

Earl H. Blaik, Oral History Interview – 12/2/1964
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Creator: Earl H. Blaik
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Biographical Note

Blaik was a Colonel in the United States Army, Athletic Director of the United States Military Academy from 1949-1958, and President John F. Kennedy's (JFK) personal representative as a civil rights arbitrator in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. In this interview, Blaik discusses JFK's love of football, civil rights arbitration in Birmingham, Alabama, and JFK's views on the system of appointments to West Point, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

Colonel Earl H. Blaik

December 2, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Let me ask you if you recall the first time that you met John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy].

BLAIK: Well, I remember him as a Senator.

MORRISSEY: Was that the first time that you met him?

BLAIK: I would imagine that it was. It could have been before but I don't believe so. His roommate, I think, was Torby Macdonald [Torbert H. Macdonald]. In those days, when Dartmouth teams were playing Harvard, I remember Torby and I knew Torby's father [John G. Macdonald], who was a football coach. I would think that probably coming down here and trying to get appointments and so forth was the first I knew the President, when he was a Senator. It could have been when he was a Congressman but my memory is bad. Anybody who has been coaching football has reason for trouble with his memory. So I would say that was the first time.

I remember one time seeing him in the hall of the Senate surrounded by about thirty women. He saw me coming up the hall and he wanted to get away, anything to get out from that group. That was the last time I saw him as a senator. Then I came down here to invite him to accept the Gold Medal Award from the National Football Hall of Fame. This was an honor which had gone to President Hoover [Herbert Clark Hoover],

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President Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower], General MacArthur [Douglas MacArthur] and, of course, the President accepted it. From this particular time on there developed a little closer association.

MORRISSEY: You didn't meet John Kennedy when he came to West Point with the Melville, Rhode Island, football squad?

BLAIK: No. He told me he was there. He led me to believe he was a player and he told a story about it. The most amazing thing about the President, as I remember him, was his recall—complete, total recall of things, things that he should not have known about or should have forgotten long since. He would come up with these things and I would be just perplexed and think, "Well, he anticipated me coming in here and he looked it up." But, you know, that is ridiculous. This is just his type of mind.

MORRISSEY: Do you mean scores of football games?

BLAIK: Individuals, games, and so forth. The first time I went to the White House was to invite him to receive the Gold Medal Award. I was with a committee and the minute he saw me with this group (he had a great love for football, as did the whole family), he came over to me and said, Do you remember so-and-so and so-and-so?" I said, "I sure do. They played for me at Dartmouth." And he said, "Indeed they did; they were all with me at Choate, but they went from Choate to Dartmouth and then you beat us six times I recall." I said, No, Mr. President, that's not quite correct. When I was

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at Dartmouth we played you seven times and we won seven times." Well, he laughed and enjoyed this very, very much and he said, Oh, yes, I recall." And surprisingly he said, "Well, I do recall that one game. That was the Hutchison game." The Hutchison game was one in which we did nothing but make twenty points; it was a muddy day. Harvard ran from the ten yard line to the ten yard line but never could score so we beat them twenty to nothing on Hutchison's three long runs. But the amazing fact to me was that he had remembered this and he remembered it in detail. So we got quite a boot out of the fact that we were discussing this matter and his memory was not quite right but was so close that it was remarkable.

MORRISSEY: Did he remark on the fact that his older brother, Joe Jr. [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.], had played football at Harvard?

BLAIK: He did. And he also remarked on the fact that I knew Bobby [Robert F. Kennedy], who had played in the 40's. Bobby had played at West

Point and I do recall him quite well as a player. I did not recall Joe at all. But it seemed to me this great love or whatever it was for football was certainly well advanced in the Kennedy family, certainly with the President.

The second time I came down here was in response to a call I got from the Attorney General. They were having great difficulty with the NCAA-AAU dispute. This was a very vicious fight. It was probably going to wreck our

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Olympic effort unless something was done. The President realized this and the Attorney General realized it quite well and they were striving for some way to get these two groups together so that we would have a united effort for the Olympics. They had to do something because these two groups were just miles apart and had come to the point where they were barring athletes from participation in college meets and vice versa in the AAU meets. I received a call from the Attorney General and he said that he would like to know whether I knew anyone who might arbitrate this difficulty which they were having and I said that I couldn't think of anyone offhand but I would think it over and call him back. Within ten minutes after I had hung up the phone it occurred to me that there was only one person I knew who could do this and do it well and probably succeed, because it was practically an impossible job. It certainly was worse than labor relations. The person I had in mind was General MacArthur. So immediately I called the Attorney General and told him there was only one person I knew who might do the job and that was General MacArthur. Because General MacArthur headed the Olympics in 1928, he was in a minor fight like this back in those days and he had a great interest in athletics. And the Attorney General said, "Well, this sounds like a fine suggestion. I'll call you back." Within five or ten minutes he called me back. In the meantime

