the black constituency was concerned. We were very

fortunate in those cases.

SOAPES: You had a lot to show for it.

MARTIN: I think the only real mandate as I recall, "Well, you do for President Carter pretty much what you did for JFK and LBJ." There was nothing specific outlined. As a matter of fact, there were no suggestions or guidelines whatever. The problem was presented, and they said, "You address the problem."

And there was a problem of communication. One of the differences between those years and today is that the general media does not carry or seem to be as interested in what we call black achievement as the media was in the '60s. Somebody said to me that was a sign of progress that black achievement is no longer news. However that might be, as far as the administration is concerned and the credit that should go to the President was a negative approach. So we had to consider how we would operate, and, of course, I just really had to figure out myself. So our approaches were somewhat different.

In the first place, I knew fairly intimately every so-called national black leader in the country because I had worked with them so long. Then after having been in the newspaper business since 1936; I started a newspaper in Detroit in 1936, so I've been in the business ever since then. From that point of view, that contact was a piece of cake. It was to sell what we had to offer. The more I examined what was taking place within the administration, and the harder I looked at the various moves of the President himself, his aides, etc., the more convinced I became there was a great deal that could be done that had not been done. So we really followed two general approaches. One is that I started immediately to send out a fact sheet. I guess you are familiar with those. I sent them out every month.

SOAPES: Sent them out to White House staff or...?

MARTIN: No, this was to the public. The mailing list finally grew to eighteen thousand. And on that mailing list I included every black elected official in the United States. I had earlier been associated as chairman of the Board of Governors of the Joint Center of Political Studies, which we organized in 1970. So I had that mailing list. That was the core, and from that mailing list we built the lists of leaders, not only the national civil rights types, but what we called the CBO heads, community based organizations. We did that in all the key states. We went at it fairly systematically. Ultimately, I think my last count was eighteen thousand. We took the position that this continuous, regular flow of information would in itself bring its own rewards, because we feel that these sudden, big campaigns with no base don't seem to be as effective.

SOAPES: You mean like human rights campaign?

MARTIN: These sudden political three-month campaigns have no background, no solid information. While people can be influenced by other things, imagery, etc., ultimately you have to get across solid factual data to sustain in the long haul these political approaches, speech making, propaganda stuff put out there, and so forth. This was one of the very basic things, monthly fact sheet. In that fact sheet we did not editorialize. We kept our own adjectives to the simplest thing. In this project, this was done and so forth and so on. We had to establish by doing this what we thought was hard credibility. And I don't care how critical the reader, you have to concede that this was an achievement. And that list included, of course, all the black media, radio, print media, etc.

Then we proceeded to do what we did earlier in the '60s, and that is to open the door to those voices in the black community that we felt had not been heard in the White House. What that meant was we brought in people like Jesse Jackson. [Interruption] We deliberately set out to invite on one occasion or another those key leaders in the national black community who we felt had no ties or had not been in the White House, did not know the administration, did not know the aides, and so forth. While many of them did know them, a lot of them had very casual contacts. So we tried to make certain that they got to know the President, and we asked for one-on-one meetings with these people and the President. We arranged meetings with a broad spectrum of leaders, not only the political types, but we had the business types, the intellectuals, etc. In fact, I made a very deliberate move to get about a dozen so-called intellectuals, that is writers, authors, academics to a luncheon with him, which I thought was very successful. So this was another part of a general program tightening the relationship [of] the shakers and movers in the black national community with the administration.

Then we proceeded, of course, as you do in all these cases to harrass the personnel people to make certain that we had some appointments of black personnel in key, strategic positions in the administration. These appointments, of course, [inaudible phrase]. Further, they can make a substantive contribution to politicking.

