

George C. Wallace Oral History Interview –JFK #1, 5/25/1967
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Wallace, George C.; Governor of Alabama, (1963-1967). Wallace discusses John F. Kennedy's [JFK] Administration, his thoughts regarding JFK on a personal level, and his opinion on federal jurisdiction. He addresses civil rights, the integration of schools, and voting, among other issues.

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George C. Wallace

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Democratic National Convention, Alabama delegation, 1956
1	John F. Kennedy's [JFK] run for vice-president, 1956
2	Wallace's thoughts on JFK's run for president, 1960
3	Democratic National Convention, Alabama delegation, 1960
4	Wallace's campaign for governor, 1962
4, 11, 16	JFK's Administration
6	Civil rights
8, 14	Integration of schools
12	Voting rights

Oral History Interview

with

GEORGE C. WALLACE

May 25, 1967
Montgomery, Alabama

By John Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: Were you at the 1956 Convention, and if so, what were your reactions, if you recall, to the race that Senator Kennedy made for the vice-presidential nomination?

WALLACE: I was a delegate in the 1956 Convention and, as you probably recall, the majority of the Alabama delegation voted for Senator Kennedy for the vice presidential nomination, as I believe all the states of the South did with the exception of Tennessee and maybe a few votes in Florida and a few in Alabama that supported Kefauver [Estes Kefauver]. I voted on the first ballot for another candidate, and along with others we changed to Senator Kennedy because most of the Southern delegation did support him against the late mezzanine floor of the La Salle Hotel by prearrangement because he had asked me to carry one of his sisters to the Alabama delegation at the same time our delegation was caucusing or meeting. Mrs. Shriver [Eunice Kennedy Shriver], I believe, was the sister of the then Senator Kennedy that I carried to the Alabama delegation and presented. We did support the late President Kennedy in the Convention, that is, the Alabama delegation did.

STEWART: Do you recall if most of this support, and particularly your support of him, was more a pro-Kennedy or an anti-Kefauver thing?

WALLACE: Well, frankly, most of the support in the Southern delegations, although I cannot speak for the Southern delegations, was maybe against Senator Kefauver. However, Senator Kennedy's record and his association with members of the Congress from the South had been very pleasant, and he had many friends among the Southern members of the House and of the Senate. This was some pro-Kennedy support. I think a lot of it was anti-Kefauver, but they had a high regard for Senator Kennedy also.

STEWART: After the Convention, of course, he began to become a fairly active candidate for the nomination in 1960. In 1959, then Governor Patterson [John N. Patterson] endorsed Senator Kennedy as his candidate for the presidency. Do you recall what your feelings were in these years, in '58 and '59?

WALLACE: Well, I wasn't in a position of office holding in 1959. I do recall that Governor Patterson did endorse Senator Kennedy. I had the pleasure of being with Senator Kennedy after that when he spoke to the Alabama League of Municipalities in Birmingham, I believe in 1957. I remember him cracking the joke that had he been successful in the 1956 Convention, it might have ended his political career. It might have been over. What he meant was that Mr. Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] and Mr. Kefauver had been defeated. I had the pleasure of driving him back to the airport to catch his airplane after the League of Municipalities meeting.

STEWART: Do you recall if there was any discussion at that time of his future ambitions?

WALLACE: I'm sure there was. I just don't recall the conversation. There were three or four of us in the automobile, and mainly we talked about the pleasure of having him in Alabama. He was very personable, as you know, and he was a very lovable character in politics. In fact, I've always said, and said it before, that his family has been and is

[-2 -]

one of the most attractive families in the country and one of the most attractive political families although I do not agree with all the philosophy of the Kennedys and of the late President. I have a high respect and regard for them even though we differ politically. I'm sure we did discuss some of his future plans, but I don't recall the details at the moment. It was more light chatter and appreciation of his seeing fit to visit our state.

STEWART: What was your position before the 1960 Democratic Convention? Who were you supporting, if anyone?

WALLACE: I don't recall other than Lyndon Johnson, being a Texan and a Southerner. Naturally we sometimes have these cleavages. He had supported measures and fought measures in the Congress that made him more satisfactory, we thought to the people of Alabama. I would say at that time that, as between Senator Kennedy and President Johnson, maybe our choices would have been President Johnson. Although I'd like for clarification to say that we are not pleased with President Johnson's policies, especially on the domestic scene. We are talking about on the domestic scene. We are talking about on the domestic scene now. Most of the people here, I think, as between those two, probably would have been for President Johnson. Although Senator Kennedy, the late President, was highly respected by all of us.