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he had been in communication with the President and the President told him, "This is fine. But how do we get him?" So, the Attorney General said, "Could you get him?" And I said, "Well, I shall try." Then I proceeded to go see the General. The General has been a friend of mine for years, a very close friend. As a matter of fact, I had been a cadet under him back in the 20's. We had had an association of over forty years. I went to see the General and I told him what the President wished. The General looked at me and said, "Earl, I want to tell you something. If you're able to do what the President wishes or requests, this is always a duty. I am willing to do anything of this nature that the President wants done. It's a matter of duty as far as I am concerned and I will do it under one condition." I asked, "that's this, General?" He said, "That you act as my deputy." And I said, "I'll act as your deputy if you don't put out any publicity on it." I called back and told them. Immediately the President got in touch with General MacArthur and asked him to arbitrate.

This arbitration took place in January, 1963, and was a very, very difficult procedure. It took the best effort of General MacArthur. I think he probably gave them a flag waving pronouncement about every hour on the hour. At any rate, after two days of effort he got them together. I think that he was able to do so meant a great deal to the

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Olympics. Otherwise, we would not have had the concerted effort we did. Well, we got then together at 6:00 P.M. on a Saturday. I called the Attorney General at the White House and told him the result at 11:30 at night and he said, "Just hold the phone. The President wants to talk to you." So the President talked to me for just a minute. He said he was going to call the General in the morning and said he couldn't be more happy and emphasized that this meant a great deal to us. And, of course, it did. There was no question about it. But the main thing was that the President was extremely interested in this. It meant a great deal to our country in an international way, much more than the average person realized.

Months later, I got a call from the Attorney General and he said, "Do you think that you could get General MacArthur to go to Birmingham to settle that deplorable situation?" I said, "No. I wouldn't ask the General because I think this is asking too much of a man of his age and I'm sure the President would understand that. This is a man of eighty years of age and so on, and settling this problem is going to be most difficult." The Attorney General then said, "Do you have anyone you might suggest?" I just happened to think that there is one person who could do this job. I was thinking of General Kenneth Royall [Kenneth C. Royall]. Kenneth Royall had been Secretary of the Army. I knew that he had

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integrated the troops back in the 40's. I also knew that he was a Southerner. He came from North Carolina and was well accepted in Southern circles. He was a natural for the Birmingham job. The Attorney General said, "This is a fine suggestion. I'll call you back." And I said, "Well, you don't need to call me back. You just go ahead and get him. I wouldn't be able to get him although he is a neighbor of mine." He did get him and about three o'clock that afternoon I got a call from the Attorney General who said they were grateful to me for suggesting General Royall. Then he said, "I have one other request and that is that you serve with him." I said, "Well, you're talking to the wrong person. My image in this country is that of a football coach. To send me on a mission like this might cause people to misinterpret it." He said, "Well, the President thinks otherwise and he's already gotten Royall's decision to do it. Mr. Royall said that he wants you to do it with him." I said, "Let me think this over." He said, "Well, you only have an hour to think it over because we're going to announce something within an hour." I then sat down and thought it over and thought especially of what General MacArthur had said. This was a request from the President. This was a matter of duty if it was possible for a citizen to do it. I called the Attorney General and said I would do it.

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Then started our association as far as Birmingham was concerned. This meant that we were in and out of the White House for a long period of time. During that time I never went into the President's office without the President saying something about football. One day I went in and he said, "Do you remember the Melville team that came to West Point?" I said,

“Yes, I sure do.” He said, “We scared you, didn’t we?” I said, “Yes, Mr. President, you sure did.” He said “As I recall it, the score was thirteen to nothing.” I said, “Yes, Mr. President, you are correct. The score was thirteen to nothing at the end of the first period.” Well, the remarkable thing about this game was that Melville was ahead, for this was the era of the great Davis and Blanchard teams of the 40’s which went undefeated for three years. This was the Melville team which had some very fine amateur football players on it and some professionals too, and as I understood its the President was a member of that squad. So I said, “Well, Mr. President, do you remember the final score?” He said, “No, I don’t believe I do.” I said, “Well, the final score was fifty-five to thirteen.” So he got a great kick out of it as he probably remembered the score as well as I had.

