

The Importance of Controlling Local, State, and Federal Budgets

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Speakers include:

Kwame Brown- Entrepreneur, Public Speaker, Managing Editor, AlwaysRealTalk Network, Political Analyst

Elijah Rogers- President Emeritus & Senior Advisor with Delon Hampton & Associates, Chartered

Carol Thompson Cole- President and CEO at Venture Philanthropy Partners (VPP+Raise DC)

This discussion centers around the importance of understanding the allocation of government funds, whether local, state, or federal, for a government to push and accomplish political agendas.

Kwame Brown: Welcome to the 60th anniversary of the SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Good afternoon. I'm Kwame Brown, and I am honored to be your moderator for today's discussion on the importance of controlling local, state, and federal budgets. It has been said that the government is all about the allocation of resources.

He or she who understands the allocation of resources controls the policy decisions that can be implemented. Today, we will hear from two of the top experts on local and federal budgets. We will explore three key topics, the importance of the budget, two, why it is critical to understand the budget, and how elected officials or government executives can use the budget to create policy change. I'd like to welcome to this panel two esteemed experts.

First, we have [Carol Thompson Cole](#), one of the first women city administrators in the country. She is the president of Venture Philanthropy Partners. She holds a BA from Smith College, a master's in public administration from NYU, and, like myself, is an alumna of the JFK School of Government at Harvard University, specifically the Senior Executives in State and Local Government program. She served as a senior advisor to President Clinton, was the District of Columbia's city administrator, and is an honorary member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority.

Next, we have Elijah Rogers, President Emeritus and Senior Advisor at Dalan Hampton & Associates, one of the largest minority-owned consulting and design engineering firms in the city. He is a former assistant managing partner at Grant Thornton CPA Firm, a former city administrator for both Richmond, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. and has taught urban policy and politics at the University of Maryland. Welcome to both of you. Mr. Rogers, I'd like to start with you. Can you share some insights on the budget and its historical context?

Elijah Rogers: Certainly, In January 1979, [Mayor Marion Berry](#) was elected mayor of the District of Columbia. At that time, the district's budget was part of the federal budget. We didn't know how much money we had or how many employees we had. Essentially, we were flying by the seat of our pants.

Under the [Home Rule Act](#), which granted the district limited home rule[self-governance], the law required that by April 1979, the District establish its checking account. This meant we had to separate from the federal treasury and set up an independent account. The challenge was, we had never been audited in 100 years. We didn't know whether we had a deficit or a surplus. It took us 18 months, working day and night with Arthur Andersen, to produce the district's first balanced sheet audit.

What we discovered was alarming: we had an accumulated deficit of \$279 million out of a \$2 billion budget. When I started, the district's budget was approximately \$2 billion. The following year, in 1980, we added another \$105 million to the deficit, bringing the total accumulated deficit to \$384 million. So we essentially had to stop, reassess, and start working to get the budget under control so we could execute the mayor's priorities. Another critical role we had to play, being a creature of the federal government, was collaborating with congressional members on Capitol Hill, who had authority over our budget.

The late Charlie Wilson, chair of the House District Committee, controlled all our funds. To gain his approval, we had to strike a deal. Charlie told the mayor, "If you want more independence, you need to demonstrate to us that you can manage your budget effectively." It took another year and 18 months, to be precise. We had to make staff reductions, but we finally started to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Over the next six years, we achieved surpluses, the first in the district's history in over 100 years. This success took hard work from everyone involved, Carol, the mayor, the council members, and thousands of employees.

We had to put in the effort to build credibility so that legislation passed by the council could gain congressional approval and take effect. That's why it's critical for every city, county, or state leader, when elected, to understand what authority do I have. Every state constitution provides certain authorities. County governments operate under a charter, and each city also has a charter. These charters outline what you can and cannot do.

So, when you assume office, it's essential to get organized by understanding the foundational documents that grant you the authority to carry out your plans. I always emphasize this to everyone, understand the authorities you have. Once you do, you can organize, plan, bring people on board, and move toward your goals.