STEWART: What role did you play at the 1960 Convention? Were you at all involved?

WALLACE: I played no role at all. I was not a delegate and I did not run for delegate. I'd been defeated for governor in '58, and I was traveling the state, speaking and mending fences, I suppose you would say, getting ready for the campaign of '62.

STEWART: You took no active part...

WALLACE: I took no active part in the campaign of '60, although the people of this state, a majority of them, supported the Democratic ticket.

[-3-]

STEWART: The electors didn't vote for the...

WALLACE: Well, we elect our electors in Alabama, and sometimes that's a little confusing even to the voters because so many people run. The people did elect some electors in the May primary, I believe five unpledged and six for Kennedy. But anyway, the state voted the Democratic ticket and, in my judgment, were voting for President Kennedy. The electors are free agents, and they had been elected in the primary running on certain platforms and so they did split their vote. I believe Senator Kennedy, the late President, received six or five. I've forgotten the case.

STEWART: Right, it was six to five. Byrd [Harry F. Byrd] received six.

WALLACE: He got six. Is that correct? That's right.

STEWART: In your 1962 campaign, what was your overall position as far as the programs and policies of the Kennedy Administration?

WALLACE: Well, as in most elections prior to that time, neither candidate nor platform

was absolutely satisfactory to the people of Alabama. But we'd been placed in that position so many times that we had to take a choice. The majority of the people did choose to support President Kennedy. I would say that the people of Alabama have never been, in modern times at least, satisfied with the Democratic Party platform or the Republican Party platform.

STEWART: Now I was asking about your 1962 campaign. To what extent were the policies and practices of the Kennedy Administration a factor in that campaign?

WALLACE: Well, the Kennedy Administration was elected in '60. And in '62, there was no issue involved in that campaign insofar as the national party was concerned.

[-4-]

STEWART: You ran for Governor in '62...

WALLACE: '62, not '60, and that was two years after the President had been elected. The policies of the Kennedy Administration played no part, other than our opposition generally to the federal government continuing to take over, under the Kennedy Administration, the public school systems and the domestic institutions. We were very much opposed to President Kennedy's so-called civil rights proposals. This issue really wasn't an issue because all the candidates in the race in '62 espoused the same principles in that regard. The Kennedy Administration was an issue in the sense that the candidates were all opposed to the federal government trying to take over and run the domestic affairs of the states. But that was political, it was not personal.

I think that every one of the candidates had a high regard for the President personally, as I did. When I spoke in '63 in Boston on television stations, asked about President Kennedy, I said, "We differ with him politically to a great extent, but we've never said anything that reflected upon him personally because he was a great personality and came from an attractive family. We had the highest personal regard for President Kennedy." And I did. I think one of the most tragic moments in American history forever will be the brutal assassination of President Kennedy in his early days when he was President of the United States.

STEWART: Had you had any contact with either President Kennedy or the Administration during 1961 and '62?

WALLACE: No. I had a letter from Senator Kennedy in 1958, just prior to the primary. In fact I was supposed, according to many newspaper people, to win the race in '58. I was running against a man whose father had been assassinated after he was elected attorney general, and it was very hard to overcome the sympathy vote for a

young man whose father had been slain. I did receive a letter from him stating that some of his mutual friends in Alabama had said that I was leading in the gubernatorial

[-5-]

campaign. I do not mean to say that Senator Kennedy was expressing any preference or anything of that sort, but he did allude to that.

STEWART: As you assumed the office of governor late in January of 1963, what generally were your expectations as far as problems with the Kennedy Administration?

WALLACE: Well, I expected the same problems that we would have had if the Republicans had been elected. On the domestic scene, both national parties were committed to a program of further intrusion into the rights of the states. And I'm sure they were honest in their belief and attitude. We expected that and did have that with President Kennedy. But we would have also had it if Nixon [Richard M. Nixon] had been president. I think we would have had it if anyone of the people who tried to get the nominations of both parties had been elected president.

STEWART: Were there any specific problems that you saw on the horizon...