Another time when we came back there to report, General Royall and myself, the Attorney General took us over. We stood outside the President’s office. Inside was the

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Ambassador from Russia, Mr. Rusk [Dean Rusk], Mr. Bundy [McGeorge Bundy], and a few others. They were just concluding their conference. The President was the most gracious person that certainly anyone could meet. He saw us out there and he beckoned to us to come in. We went in and he introduced us to the Ambassador from Russia. We talked for a few minutes, and then they were gone.

Then all of a sudden you might say commotion galore broke out. That isn’t quite the way to put it, but the youngsters came in—little John [John F. Kennedy, Jr.] and Caroline [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy]. One of the pictures that was taken with little John peeking out under the desk, if you will recall, was taken at that time. Interestingly enough, they just romped around there like any natural youngsters would. They were wonderful. Little John went over and tackled Uncle Bobby and the President got a lot of fun out of it and then all of a sudden the scene was over. The President had had enough. He was getting a little tired of it, so he clapped his hands and asked for the nurse to come in and away they went. This was a wonderful family scene. It was really inspiring to see it.

After that we sat down and talked about the Birmingham situation. We had gone a long way with it and had made considerable progress. The President was exceedingly happy. During the conversation the difficulty with Russia regarding transportation on the autobahn was then occurring. The President was talking back and forth on the phone with

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Mr. McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] two or three times. This was a very serious situation, touch-and-go at that time. I was greatly impressed with the fact that the President would be talking about something extremely serious that you would think would take all of his attention, then turn right back to us and continue the conversation. This occurred two or three times while we were there for more than an hour and a half. During the hour and a half the butler came in (or whoever it was, his aide) to bring him a bowl of soup. This was about 7:30. He had his soup as we conversed about our progress in Birmingham. Then I said to him, “Mr. President, how is your sense of humor?” He said, “Pretty good. Even under tension it was fine. Nothing seemed to bother him. This impressed me no end, particularly being a

football coach. All these troubles and so on, occupying his attention. Anyway, I said, "I want to tell you what we saw down in Birmingham. On an automobile down there we saw a sign which read: "Kennedy for King—Goldwater for President." Well, at first the President didn't quite get it. Neither did his brother the Attorney General. Then all of a sudden it dawned on him what this was about. This sign on an automobile meant the President was for Martin Luther King [Martin Luther King, Jr.] and the automobile owner was for Goldwater [Barry M. Goldwater] for President. This was going around that Southern city. The President got a great kick out of that. He enjoyed it very, very much.

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We were supposed to go back to give our report to the President on the Monday following the assassination. Our report was then to be filed and it was going to be published. Of course, we understood, when President Johnson [Lyndon Baines Johnson] came in, that this was not his assignment and so on but what we regretted mostly was that we had promised the citizens of Birmingham that we would tell the story as we saw it and let the chips fall where they may. But this we were never able to do, and we were never able to explain to the people in Birmingham why we did not do it. In essence, this pretty much covers my confrontation with the President.

MORRISSEY: Let me ask you what kind of a reception you got in Birmingham as representatives of the President?

BLAIK: I would say that our reception in Birmingham was one of being courteously aloof. We were met at the plane by the Mayor [Albert Boutwell] and a committee, which is the usual way they meet anyone coming into a situation such as that. We were taken to a luncheon which was pretty well staged. Then we said we didn't want any help from anyone except that we wanted a list of names and we would get in touch with them when we needed help. Actually, I think there was a feeling that they might be able to control us and control what we were doing. The next thing we did was to give out a statement to the press that we were here for a purpose and so forth, appointed by the President, and that we would not give any

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release whatsoever until our task was accomplished. We never held a press conference, never made a formal statement until we had fully completed our task.

When we got there the communication between the Negroes and the white citizens of Birmingham had been practically nil. Actually, for five months they had no communication whatsoever. This was a tremendous task trying to get them together. We met with groups of anywhere from ten to twenty. We saw over five hundred people. We would give them as long as they wanted and we allowed them to discuss what they wished. We went from the extremes on the one side to the extremes on the other side. We went out and visited in Negro homes. The only man who would not come before us was Bull Connor [Theophilus Eugene Connor], who, of course, had been one of the main segregationists in this whole matter. He

was chief of police when they had all that difficulty. But in general we were able to set up a biracial committee consisting of fifteen whites and nine Negroes, and this committee has functioned ever since.