Kwame Brown: The budget is all about the allocation of resources. He or she who understands resource allocation understands the budget. Carol, you have extensive experience with the role of budgets in government. How important would you say the budget is?

Carol Thompson Cole: Well, I think the budget is probably the most important tool for anyone in government, whether they're in the legislative or executive branch. It's about resource allocation, understanding what you're trying to achieve, and having the means to accomplish those goals. It's vital to understand the overall budget for the government as well as the budgets for its various components. The budget is how you get things done.

Kwame Brown: You were one of the first female city administrators in the country, to take on a

leadership role in a male-dominated environment. You did such a phenomenal job. What were some of the first things you noticed as you started developing a city budget, especially when working with elected officials and advocates?

Carol Thompson Cole: For me, I want to step back a bit. I developed an understanding of budgets early in my government career. Mr. Rogers came on as the first city administrator within our mayoral administration. I remember how the city was full of excitement we had a new mayor, a new team of administrators, and a renewed sense of hope for our city and community. Within about 90 days of that term, we discovered serious fiscal challenges. As a young professional in public administration, I quickly realized that if you don't understand the budget, its structure, and its process, you won't be able to accomplish much.

When I became city administrator, the city was in relatively good financial shape. We had achieved multiple balanced budgets, thanks to the efforts of Mr. Rogers and others who paved the way. My task was to maintain that stability. However, soon after, revenue began to decline significantly. We had to manage the situation on a day-to-day basis, analyzing what resources we had, identifying priorities, and ensuring accountability.

The budgeting process, as you know, involves collaboration between the executive branch and the council. Building alignment with the council, particularly the finance and budget committees, is critical. You need to work toward a shared vision for the city across both sides of government. That requires building strong relationships, understanding both the expense and revenue sides of the budget, and striving to work in tandem even though that doesn't always happen.

Kwame Brown: That's a great point. What's interesting is that both of you were part of a remarkable organization early in your career, the Mayor Marion Barry administration in Washington, DC. Mr. Rogers, you always remind me that government is fundamentally about the allocation of resources and how those resources are used. You and I have had many discussions about this, sometimes with differing perspectives. But you always guide me toward the right approach and show me how to get there.

I'll tell you, I thought I knew everything early on. Back in 2002, as a young candidate running for office, I was convinced I had all the answers. You see, young people often think they've got it all figured out. I said, "Okay, I worked for Walmart Corporation. I was responsible for a \$20 million budget. I've got this." I worked for Citibank and First Union in brokerage services. "I understand budgets. I've got it." Then I said, "All right, I worked in the Clinton [President Bill Clinton] administration, where we were always discussing the budget and ways to improve it with people like [Courtland Cox](#). We talked about how to secure more funding, advocated for changes, and analyzed budgets. I've got it."

Then I ran a nonprofit. And in nonprofits, you're responsible for raising money, spending it wisely, and budgeting effectively. So, I thought I truly understood it. So, I went to see Mr. Rogers, confident that I had all the answers. I thought, "Here's this older guy, he's going to try to tell me I don't know anything." And I was ready to prove him wrong.

I sat down, and he asked me, "Do you know what the budget is?" I replied, "Yes, I think it's about \$12 billion. I've reviewed it." And he said, "No, no, no. You say you want to do all these

things, but how are you going to pay for them?" I paused. He continued, "No, really, how are you going to pay for it? All your ideas sound great, but what's the funding plan?"

I had all these bright ideas: vocational education, getting people back to work, affordable housing, improving charter schools, making sure kids have what they need. Within ten minutes of this conversation, I didn't like Mr. Rogers very much. During that time, things were different. You had Mayor Marion Barry, who came from SNCC and had a deep history in advocacy. When he became mayor, he brought in a team during a time shaped by a unique environment, urgency and passion for change that felt different from today.

Now, when you look at advocates and protesters, the methods and mindset have shifted. Back then, the approach was about breaking barriers and creating opportunities. Today, urgency and passion sometimes seem less pronounced. Some might say that those stepping into government positions, whether as administrators or executives with control over budgets, don't fully grasp the importance of a budget the way it was understood from a survival perspective back then. Carol, do you think they're wrong about that comparison?