We also worked on the social side with the Social Office in making certain...we had some very disappointing situations where they had social affairs with no representation of minorities at all. As a matter of fact, I couldn't believe it. We had such a thing as the state dinner for the Chinese premier...not a single black on that invitation list. [inaudible phrase] Not even Andy Young was on it, the ambassador. [inaudible sentence] I must say that prior to the '60s [inaudible sentences]. So this time [inaudible phrase] we fought to make sure that these social affairs are really representative of the American people.

In addition to that, we had one other approach, and that was to try to get media attention by citing to certain people in the media things that we thought they might do that might be interesting to their readers by reflecting some achievement here [inaudible phrase]. So it was a standard operating procedure in

this kind of business.

SOAPES: Was this something you would do on your own?

MARTIN: Yes.

SOAPES: Or through the Press Office?

MARTIN: Well, no, I did this, well sometimes, yes. Of course, the most important thing of all was to keep current with issues and to have some input in policy. This was difficult because you had an unfortunate crowd of aides who I thought...[I] questioned in many instances their experience and knowledge on basic issues, so we had a fight going on there all the time. At the staff meetings which I attended regularly I was probably an irritant, but this was no reflection on the President. I think he was...it's one of my standing grievances I must make clear, the President himself seems to have been closeted by his aides to a degree that I thought was unfortunate, because I thought his point of view and his personality never really got across. That's just a judgment call. [Chuckle] People will differ with that. But I as a newspaperman didn't give a damn what [Stu] Eizenstat thought about anything. I wanted to know what the President thought, and I'd rather the President tell me. And I think the American people are that way. The first thing about it, a lot of the aides I didn't think knew what the hell they were doing in the first place. I would rather have the President present in his own inimitable manner, and I think he does a good job of it, his own outlook, at least, if not his solutions, his approaches to it. This was an unfortunate thing which I regret very much, and I consistently argued in staff meetings for his appearances on national TV, radio, etc., explaining government policy and his own personal views. That's a battle I did not win.

SOAPES: Having worked with the Kennedy and Johnson White Houses, too, you were able to in your own mind draw comparisons.

MARTIN: Well, one thing about it. No White House aides ever got in the way of LBJ or JFK. And I thought they did here. I also must tell you that I worked in the campaign in 1944 as assistant publicity director [inaudible phrase], and one of the things that they drilled into our heads in those years was that anonymity was the name of the game if you were working for a President. But I think [inaudible phrase] years, that's been lost. Every little wheel wants to be a big shot. There's nothing wrong with it. I think politically it may serve the administration well in some cases, but I don't think in this case it did.

I say that because I came in late, and I was so shocked when I came in, having been in the newspaper business too many years before [inaudible phrase], I had no idea of really what this man was like. When I found out, he was in my view a much brighter, intellectually alert, smarter than I assumed. It's a pity that

there are some images of him out there as a sort of accident, a sort of fluke, an ambassador from Dogpatch, at least that's what my old Kennedy friends say. The hillbilly image just didn't make any sense when you got to know him. So I felt rather unhappy about that, more so after I got to know him.

SOAPES: After you got here and you were surprised...

MARTIN: It encouraged me to do more and more communicating, trying to get across what I thought this man was like, and I think I succeeded in some ways in impressing black America that this man was genuine, he was smart, he was knowledgable, he was believable, he was worth working for.

SOAPES: I remember reading during this past campaign that really the President was often at his best when speaking in a black church in Atlanta, that he just seemed to come across.

MARTIN: He would be equally effective, I think, with any group. The problem is, I think, will we be able to get him more often with these groups [inaudible phrase] than they were with some other groups, and I think he could have done very well. I come from Chicago and Michigan [inaudible phrase], and he certainly would have been effective with a Chicago audience, mixed or black or white or ethnic. I just don't understand.

SOAPES: He was kind of insulated from...

MARTIN: I don't know whether it was by choice or what, but I think it was a mistake because he was challenged by some problems beyond his control. What people look for once they recognize difficulty, they begin to evaluate you on your effort. My theory was he ought to get an A for effort even if he loses. That's why I was very...we did not do so many things I felt like we should have done or didn't do. Of course, this is hindsight.