WALLACE: I saw on the horizon the proposed civil rights legislation, so called, which is an intrusion upon local government. They take over domestic institutions such as hospitals, schools, and infringement upon property rights of citizens when you talk about who you can sell your home to and who you cannot. Yes, we saw that on the horizon and that existed. We had the take-over of our public school system by court decree, at the insistence of the Justice Department during Mr. Kennedy's Administration.

STEWART: In May of 1963, President Kennedy made a trip into this area, primarily to some TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] facility.

WALLACE: That is correct. And I met him. We had been in Alabama very much opposed to many of the proposals of the President on the so-called

[-6-]

civil rights field. There were people who would question me, "Are you going to meet the President?" Of course, I said, "Certainly, I'm going to meet the President, unless the President doesn't want me to meet him, because he is the President of the United States and we are happy to have him in this state. It's a great honor to have the President of the nation to visit your state."

I was happy to be able to meet the President at the TVA facilities in north Alabama. I flew with him in his helicopter to Huntsville, and we had a pleasant chat. I met him at the helicopter, and I walked with him. I recall one time I was getting a little behind, and he said, "Come on, Governor." And then, I believe, we went into the restroom, and when we came out, we went up on the stand. When we came down, of course, the crowd engulfed the President. And I remember him turning around to me and saying, "You're going to ride with me to Huntsville, aren't you?" And I said, "Yes, sir, Mr. President, if you want me." And he said, "Sure, come on." So I went with the President, and we had a nice talk. At that time they were having the demonstrations in Birmingham, and of course the President was very concerned and hoping that these matters could be worked out. And they eventually were worked out. I noticed he was overly concerned about the matter and was very interested in trying to see that things could be worked out so everybody would be satisfied.

STEWART: Did you recall any of the specifics of your discussion on the helicopter?

WALLACE: Well, yes, I can recall some of the conversation. He talked about how beautiful the Tennessee Valley was and the beautiful river. He watched the scenery, and was very impressed with it. He discussed the Birmingham demonstrations and, he was concerned. There had been some complaint that Negroes were not employed in some of the business establishments, which of course was not correct. There have been Negroes employed in business establishments in this state since a hundred years before I was born because that's part of our life. People work together, and there is no Negro, non-white unemployment to speak of in Alabama now or then. He said that he hoped the establishments would employ people of all races. Which I

[-7-]

said, "They do now, Mr. President. And then, on the other hand, I do not feel that government ought to try to tell private businesses who they should employ. I certainly think that business should employ people because of ability." We discussed that generally, and he was hoping that there could be a getting together and a cessation of those demonstrations.

STEWART: What were your feelings on the contacts that the Kennedy Administration was maintaining with the leaders of so-called civil rights groups?

WALLACE: We felt that maybe his Administration was over solicitous in their contact with the so-called civil rights leaders and not taking into account the attitude of people who were trying to see it more objectively. Although I do not blame the President. I think it was only natural to listen to the so-called civil rights advocates in view of the fact that the propaganda through the news media, in a majority of instances, had led people to believe that there was much mistreatment and discrimination. I think time has borne out the fact that many of the things that we said at that time have now come to pass, that there are many leaders of this movement who are not interested in solving problems but interested in creating problems and compounding problems. Some of the

leaders of the movement at that time have today now been criticized by the associates of the former President. But, of course, he had no way of knowing. And I certainly don't impugn the President's motives. His motives were, in his heart, good. And I never did impugn the motives of President Kennedy because I think that he was doing what he considered to be right and fair. I think he was mistaken in this matter, in many instances, but it was a mistake of the head and not of the heart.

STEWART: Moving on to the problems surrounding the University of Alabama in June of 1963, did the President advise you to stay away from Tuscaloosa at that time?

[-8-]

WALLACE: Well, of course, I don't know that the President advised me. I didn't have any conversation, I don't believe, with the President personally about the matter. I did talk to the now Senator Robert Kennedy when he was the Attorney General. He came to Montgomery and talked to me in this office for an hour and twenty-two minutes. We recorded that conversation, knowingly, of course, to him, and we had our recorder on the table there. We both agreed that we would not release the text of the tape unless both mutually agreed. I can say that Senator Kennedy, then Attorney General Robert Kennedy, did not come off of his position at all. And neither did I come off of my position. And I think that when we left, the attitude was, well, we both felt the same as when we both came together.