Carol Thompson Cole: Yes, they're off completely. What Mr. Rogers said is correct. You have to understand the authorities, the structure, and the dynamics within your community, as well as the relationship between the executive and legislative branches of government. Most people assume that when you mention a \$12 billion budget, you've got endless resources.

But the truth is, much of that money is already fixed—allocated to mandatory expenses. There's far less discretionary funding available for the initiatives you want to implement or the promises you've made to the public. Newcomers, they'll eventually learn exactly what Elijah described. It might not be as intense in other places as it is in DC, but regardless, you're entering a system. You have to learn that system, figure out how to navigate it and build the relationships needed to accomplish your goals.

I learned very early on as a director that, with the ideas I had, I needed to understand and connect with the budget director and the city administrator. Then, I had to present my ideas to the council, helping them understand the needs and the resources required to achieve those goals. Sometimes, people think it's much easier than it is and assume there are far more resources at their disposal than there are. That's a lesson most newcomers to government eventually learn, it doesn't change.

Kwame Brown: Right? Oh, it's true. I'm telling you, when I first started, from a broad perspective, I thought, "It's just money, and I'll go get it." That was my mindset until, of course, Mr. Rogers asked me, "How are you going to pay for it?" We started digging deeper into the topic, and I'll say this, if it weren't for Mr. Rogers making me study the budget for 12 months straight, I wouldn't have become a budget expert. I realized that to accomplish anything, you have to understand where the money comes from. Let's be real: a lot of people run for office with passion and energy, which is fantastic. We want more young people involved in the process, right, Mr. Rogers?

Elijah Rogers: Yes, exactly.

Kwame Brown: We want more young people engaged in the process. But when they step up, run for office, or take on roles in government, they need to understand the importance of the budget. Without it, they won't know how to achieve the goals they're so passionate about. Ms. Cole, you've mentioned this: resources are limited. People see a \$16 billion budget and think, "That's a lot of money!" But it's not \$16 billion just sitting there, readily available.

Much of it is already allocated, and you have to figure out what's actually at your disposal. What are the top two pieces of advice you would give to individuals considering becoming elected officials or transitioning from the corporate world to an administrative role in government? Let's start with you, Mrs. Cole.

Carol Thompson Cole: I think the most important thing is to understand that government operates within a bureaucracy¹. It's a very structured environment, more so than the business world. Having worked on the business side as well, I know that each environment requires its learning curve.

What I'd emphasize, as we've been saying throughout this discussion, is that you must understand your budget. You need to know your programs and their impact on the community. Advocacy plays a significant role here, as you've mentioned. You must understand your constituents—who they are, what their needs are, and how you can address those needs

Once you've identified those needs, you must develop a budget that reflects them, navigate the approval process, and deliver on the promises you've made. It all comes back to understanding your budget and building effective programs to create real impact.

Kwame Brown: Wait, Mr. Rogers. I think she makes an excellent point

Elijah Rogers: You need to develop coalitions at different levels. As Mr. Cox [Courtland] prepares to make his presentation, he'll likely touch on how, in the early days of SNCC, the focus was on protesting. Now, however, it's about accumulating power and authority to make a meaningful impact on the people we aim to help. We need to step back and acknowledge that we can't do it all alone, we need help. There's talent all around us, but we must focus that talent and energy constructively.

For example, consider the recent discussions about defunding the police. What does that mean in practical terms? As Carol mentioned, budgets are already established, and resources have been allocated to various areas. If you want to modify the police department's budget, what impact will that have on your colleagues on the council, especially if they hold differing opinions?

How do you get those individuals to buy into and accept your philosophy? Building relationships with others on the city council, county council, or state government is critical. Additionally, you need to consider why funds were initially allocated in a certain way. If you attempt to reallocate those funds, you could face a significant political fight.