It is interesting to look back and note that actually they have had no real racial disturbance in Birmingham since this committee was formed. It doesn't mean that anything is completely cured but the main point is that this was the first breakthrough. I would say that this was a great satisfaction to us because it came hard, and anything that comes with difficulty, once arrived at, is worth having.

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MORRISSEY: How much time did you spend in Birmingham?

BLAIK: We were in Birmingham about two weeks, and in touch with various groups for another month. Then we went back for a couple of days and then we wrote our report. When I say we wrote it, I mean we wrote snatches of it and talked over what we were doing with the group in the Attorney General's office—Burke Marshall and others—and also went over, as a rule, to report to the President. This was very important because it was the first major effort in a Southern city to get the groups together. I thought that as a whole the citizens of Birmingham (and many were extremists) were very fair. It was just a question of getting people to sit down and talk. This is pretty much true internationally or elsewhere. If you can get people to talk they come finally to some conclusion. Either that, or they get so tired that they have to come to a conclusion. Anyway this is what happened.

MORRISSEY: Offhand, do you recall anything about John Kennedy's interest in West Point appointments when he was a Congressman?

BLAIK: Yes, I do. I remember very well. Congressman Kennedy wrote an article, I believe for the *Saturday Evening Post*, about what he believed should be done with respect to appointing cadets to West Point. At that particular time I did not agree with him in total. I felt that he had arrived at a one-type individual and I thought that the Corps should be a little more balanced. I agreed with what he was doing

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except I thought he should have gone on just a little more than he did. However, the interesting aspect about it was that it was the first time any Congressman or anyone on the Hill, as far as I know, had ever been bold enough to put his thoughts on appointing cadets in writing. This was very important. It was very much like the future President.

MORRISSEY: In regard to the controversy between the AAU and the NCAA, and in regard as well to the President's interest in the Olympics, did he ever discuss with you the matter of the physical fitness of American youth?

BLAIK: He did to a certain degree, yes. Of course, he was vitally interested in the physical fitness program, which he had put under Bud Wilkinson [Charles B. Wilkinson], the football coach at Oklahoma. However, he had set up the working of the AAU and the Olympics and the NCAA through a different organization which, I believe, was under Mr. Rusk, the Secretary of State. This came under—I've forgotten his name now—he played guard. It's terrible to forget this name.

MORRISSEY: He played guard for whom?

BLAIK: He played guard at Harvard on the same team with Bobby Kennedy. Well (pause), don't ever tell him that I forgot

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his name. I know him so well. This is what happens with age.¹

The President did talk a little about the physical fitness program. I think that they were making progress. His idea and the fact that he backed things with the energy and the wholeheartedness that he did made it possible for a program like that one to be a success. Unless you had the President or someone like him backing it, as he did in the same way with the NCAA-AAU dispute, this would never have been possible. And even with him backing General MacArthur as he did, and with the stature of General MacArthur, it was touch-and-go whether they would ever come to an agreement. I can assure you that they (the NCAA-AAU) are now getting back to fighting where they were before because this was just a hiatus created by MacArthur until after the '64 Olympics. That's all.

MORRISSEY: Did the President ever comment on the lack of financial backing for our athletes who go to the Olympics?

BLAIK: Yes, he did. The question arose, and quite rightly, whether the government should get involved in something of this

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nature. This is something that the AAU wouldn't welcome. The President wanted to help but still he didn't want to appear to be dictating in any way or be placed in a position like Russia that controls its athletic program. This would have been resented by the athletes and those who run the sports of this country because it would have been governmental dictation. His desire was to be helpful without controlling. This was very important.

MORRISSEY: Did he ever remark to you on any of the Army-Navy games that he went to?

¹ In editing a preliminary draft of this transcript, Col. Blaik recalled that the individual he had in mind was Nick Rodis [Nicholas Rodis] of the State Department.

BLAIK: Well, he was very disappointed in the first Army-Navy game he saw. Incidentally, he had invited me to go with him to the Army-Navy game that he did not see of course. Yes, as a matter of fact, after the first Army-Navy game he saw, immediately he wanted to know what was wrong with the Army.

MORRISSEY: Do you recall what year that was?

BLAIK: Well, that was his first year in office.

MORRISSEY: As President?

BLAIK: As President, yes.

MORRISSEY: 1961?