I do know that the President did issue a cease and desist order to me from interference in Tuscaloosa. And I believe that did, in effect, call for me not to be in Tuscaloosa. But I felt that the President had no right to issue a cease and desist order to the governor of a state and that I was not trying to defy the law or a court order. We must abide by the court orders as bad as they are. We must abide by many of these laws as bad as they are. If we refuse to abide by orders, we would, of course, have an anarchist situation. I wanted to raise a constitutional question as governor through a citation for contempt to then be adjudicated in the federal courts as to who in the final analysis can run the schools of this state: the governor, the legislature, the state of Alabama, or the Justice Department of the federal government. They refused to raise that question with me by violating the Constitution and bringing in federal troops contrary to Article IV, Section 4. So President Kennedy did issue a cease and desist order aimed at me as a governor of Alabama, which, of course, I did not abide by because no such order was legal and valid in my judgment.

But I would say again that the President of the United States did what he considered that he ought to do. And I've never impugned his motives, and I never lost my personal respect for him. In fact, I had a high personal respect not only for his ability but him as a person. I am proud to say that never did I say anything in my political career that reflected upon him personally. It was all political philosophy,

[-9-]

as now I object to President Johnson's political philosophy on the domestic scene, but I've always said I have a high regard for him personally. I respect the presidency and I respect anybody who has been elevated to that high position by the people of this nation.

STEWART: Do you recall in this meeting with Senator Kennedy what, if any, concessions the Administration was willing to make, to try to...

WALLACE: We were not willing to make any concessions.

STEWART: Were they?

WALLACE: They were not willing to make any concessions, no. And that's the reason that we went ahead and carried out my plans and my promise to stand and raise the legal question at the University of Alabama which I did for that purpose. I feel that I made my point in showing that for political expediency, they were violating the Constitution of our country. I wasn't trying to defy the law for defiance sake. I was wanting to raise another question because I was the governor of the state. And the governor of the state's standing is entirely different from that of a person leading a mob in the streets, which I oppose.

STEWART: What, if I may ask, ever happened to the tape of that meeting? Has this since been made public?

WALLACE: What happened to the tape made of that meeting? I have a copy of the tape and also Senator Kennedy does.

STEWART: Have the contents of it been made public?

WALLACE: No. We haven't made the contents public. We both agreed that if we ever made them public that it would have upon mutual agreement. And so far we just haven't made the tape public. There's nothing in the tape that would reflect upon Senator Kennedy's position, I can assure you that. He was very strong and firm, as he is very cool and calculating in all business. He was very firm.

[-10-]

I might say that there was no concession that I wanted to make nor I could make in keeping with the promise and pledge I'd made to the people in our state.

STEWART: Were there other people...

WALLACE: Yes, there were other people in here. Mr. Ed E. Reid was here, who is since deceased. I believe Mr. Burke Marshall, and also Mr. Trammell [Seymore Trammell], in this state administration, was present.

STEWART: The Kennedy Administration, as they, I think, did in many states, made a great effort to stay in contact with a number of business leaders and educators and other people throughout the state in an attempt to resolve some of these civil rights problems. What were your reactions to this whole effort? Were you generally in agreement or in favor of this?

WALLACE: Of course, I'm generally in agreement with the matter of negotiation with business leaders and labor leaders and anybody else to try to work out problems. That's the American system, to try to meet in good faith across the table. However, we have found that in dealing with some of the militant civil rights advocates, as those in Washington have now found, is that their tactic is completely left wing. I'm not accusing everybody in the civil rights movement as left-wingers or Communists. But the Communist movement is involved. It was involved. It's involved now. The strategy of the militants is that when you sit down at the table and make a concession, then they come back later with another concession; you make that one, and they come back with another one; and yet another one. So there is no way to concede on matters of basic principle and attack on the property ownership system.

I think the people have found out now that some of the so-called civil rights advocates who talked about schools, then got to talking about housing, and Vietnam. So I don't think that any negotiation with some of the militants has ever made one whit of difference insofar as solving of problems. However, there are many folks who are conscientious in this field. And when you meet with them, they are not objective.

[-11-]

STEWART: Where did you feel your whole resistance to the matter of school integration would lead? Did you feel and, probably, do you still feel that given the powers of the federal government, that it is inevitable that they will succeed in what they are trying to do?