¹Bureaucracy- a system for controlling or managing a country, company, or organization that is operated by a large number of officials

In such cases, you might end up expending unnecessary energy fighting amongst yourselves rather than achieving the goals you set out to accomplish. So, while it's essential to understand the financial aspects, it's just as important to understand the people involved—because government is made up of people.

Carol Thompson Cole: You must understand people from all the different perspectives they bring. Elijah mentioned "defund the police." The first time I heard that term, it was in the context of young activists, and they didn't mean it the way many have interpreted it. They were talking about reallocating resources to fund the right types of professionals and programs to work alongside police departments, aiming for better outcomes in communities and on the ground. But the focus quickly shifted to the idea of simply taking money away from the police departments. What they were talking about was using the funding differently, but that nuance got lost.

We still haven't been able to move past the controversy surrounding the term. It's become a tool for those who want to be confrontational or create confusion. One of the lessons I learned early in government is that you must carefully consider what you say, who you're saying it to, and what you need to achieve. This perfectly illustrates Mr. Rogers' point, it's all about reallocating resources to accomplish specific goals.

Kwame Brown: I want to say that both of you are right when it comes to Defund The Police ² and Mr. Rogers, you and I had this conversation back to back, defund the police and, and, what does that mean? I think that you had a certain segment of people create the narrative of what that means. And it caught on because it became a fire. It was hot. Everyone was talking about it, but that's not. I've had, you know, people on my always real talk show that came through advocates who were adamantly opposed and wanted to defend the police. And as we started to unpeel that onion, it was very clear that the reason why they just said defund everything, was because they did not understand and be able to articulate how to fund what they wanted, because they didn't understand the budget.

So, for example, they wanted to cut everything out of the police department budget, because that's where they said all the waste and abuse was going and they wanted to reallocate it. They didn't look anywhere else in the entire budget of a municipality that there might have been excess dollars. That could be that go towards what they want.

Whether it was training, whether it was all the different things that advocates want to see included, but within a police budget. I'm not sure that, you know, we start to talk to elected officials, how they could understand that too, right? How to reallocate resources within the entire government to meet an objective that everyone agrees to as opposed to just, just defund the entire police department. Mr. Rogers.

Elijah Rogers: That's an excellent point; governing is exceedingly difficult. You need the outside people pushing the government. You need elected officials who are very sensitive to trying to achieve something. Then you need inside public administrators who are committed to

² Defund The Police- This movement has various beliefs from abolishing police departments entirely or limited to simply restricting money for military-style equipment.

using the system to get things done based on the priorities set by the elected officials. Now, during the first term, Mayor Barry came from quote, unquote, the streets. He understood people. He understood politics. So, he was Mr. Outside.

Then I played the role of Mr. Inside. And we worked hand in hand. He was the chief elected official. He articulated verbally where we wanted the city to go. It was our job, Carol, myself, and others inside to push the government in the direction of going where the mayor said we needed to go. And that requires everybody pulling in understanding and working together. But the key in America, I keep preaching. This, everything comes around money.

That's America. Whether we like it or not. And if you do not understand the money, you are not gonna make the kind of change you say, you wanna make, yeah, look at the United States, trillion down budget every year. When you start stepping on certain toes, the Biden administration is talking about reallocating funds for a human infrastructure and you see all Hell has broken loose because if you reallocate money from over here, you are impacting people with money and they're gonna fight you. It's the same thing at the local level. That's why it's so important. We keep preaching and understanding the financial aspects of your local county, state, or federal level. And you can make a tremendous difference.

Carol Thompson Cole: When allocating funds, taking money from one area to put it elsewhere often means someone loses while someone else gains. That's how people perceive it, and it's why they are always ready to fight for what they want. One of the most significant developments—I believe it happened during your administration, Elijah, was the creation of a community budget process.

We went out into the community, explained the budget process, and involved them in shaping it. We gathered their input on their needs and priorities and worked with them to help them understand why some things couldn't be done. At the same time, we prepared them to present to the council and articulate why certain items in the budget were crucial to their community.