BLAIK: 1961, yes. I've forgotten the score—but it was horrendous. He came back on the train (this was told to me by those in the party). Most of the time was taken up by discussing what's wrong with the Army and what can we do to help them. I never had that help when I was a coach [Laughter] from

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higher up. The President was concerned, and rightly so. It was his belief that when you had the Army and the Navy playing before the entire country, as it were, looking at it on television, that the people judged the academies to a degree on how they played and how the game went. If you have a very sad performance on one side, as the Army gave, and the other side is overwhelmingly good, as Navy was, the situation is bad. This was something that couldn't be because it left the wrong impression with the country. He did say that he was going to change things a little. As a matter of fact, I am sure that the increase in the corps of cadets today which has been authorized by Congress so that it would be on a par with Annapolis, (and this also took place with respect to the Air Force Academy) grew out of the fact that he thought the difference between the enrollment at Annapolis, which is forty-four hundred authorized, against twenty-five hundred for West Point and also, I think, for the Air Academy, caused this great difference in football ability. Whether that's true or not, the facts are that now they have the same authorized enrollment as the Naval Academy. Pretty soon you are going to find about a hundred million dollars going into West Point to get ready for the increment of whatever it is—twelve hundred or fourteen hundred more cadets.

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MORRISSEY: Do you recall that he ever commented about either the Army or the Navy scheduling the Air Force in football?

BLAIK: No, he never did comment to me about that. I'm sure he discussed it with others. I would have been delighted to have discussed it with him because I was Athletic Director at West Point when the schedule was being made. We were all for playing the Air Force. My feeling in the matter was that this was a striving young academy that needed money and that they should put their pride away and play the game in Chicago and make some money so they could finance all their sports program out there. They would find out sooner or later that this was a must. Also, I did not believe that the West Point cadets should go out to an unfair difference in conditions. The cadets were not tuned to it. You can come from a high to a low and it won't affect you but if you go from a low to a high you have to adjust or have a very large squad. A college with a large squad could go out there and compensate for the difference. But I didn't think West Point could and I wasn't for giving the Air Force or any other academy a preferential position.

MORRISSEY: Are there any other matters that you think we ought to comment on? Any specific recollections of any other meetings with the President?

BLAIK: Although I had seen him as a Senator and visited him I never had the appreciation until I walked in to his White House

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Office that he was a man of great physical stature. In the first place I didn't realize he was as tall as he was. He certainly was over six feet. He had a fine physique. Outwardly, just to look at him as he was, you had the impression of virility, drive, youth, even though he was in his forties.

Also, I was completely convinced that I understood why Mr. Nixon [Richard Milhous Nixon] had lost the election. The President had a warmth and charm, and something that is difficult to have for big men—an attention to individuals regardless of their position in life. He was the type that made you think at the moment you were exceedingly important. This is a wonderful attribute. His warmth and personality and all that was most impressive. You could realize why on television Kennedy took this country. This is a quality that few people have. The ordinary man in political life isn't able to transmit to the public what the late President was able to transmit. He was just a natural, that's all. This has nothing to do with the politics of the situation. This is just how a leader can be a leader, without leading, by just the fact that when he stands there you see him as a leader. There is something about him you may not be able to describe but immediately it rings a certain chord in you which responds immediately to his synchronization, or whatever you want to call it.

MORRISSEY: One matter comes to my mind. A moment ago you mentioned that when John Kennedy was a Congressman and you first read

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his proposals about appointments to the two Service academies you were not in favor of them. I assume you changed your mind later?

BLAIK: I thought his approach was only in part correct, meaning that it did not go far enough. He had in his approach used the competitive examination system. Well, my own feeling is that in doing so you don't necessarily get the best Army officer. If some of our great generals had been forced to take a competitive examination they never would have made the battlefield. It did as far as graduating men high in the class accomplish a goal. You never lost a man. But this wasn't necessarily the whole criterion as far as I was concerned. Also, I had the feeling that if you gave competitive examinations to all who came in and used that as the criterion, then you would be getting a one-type individual, rather than getting a balanced Corps. For example, you're from Dartmouth and you know that in selecting at Dartmouth they will even go down and take someone who they think is a poor student now but has a possibility of being a good one. If he were to submit himself to a competitive examination he would never get into Dartmouth at all. But in the end, they're betting on a few of this type and I think the records prove that they've done pretty well. At Harvard, for example, as far as athletics are concerned, they have now come to the conclusion that the athlete gives them something that

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they never thought was possible before because they find that athletes have a curiosity as well as a type of mind and leadership which they never before were willing to admit as being anything above the normal. And so today, it's much easier for an athlete to get into Harvard than it ever was before. This I'm sure the President would have loved [laughter].

MORRISSEY: Do you have anything else you think we ought to put on the tape?

BLAIK: No, I haven't anything else.

MORRISSEY: Thank you very much, Col. Blaik.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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