WALLACE: Well, I don't know whether they are going to succeed in the matter of compulsion and coercion in the school system which they are attempting now. A big fight in this country at this very moment is against compulsion and coercion, picking people up in one section of a city and sending their children to school in another section. That's being opposed in New York, in California. And it goes beyond the matter of integration and segregation. I do not recommend segregation for any school system in the United States, other than I believe that is in the best interest of all the people of our own state. I only recommend that each state have the right to determine the policies of their own school systems. I don't recommend any sort of school system for any other state in the union. That's not any of my business. I feel the people on that level can best determine what is in the best interest of their own children. That was the basic issue involved in the Kennedy Administration and now the Johnson Administration and even the Eisenhower Administration with the states, the right of local government, the Constitutional rights of the

states because there's nothing in the Constitution that gives the federal government any say-so over the public school system. And I'll tell you where it's leading at the present moment: it's leading to great discontent and dissatisfaction in this country with theoreticians and bureaucrats trying to run people's schools and determine what's in the best interest of their children when the people know best themselves. And it's going to lead, although this tape is not supposed to be talking about '68 politics, it's going to lead to a shakeup politically in this country.

STEWART: What generally was your position in the whole program that the Administration had undertaken in the area of voting rights?

[-12-]

WALLACE: Well, of course, I believe that any citizen of the country, regardless of his race or color, is entitled to vote. But the Constitution of the United States says that the qualifications of voters is a matter for the states. And whenever a program was instituted.... The legislation passed after the '64 elections had applied only to the five states that voted against Mr. Johnson. You know, that's very ludicrous. It's very unfair. It's savage legislation that says that an illiterate can be registered to vote in Alabama. But that same illiterate when he moves to New York cannot vote. So an illiterate has more civil rights in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Louisiana, and South Carolina than they have in other states of the union. However, there may have been a few instances when some local registrar boards have discriminated. I mean that may have been the case. But you had thirteen statutes on the statute books already to cure that. And all it took was a simple order of a court to go in and remove that small bit of discrimination that existed, wherever it existed.

We had one college professor, from a college in this state, who went all over the country saying that "I'm a college graduate, and I tried to register to vote in Alabama, and they wouldn't let me register to vote." And he was telling the truth. But on the form for registration in Alabama, it asked these questions. I believe the question was like this: Do you belong to an organization cited as subversive, that advocates the overthrow of the government by force or violence? And I believe that he didn't answer that question. The other question was: Would you bear arms in defense of your country in time of war? And this professor answered, "No." And so he was turned down as a result of refusal to answer one question and answering that he would not bear arms in defense of his country. So he was telling the truth, but it was a half truth and was overplayed.

People have always voted in Alabama, regardless of their color. And I think they are entitled to. But I think that they ought to be qualified under the laws of the state. We object to the theory that only the folks in Washington have morality and integrity and ability and will do the right thing. We believe local people will do right the same as bureaucrats at the Justice Department.

[-13-]

STEWART: Did you feel that the President and the Attorney General completely understood your motivation and your feelings in this whole matter?

WALLACE: I'm not sure whether they understood my motivation in the matter. I'm sure that they knew that I was motivated by a desire to defend our school system, and that I was representing the attitude of the people of this state that elected me. I think they understood my motivation. I don't think they agreed with it.

STEWART: But you did feel that...

WALLACE: I feel that they understood that I was doing what I had promised to do. And that the people of Alabama wanted me to do it. But I think that they believed that I was mistaken and that the people of Alabama were mistaken. Of course, I think they were mistaken. But, of course, those are honest differences.

STEWART: In the fall of 1963, there were some further difficulties over the proposed integration of schools, I think primarily in Birmingham. Do you recall any contacts you had with the Attorney General at that time?

WALLACE: I don't recall any contact. I didn't have any contact by telephone, and I don't recall any telegram contact. I'm sure there was contact made in the sense that there were Justice Department officials throughout the state and were in Birmingham. But I don't believe they contacted me. I could be mistaken on that. But I think that President Kennedy and the Attorney General, Mr. Kennedy, knew there wasn't much need in contacting me to work out any agreement because I was never going to agree to the take-over of the public school system. I understood, of course, that the court orders had to be obeyed, but it was their duty to enforce them and not mine.

[-14-]

STEWART: Did you have any other telephone conversations or direct contacts during the whole year of 1963 with the President or the Attorney General other than the ones you already mentioned?