What always amazes me is that, fundamentally, we aren't as far apart as we think. The real issue lies in how we prioritize things. You may want one thing first, but I might feel that something else is needed before you can get what you want. That's where the tension arises in the day-to-day process. At the end of the day, people fight to win—and they fight hard.

Kwame Brown: It's interesting to reflect on the past, hearing how things evolved over the years how it started with advocacy, with people actively engaging on both sides of the issues, and then transitioning into government roles. As you mentioned, former Mayor Barry had connections with advocates because he had worked with them. When he moved into government, he brought others along with him, including you. I'm still trying to figure out how all of that came together, especially considering your approach to the budget.

But what stands out is the perspective you brought to the table. I have to ask, do we still have those kinds of perspectives among people who are now, or are becoming, elected officials? I think it's an important question to consider. For context, I was the former Chairman of the

Council of the District of Columbia, and I've seen how valuable those perspectives can be.

I can tell you that, as someone who identifies as an SNCC baby, I grew up immersed in that perspective and philosophy. I've had the opportunity to work on creating change within the budget, but I'll be honest—it's a heavy lift. It's not easy, it's not always well-received, and it's not necessarily something that will secure your re-election.

I think it's crucial for people to understand this reality. I've seen it happen: individuals with strong philosophies and convictions, who have fought hard for what they believe in, only to lose their office the next year. That reality often makes others hesitant. Even when they deeply believe in the need for change, the fear of losing their position can hold them back.

When you start creating change, it's not easy to navigate, especially when you're the one sitting in that seat of responsibility. That's why some people go it alone, make their mark once, and then they're gone. So, what advice would I give to young folks who are ready to dive in? Those who know exactly what they want, have some understanding of the budget process, and are ambitious to go far in the political arena. Many of them face a dilemma. They recognize that pushing bold policies, policies they deeply care about—might hinder their long-term political aspirations. The number one complaint you hear from people on the ground is this: "Politicians get elected, and everything they promised to do, they don't follow through on." The politicians often justify it by saying, "If I do what I said I'd do, I won't get re-elected."

My advice is this, stay true to your principles. Find ways to balance bold action with strategic planning. Understand the system deeply so you can work within it while still driving meaningful change. Change is hard, but it's worth it, even if it comes with risks.

Kwame Brown: What advice would you offer to those individuals, especially as it relates to the budget? Because this is about reallocating resources—understanding how to move the money and how to allocate it effectively. When you begin to create real change, that's when the real fight begins. Everyone agrees in principle on the big ideas, helping those in need, creating more affordable housing, ensuring access to quality education, and providing economic opportunities, including government contracts.

But when someone in a position of power, someone elected starts making tangible moves to achieve those goals, that's when the resistance surfaces. That's when the battles intensify, and often, those leaders become targets. For many, this is the point where their tenure ends. Can either of you speak to the challenges of navigating that process, the pushback that comes, and how one might sustain their efforts in such a difficult landscape?

Carol Thompson Cole: I'll start by saying this: you mentioned that they don't have a perspective, but everyone has a perspective. The key is to understand and learn what that perspective is and then figure out how it fits into the broader scheme. I believe everything is relationship-based.

One of the most important things is understanding the power dynamics. When you want to get involved in government and decision-making, particularly in finances, you need to position

yourself strategically. If you're in the legislative branch, aim to be on the finance or budget committee. That way, you can understand the process thoroughly and figure out whether what you want is possible, what's preventing it, and what steps you need to take to make it possible.

Equally important is building a strong constituency on the outside. You need a group of advocates who can support you, amplify your vision, and be present to advocate alongside you. That external support can make all the difference. It requires collaboration across all stakeholders to make meaningful change possible. If you go in with a mindset of focusing solely on one issue, insisting it must be done your way, and pushing it without flexibility, you're unlikely to achieve much success.

On the other hand, if you're addressing a major issue, recognize that it may take time to accomplish. You might face setbacks or even fail initially because the timing may not be right. The key is to build relationships, communicate effectively, and educate stakeholders, both within and outside of government. By doing so, you can ensure that when the time is right for your issue, you and your allies are prepared to move it forward.