I'm rather pleased that at least we were able to get across, I think with the assistance of many people, not only my work necessarily, the picture of the man that I knew he was.

SOAPES: Could you speak to the point of the importance of black constituents to Mr. Carter?

MARTIN: I think that was part of...I'm not familiar entirely with the '76 operation. I wasn't actively in the campaign. I was a contributor, and so forth. [Interruption.]

I think his candidacy got legitimacy, if that's the proper word [inaudible phrase], because of the identification of people like Andy Young and that [Martin Luther] King crowd in Atlanta. Further, I think the thing that really struck us most was the victory over [George] Wallace in Florida, as I think back. Once the Southern black operation was solidly for him, as a result pretty much of Andy Young and his associates and those friends of

his in Atlanta, who had been active...Jesse Hill and some of those old friends of mine, because I'm originally from Savannah, Georgia. We sold the family insurance company to Jesse Hill for Atlanta Life back in the early '60s, and so I had business relationships with Jesse. I got to know him very well. I was very impressed with the kind of support they gave him. That's my personal opinion. I think many blacks in positions of some leadership all across the country felt the same way.

In addition, he had a religious background and knowledge of the religious concerns and interests of black people, particularly in the South, but most blacks are now or came from this part, which enabled him to operate in a vein that few politicians that I know could compare or compete with. Certainly neither JFK nor LBJ knew that vein, and that's a very important vein in dealing with the black constituency. While many of them are not church-going, but I think there is a larger church-going crowd in black America [inaudible phrase], I may be wrong, except maybe the Irish Catholics. He did have that attribute and ability, and I don't know whether I'm answering your question or not, but that certainly gave him a leg up on everybody else. He did a good job of it, and I thought in operating basically through the church route, he did a good job of building a new type of support that had not really been cultivated properly before.

He also did not need the services of so many black professionals who sell themselves, put their price up. [Chuckle] He did a good job in '76 I thought. I was really very impressed by the campaign. I didn't know him, of course, but actually I [inaudible sentences].

SOAPES: So what happened to that support this time?

MARTIN: Well, the problem was that blacks were very conscious of their input, and they knew that they made the margin of difference, not only in many Southern states, so they felt that the President owed them a lot more than perhaps some other Presidents had in their elections. Because before we had landslides, and '60 was a long ways away. A lot of people don't remember it. Although we won by one vote per precinct in the state of Illinois. That was the margin.

[Interruption to turn over tape.]

SOAPES: You were talking about what happened to the 1930 black vote and were saying that this time, more so than in the last few elections, excuse me in '76 more than in the last few elections the black leadership was aware of their importance in getting the President elected.

MARTIN: That's right. So they held him to a higher standard in those terms. This question of what he promised and what he delivered of his promises, I was never very clear on. To tell you the truth, I was never very clear on what he promised. [Chuckle]

But they expected him to pursue the civil rights goals on the agenda of every black leader in the country. They differ in many ways. It's not a monolithic bloc, but they all have in terms of goals, fairly similar goals. One is, of course, some legislation and some programs in the government itself and appointments to the government. Those are the three big things people look for. There may be some others. And in those three areas, this man, I thought, was moving in the right direction.

The problem was that many of the critics did not know what he was doing. So this comes back to the original question of communication.

I think that while we as a poor group in the society, at the bottom of the economic totem pole, felt perhaps the recession more keenly than others, and normally we are bread and butter issue people, had we not been able to show that in the civil rights area that he had worked so vigorously, we would not have gotten the black response we did get. Because the economic issues, whenever they're very important to poor people, inflation or unemployment, I don't have to go into that, the leadership is seriously affected. There are several things that we finally got across. And that was however horrible the economic situation was, no other President probably could do much better. Secondly, most of the problems arose from difficulties that no President could have too much control over. I think the economic issue was the toughest thing we had.