WALLACE: I don't recall having any telephone conversation with the President or the Attorney General at all in '63. I believe the only conversation that I had with the President was when he visited Alabama and I was on the helicopter with him, and with the Attorney General in this office. I don't recall any other, but, of course, you know, as a governor, you get so many calls. And you are with the President on meetings and so much that it is hard to remember. But I'm sure there was no other contact, other than contact with them filing suits against us in which they made me a party. There may have been official communications sent through our office, I just have to check the files on that.

STEWART: Were you at all fearful that Alabama would be hurt economically because of

all of the problems you were having with...

WALLACE: Well, no. I never did feel that we'd be hurt economically. In fact, we had more industry development in the last four years during my administration than we had in any ten-year period previous. In fact, in 1963, the first year of my administration, Alabama was number two in the South of new industry. In 1964 we were number one. In 1965 we were number one with six hundred twenty-three million dollars of new and expanded industry. Then in 1966 we were number three. So we have occupied the number two position, number one position twice and the number three position in a four year period. A billion, eight hundred million dollars worth. But, of course, we thought we were right and feel we are now in principle. We think that's shown by the fact that people in our country are reacting even favorably toward our position now since they found out we are not against people because of color, but we are four principles and philosophy of government. We took the position that if you are hurt, you might lose some industry. What if you do? After all, we are not going to lose our conscience. And we're

[-15-]

not going to lose our self-respect. So we stood for what we believed in. We believe in it now, and we continue to stand for it. We have found that many industries have come to Alabama and told us they came because this state has stood so strong for Constitutional government and for the property ownership system which is a part and parcel of the attack that's being carried on now by the militants.

STEWART: Were you fearful that the federal government, through the various projects, would create some detrimental impact on Alabama?

WALLACE: Of course, we always think of those things. I think we are living in a day and age in which the government has you in the position that if you don't do so and so, we are going to cut your funds away from you. So we do have government by fear. Yes, we do have that. However, I never felt that President Kennedy would cripple this state or do anything like that because of the people of Alabama standing for principles and standing for what they believe to be right. I think he respected that. I always considered President Kennedy an honest man. He believed in what he advocated. He was mistaken in some of the things he believed in regarding this section of the country and regarding the so-called civil rights matter, but he was honest in it. I just never did believe that President Kennedy would wreak any vengeance upon a state that had not supported him because we had differences of opinion. Although subconsciously that fear always exists and has for the last decade or a little longer because we do have a government system today that does threaten the states.

STEWART: I guess summing up then, and you had touched on this before, did you feel that the three years of the Kennedy Administration accelerated the trend toward what you would consider excessive power in Washington...

WALLACE: I think that the Kennedy Administration did accelerate it, yes. I think it was accelerated faster under President Johnson. And I think it would probably have not been accelerated as fast under President Kennedy as it was under President Johnson. But the

[-16-]

Kennedy Administration did accelerate the further centralization of government. I would say that President Kennedy, though, was honest in his thinking this is what ought to be done.

STEWART: That's about all the questions I have. Is there anything you wanted to add...

WALLACE: Well, other than to say that my personal experiences with the President were very courteous on his part. In fact, it was good to be around him personally. He was the kind of man that you only wished agreed with you or that you could agree with him a little more. He was the kind of candidate that you could have gone out and supported strongly because whenever you met him and was around him, he grew on you, and you got to like him. I liked him very much personally. I enjoyed being with him. And I think he was an attractive, intelligent, brilliant man. To have been cut down so soon, that's something that all Alabamians deplored. His death caused all political considerations to be swept aside because the sorrow of the people of Alabama, me, my wife and my family transcended all political considerations. Today it's sort of sad to talk about, to think about what happened. It's hard to believe it. I had the highest regard for him. He was one of the most attractive men in political life I ever had the pleasure of meeting. We differed honestly, but he was honest in his attitude.

STEWART: Did you attend the funeral?

WALLACE: Yes. I attended the funeral. In fact, I flew to Washington and got out at the airport, and a number of governors were being interviewed. I refused to be interviewed on television until they told me that every other governor had, because I didn't want to. I made the statement that there were no sadder people in this world than the people of Alabama at this sad, tragic slaying of our President. Because he was our President. I came back after having attended with other governors and flew back from the funeral. Yes, I attended the funeral.

STEWART: Okay. Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-17-]