Elijah Rogers: Going back to the early days of our administration, 1979, we had a cross-section of talented professionals. We had advocates from the SNCC movement. We had professionally trained lawyers, but we had the commonality of wanting to try to improve the perception that people of color men and women could run a city and demonstrate to the world that we understood the financial aspects of running the city and doing good. Now that requires a lot of work. We had a lot of fights about how do we do this, but the common goal we had, and it is still today, was a connection between people.

In the first term, we wanted to demonstrate to ourselves and to the public that we knew what we were doing, and that kept us, we put it in 15, 16 hours a day, trying to get our arms around the government so that Mayor Barry could take his leadership skills out in the community to explain what we are doing, but also on Capitol hill to get the support from Southern Congress people who did not want the district to get independence, but Charlie Wilson, the late Charlie Wilson said, if Elijah you an American demonstrates, you can get control of the budget.

I then will support you in some of the things you want to do. What a lot of people didn't understand when we came in, was 25% of all the district contracting was supposed to go to minorities. We wanted to increase the 35%. We cut a deal with Charlie Wilson. He said, Elijah, if you and the staff can get a handle on the expenditures in the government, we'll look the other way. Let you go from 25% to 35%. That's how we got 35% of minority participation. But we had to demonstrate to the people on the hill that we knew what we were doing. And we had a lot of sacrifices. We worked 15, 16, 17 hours, and 18 hours a day, for 18 months, trying to get our handle around the financial aspects of the district. So that's why it's so critical. But once we did, we gained credibility.

Carol Thompson Cole: We gained gain credibility, but also something else happened. Okay, I use this as an example, quite a bit. It's how do you implement it? So, Elijah's working on the vision the policy, and the legislative process to get us the authority to do that. And I think we were all excited about the possibility. One thing that Mayor Barry did, he did lead, and he pushed

us.

So he said, we're gonna do this. Are we all on board? And we all said, yes, we went off to our respective departments. And then we got to a cabinet meeting one day. And the mayor called on one of the men in the cabinet and said, so what is your department done over the last month to move more money into, the minority community? And you, I think the room almost froze because most of us did. We may have said we were gonna get it done, but had we focused on it. And were we prepared to give that answer to the mayor?

No, but I bet after that meeting with Mr. Rogers and Mayor Barry, every meeting, someone knew they were gonna be called on and they were gonna be held accountable to the goal we set, and it worked. We reported it and we started moving it. People are competitive. So, one department head wanted to outdo another department head. So, it's about having a vision, having people in a place that can deliver, you know, implementation is as important as having the right policies. Right. And I think so many things fall on not having the professionals in place that understand that they're about administration, but they have to do it in the political context.

Kwame Brown: When addressing complex issues, you must navigate strategically. Success doesn't come from a single, rigid approach. Even if you're elected and insist on "this or nothing," it simply won't work. Flexibility and collaboration are key. Let me share two quick examples to illustrate this.

First, both of you, as former city administrators, referenced Mayor Marion Barry in the 1970s. By contrast, I joined the council in 2004, where Mayor Barry also served alongside me. I sat right next to him; it was a moment I couldn't make up. During that time, Barry was celebrated for initiatives like the 35% equity requirement. Inspired by that, I pushed for equity participation in government-funded projects, specifically, ensuring local firms had real equity from the ground up in such projects.

This was a tough battle. Many doubted it was possible; some even laughed at the idea. But, as Ms. Carol mentioned, collaboration was critical. I needed to understand what others wanted, articulate what I wanted, and work together to create a win-win solution. That's how we succeeded. Mayor Barry privately encouraged me, saying, "Don't stop. Keep going. Don't give up. I support you." His support helped us push through, and for the first time in any city, we required 20% non-usable equity participation from local businesses in government-funded projects. This meant local firms didn't just own a piece of a block they could own multiple blocks.

The second example is well-known debates over publicly funded baseball stadiums. Whether in Cleveland, LA, or elsewhere, there's always a heated discussion should whether public money be used to fund stadiums. Why or why not? These debates highlight the need for collaborative decision-making, balancing priorities, and ensuring that public interests are met. Ultimately, progress is built on understanding others' perspectives, advocating for what matters, and finding common ground.