I think that on other issues we were able to boast about some achievements. One is the relationship, for instance, with Africa. We started a switch, or a turn around, of our relationship with black Africa. The President stood firm on many things, sanctions in Zimbabwe, and his support of Andy even in his difficulties with the Israelis.

SOAPES: What effect do you think that had?

MARTIN: I think the bottom line was blacks blamed the Israelis more than the President. The Israelis have enormous political clout, but they put so much pressure on that the job became untenable. Not necessarily because the President wanted to fire him. But Andy himself made it clear to the general public that once he felt he was causing more harm than good to the President and the administration, he would be the first to move, and he came to the conclusion. That is what I think blacks understood. That nothing he could do in response to these attacks would change the attitudes of the Israelis. He was no longer of any service to the President. At the point of departure, of course, it was up in the air which way the chips would fall. But ultimately I think there was a consensus that Israeli pressure made his job impossible rather than his relationship to the President. [Inaudible phrase.] Furthermore, Andy was so consistently insistent that it was his decision and nobody else's. He never wavered once. Secondly, the President immediately replaced him with another black, Donald McHenry, which cut the race question out of it, in front of

everybody. So any criticism by black leaders that in replacing Andy he was doing in black America could not be sustained. Don McHenry was a credible, experienced black.

SOAPES: Although not the leader in the black community of an Andy Young.

MARTIN: He didn't have the charisma. I was very pleased with the attitude of the President. I had the job of calling all of the leadership, congressional and blacks and everybody else, getting their views about his replacement.

SOAPES: I was going to ask how was your office involved?

MARTIN: Well, we did it. I did most of it from my country place. We have a little place up in Wisconsin in the north woods, and I was on vacation. So I was on the phone for about three or four days with the black leadership. It was in the summertime. There was a consensus that the appointment of Don McHenry would be a great thing. There were many other suggestions. I think some people suggested Secretary of the Army Clifford Alexander, who used to be with us back in the LBJ days. But Don McHenry is a professional in the Foreign Service. We had no assurance, of course, that the President would appoint a black at all, but since we had one with the kind of credentials that Don had and the experience he had [inaudible phrase]. This kind of reaction, I mean this kind of move, helped to strengthen the ties with the blacks who were critical on some other points. Even those who were unhappy about some economic move couldn't be unhappy about everything. Certainly they were pleased with that [appointment of McHenry].

SOAPES: Other factors that may have figured into the 1980 crumbling of that black support?

MARTIN: Well, I think basically it was the whole issue of black issues, unemployment, inflation. I don't think the black support crumbled that much [inaudible phrase]. I gather the New York Times quoted eighty-five percent, but studies over there according to Eddie Williams, who's the president [inaudible phrase], he said that their analysis showed that he retained ninety percent of the black vote.

SOAPES: That wasn't the original assessment.

MARTIN: I think most people conceded he got the majority of black votes. The New York Times and some of the papers ran about eighty-five percent, some of the papers, not all of them, some of them higher. One of the difficulties in analyzing black voting patterns is how you assess an area. For instance, most of the analyses look back on [inaudible word] statistics or even wards. You know, many wards in Chicago you might have sixty percent black. You've got

to figure out where the percentages are. So the Joint Center proceeds on the basis of precincts, so that's a closer relationship, and you know what you've got. So if you take a sample of one hundred solid black precincts and you show ninety percent support, that's a pretty good indication. So that's what they do. And the data of the Joint Center is accepted now in the government [inaudible phrase].

SOAPES: Well, good, because the first I heard was that was one of the areas the President did lose. I'm glad you've got those figures.

MARTIN: I think that blacks probably stuck, there's no question about it, most commentators will say that blacks stuck with him more than anybody else. The percentage is not as great maybe as it was in '76.

SOAPES: If you had another four years in this job, Mr. Martin, what sorts of things would you have hoped to accomplish?

MARTIN: My concern, as I think I said earlier, was to get him out. I don't know how to really express this, but I think that he was just beginning to get to know how the system works in Washington. He had gotten to know the thinking of the movers and shakers of a lot of communities and a lot of constituencies.

We would have had a much easier time in making some progress on the issues of concern, the economic issues and more directly related civil rights issues that blacks are concerned with. Specifically, the one he lost yesterday. I think he would have won that one. That was the amendment to the fair housing act, and I think had he been re-elected, he would have won that one. I think you would not have this rash of anti-busing and anti-affirmative action riders on bills. You wouldn't have that moving as fast as it is now. I think nothing would have been easy, but nothing in this kind of job is.

I think with the proper economic approaches...I have a question mark on that because I don't think the advice on that is, in my view, right. I don't know the President's personal view on that, but I didn't think that...I'm not an economist so I must beg off on whether it's right...I just myself thought his advisors were moving in the wrong direction. And I still think so. And I think Mr. Reagan is also in the wrong direction.

SOAPES: I'm about out of time, but could you in summary tot up in the two years you have been here some successes and maybe some not so successful things from your office's standpoint?

MARTIN: I think we got our message across, and I think the polls reflect that, the election returns. I think he's made some substantive, long-range contributions to the causes my constituents are most concerned about in all these areas. Specifically in the appointment area, the naming of those black judges who have now

been confirmed and who will be operating for the rest of this century. These are gains that can not be taken away. They are solid. There are thirty-eight of them, so we did not have a formal objective for.... I think that's a very important thing because they will now have an impact on the criminal justice system in this society, which is terribly important.

I think the gains that he made in minority discriminating, in minority business, while all of them may not be lasting, I think they opened the eyes of our people. I think they will have a long-range impact. In terms of appointments again, I think the opening of the regulatory commissions for the first time. Nobody had any black representation on the Interstate Commerce Commission, Civil Aeronautics Board, and a host of regulatory bodies. These are policy making bodies, and this President saw to it that there was minority, and specifically black, representation on those bodies.

I think that again that business of telecommunications went very well. [Inaudible phrase] because two years ago we had sixty-two properties, broadcast properties, owned by minorities, and in the two year period that I've been here, we've doubled it. It's one hundred and twenty-four now. These are substantive things.

With regard to legislation, I think the enactment of 95-507, which is a law that he supported although he didn't start the legislation necessarily. He supported it and tried to implement it, of course. That is a law that requires that any contractor getting a million dollars or more from this contract must come up with some affirmative action plan of his own, subcontracting or something, the theory being that providing some opportunity for black enterprise to develop. While there is some resistance, of course, as there has been to a lot of other affirmative action things, it has been fairly successful.

The appointment of Karen Hastie Williams as the director of procurement policy was a very important position, but not well-known. It was difficult in the sense that this government spends an average of one hundred billion dollars a year in procurement. Prior to the middle of '77 about eight hundred million of that went to minority enterprise. As a result of his efforts, and the administration position on it, that rate is running now at around three billion dollars a year, which is a very significant difference.

So these are some of the achievements that while our office specifically didn't take credit for any of them, we were agitators and advocates, so we feel there are some things will last to be proud of. There are many others. I think the African policy I mentioned. I think Zimbabwe has been liberated partly because of the position of this administration. We worked on that as part of our relationship with the NSC. We don't claim the credit for it. That would be ridiculous because there were so many hands in it. I felt it's been a wonderful experience, and I'm very grateful for the opportunity.

SOAPES: That's good to be able to say. If we could come back and talk to you in four or five years, do you have a permanent address

where we could get in touch with you? You've said you retired, so you probably won't be going back to the newspapers.

MARTIN: No, I'll probably be associated with Howard University.

SOAPES: With Howard, so we could find you at Howard. Great. Great.

MARTIN: But I'll be around. [Chuckle]

SOAPES: I figured you'd be around, but just where to start looking was the main question. Thank you for taking so much time. It's really been very, very valuable. I appreciate you doing this.