This is a perfect example, and I'll keep it brief. When we joined the council, myself, Mayor Marion Barry, and others—we campaigned strongly against publicly financed stadiums. It was

the worst idea imaginable, we said. I remember Elijah arguing, “You can’t let them spend all that money on a baseball stadium. You’ve got to do something better with the budget.” We had just won, and then the moment of truth arrived: it was time to vote on the baseball stadium.

This was one of those pivotal moments. We had told everyone we wouldn’t vote for it. Then came the conversation. Mayor Barry approached me and said, “We need to talk.” So, we talked. He asked, “What’s important to you?” I told him, vocational education was important to me. Specifically, I wanted to rebuild Phelps Architecture, Engineering, and Construction High School to be the most modern high school in the District of Columbia.

Soon after, Mayor Tony Williams came to see me. Back then, the mayor would sit down, just as Ms. Carol mentioned, to talk things through. He asked what I wanted, and I listed three priorities. First, the creation of a state-of-the-art architecture, engineering, and construction high school to train our young people for good-paying jobs. Second, equity participation for Black businesses. Third, increased short-term housing for women affected by domestic violence.

In the end, I voted for the baseball stadium. Baseball came to the District of Columbia, but with the condition that the school had to be built. And let me be clear, for those who are legislators or aspiring to be: it wasn’t just about the budget or the legislation itself but about timing. The law ensured that the school opened the same year as the baseball stadium.

Now, here’s the irony. Nobody talks about the school or the vocational opportunities it created. Nobody remembers the equity participation or the housing for women. What they remember is the baseball stadium. But that’s the lesson. As Ms. Carol and Mr. Elijah pointed out, understanding the process, building relationships, and aligning priorities are what lead to meaningful outcomes—even if those outcomes aren’t always what people remember.

As we close, this has been a great panel because I think people need to understand one important thing, you have to understand the budget. Because guess what? If you’re an elected official anywhere in this country, there are people who are already in place who understand the budget. And most people aren’t going to take the time to teach you the budget because they know that the budget is power. When you understand it, that’s how you learn to use it as a tool to create the change you really want to make as you move forward.

Mrs. Carol, I want to give you the floor first for any closing remarks you’d like to make. As one of the pioneers, you’ve had the opportunity to do so much. People talk about you all over the country and the impact you’ve had, and you’ve mentored so many people who have followed in your footsteps. Some people may not know you and may be seeing you for the first time today. What advice would you give to them as they move into their new roles, whether as executives or elected officials?

Carol Thompson Cole: Building off of the example you’ve just described, what politics truly is the art of compromise. It takes everyone in that body coming together to vote and achieve what each of you wants to do. So, understanding people and developing relationships with them is absolutely crucial. I think the other critical aspect is being willing to be in it for the long haul. You may not be able to carry everything through during your time, but I always tell Tony Williams that many of the things he brought over the finish line were things I worked on during

the Barry administration. I wasn't there to see the ribbon cut or to see it happen, but I was happy that it did happen.

So, I think you have to look broadly and deeply, but you also have to be collaborative. Another important thing is, as you mentioned, you were a kid of SNCC. I first encountered SNCC when I was in college, as many members relocated to the University of Massachusetts Amherst and began teaching there. I had the opportunity to interact with them and learn about their activism, which helped me define what I wanted to do in my career. I was mentored by many of those individuals. It was Ivanhoe Donaldson who, when he realized I truly wanted to be a city administrator, told me to go learn from Elijah Rogers.

To your point, I learned a lot from him, but I also took a lot of beatings in the process and engaged in many debates. You have to understand the environment you're in, and you have to be bold. But you also need to be ready to fight the fight to achieve your goals. I think young people today have to understand that many are looking for instant gratification. That's not how you win the long and important battles. You have to be prepared and step up at the right time.

Kwame Brown: Oh, that's it. I mean, this is just amazing, right? Because of course, the same people, [Ivanhoe Donaldson](#), right? Courtland Cox, right? They would tell you to go see Mr. Rogers. And here we are, 30 years later, still hearing the same advice, go see Mr. Rogers! And the thing about Mr. Rogers is, he hasn't changed. He never changed. I used to talk to him almost a couple of times a week, and he still says the same exact thing he told me 20 years ago, and probably the same thing he told you 30 years ago, right?

That's a very interesting concept, and I say that because, of course, working with Courtland Cox, knowing [Reggie Robinson](#), knowing the whole SNCC crew they were a part of who I am, and they helped shape me into a tough person when it came to being prepared. One thing I'll tell you is, you have to be prepared. Ms. Cole, you said it perfectly, it's all about preparation.

There's none of this "microwaveable" approach where you show up and figure it out later. You need to be prepared, and you need to let people know you're prepared. That's how people take you seriously, especially when it comes to the allocation of resources. There's nothing worse than an unprepared legislator or elected official trying to get things done but not knowing what they're doing. That will cause people to lose respect for you, no matter what point you're at in your election. Mr. Rogers, I'd like to give you the floor for some final comments.

Elijah Rogers: Very well said, Mr. Chairman. This is a pivotal time in life for young people, especially those who are concerned about getting involved in local, state, or federal government. The future is ahead of you, and while it requires a lot of hard work and teamwork, you're going to upset some people along the way. However, if you stay focused on how to allocate resources and engage in team building to gain support for your goals, you can make a lasting difference.

When I look back over my career, the relationships we built 42 years ago in this district are still strong today. You can make a tremendous impact, but it requires hard work, sacrifice, and a commitment to change. When we took over in 1979, Marion Barry said he wanted a very diverse cabinet. We placed more professional women of color, highly educated and highly trained, in non-traditional positions. We had a whole range of talented people who were committed to

making a change.

So, to the young people today, especially those involved in the SNCC movement, I encourage you to get involved, do your homework, and understand the financial aspects of the county, city, state, or federal government, wherever you work, or even within your private organization. If you understand the financial aspects, people won't be able to play games with you. That's critical. So, as you move forward and make these changes, get your hands dirty. As we used to say, get involved in the financial aspects of your government.

Kwame Brown: No, thank you. Well said. As we close, it's important for those listening, especially within the SNCC organization, to listen to those who may be a bit older. As someone who is still young Mr. Rogers, I'm still young, it's not always easy, right? A lot of times, young people feel that they have a vision and something they want to accomplish. We've been to a few places and had our share of bruises. But it's important to pay attention to the generation before you. There's a lot you can learn. As one of my mentors told me, I'm driving the car while looking out the rearview mirror. And I said, okay, that makes sense.

He said, "I have a Hummer, and I'm driving the car while looking at the rearview mirror, son. And I'm trying to tell you what I just passed." For the first 20 minutes, I said, "Well, you know, I have a Hummer too. So if you ran over something, I'm gonna run over something, and it'll all be good." He replied, "Oh, you think so?" I said, "Yes." He then said, "The difference between your Hummer and mine, son, is that I have the army Hummer, and you have that new one that they just came out with, the kind where you can't even run over a penny without the front end getting torn up." The moral of the story is that, often, people tell you things that may be painful, but they are right, and they are trying to save you from making the same mistakes.

As someone who has been an elected official, and worked in the private sector, and in the nonprofit sector, I've seen it all, even had the privilege of being a fellow with the panelist, Ms. Carol, at the Kennedy School. I've been in every sector you can imagine, even on the federal side. If I could go back to my younger self and do something a little differently, I'd probably say, "Do things quicker when people tell you." Because when you don't, there are consequences.

So, I just want to say that this has been a great panel. We've had two experts here who laid out some fundamental things you can do to be successful as you navigate and create change—going from being an advocate outside to being an advocate inside with the power to use resources, like the budget, to create change that people need to see in their neighborhoods and communities. Once again, this has been wonderful. Happy 60th anniversary to the SNCC Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and all those involved. We're out.