

Clarence M. Mitchell Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 2/09/1967
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Biographical Note

Clarence M. Mitchell (1911-1984) was the director of the Washington bureau of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People from 1950 to 1978. This interview focuses on the role of civil rights in John F. Kennedy's 1960 campaign and the lack of civil rights legislation in the early years of the Kennedy administration, among other topics.

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By CLARENCE MITCHELL

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Oral History Interview

with

CLARENCE MITCHELL

February 9, 1967
Washington, D.C.

By John Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: Let me ask you first, Mr. Mitchell, when did you first meet John Kennedy and what were your impressions of him at that time?

MITCHELL: Well, my first meeting with him was, interestingly enough, through Congressman Adam Powell. Congressman Powell was standing beside a very slight young man and he said, "Clarence, I want you to meet Congressman Kennedy from Massachusetts." I met him. He was very pleasant but struck me as being very young. As we left him, Congressman Powell said, "You know, you ought to keep an eye on Jack because he's going to be something very important one of these days."

STEWART: This was in the late 1940's probably.

MITCHELL: I suppose so. However, I didn't attach a great deal of importance to that prophecy at that time because most people make prophetic utterances about newly elected officials. But my next reason to think of it came when President Kennedy, who was still a congressman, of course, at that time, decided to run for the Senate in Massachusetts. I became more acutely aware of it because he was running against

Senator [Henry Cabot] Lodge who had been very friendly and cooperative on civil rights matters.

I've always been interested in trying to maintain some kind of a balance of interest in civil rights between the two major parties, so from a tactical standpoint I thought it was unfortunate that Senator Kennedy, or Congressman Kennedy, was running against Mr. Lodge at that time. I must say that if I had my way as to how the election would have come out at that time, just on the basis of factors then known to me, I would have hoped that Senator Lodge would have been reelected because I saw in his defeat the diminution of Republican assistance on civil rights.

Well, when Senator Kennedy came into office, we got along very well. I had a very pleasant relationship with him. I guess, like so many other people, I had the impression that civil rights as such was a kind of a secondary interest to him. I was a little surprised, for example, when I went over to his office one day, and I remember seeing some names on desks which clearly indicated that either by accident or some happy design he had on his staff people who were representative of the major minority groups in Massachusetts, but I didn't see any Negro around, and I had an impression that while he was friendly on legislation, he didn't know a great deal about the civil rights problem and had other things which were more important.

STEWART: He did become the first New England senator to appoint a Negro person to his staff. I believe he appointed a secretary who worked in the Boston office. This probably would have been sometime later.

MITCHELL: That I didn't know. It's entirely possible that he had this person working in his office even at the time I made this observation. But at the time I made the observation, I was just looking at his Washington office.

STEWART: Do you recall any contacts with him on the 1957-58 civil rights legislation?

MITCHELL: Yes, we had kind of an unfortunate experience in that. The main thing that many of us were concerned about in the 1957 legislation was the preservation of a title which was known as Part III, which gave to the

Attorney General the right to seek injunctions against individuals who were depriving other persons of their civil rights.

We were also interested in a so-called jury trial amendment. There were persons who argued that there ought to be attached to this bill a jury trial amendment which would apply in cases where courts sentenced people for contempt, and the individual sentenced would have the right to a jury trial. Well, very fresh in our memory--and, indeed, a problem that is still with us--is the problem of getting convictions where all circumstances point to the guilt of the accused, but the jury, being friendly, lets him go. We, therefore, were opposed to the so-called jury trial amendment on those grounds. It appeared that we had this pretty well beaten as an amendment because there were strong forces in favor of keeping the bill without the amendment, and the main proponents of the amendment were the persons who were identified as the segregation group.

Well, we brought down from Boston, as we did from many other communities, a delegation which was made up of very distinguished people, and this delegation had a meeting with Senator Kennedy. I was with him at the time. It was a most friendly meeting. He was charming as always. As the meeting was about to break up, and most of the discussion had been on Part III of the bill, one of the people present said, "Well, what about the jury trial amendment? How do you stand on that?" And he slapped me on the back and chuckled, he said, "Oh, you don't have to worry about me on that. I'm alright." As I look at it in retrospect, I can see one thing: Instead of saying yes or no, he was saying alright; that could mean most anything.

Subsequently, I heard a tape of a speech given by President Lyndon Johnson who was Vice President at the time he made the speech. He said that he had looked over the Senate floor on one night while the 1957 civil rights bill was under consideration. He, the Vice President, also said that he felt there were not enough votes around to pass the bill, so he had called in some young senators for the purpose of trying to get them to agree to put the jury trial amendment in the bill as a means of getting it passed. The Vice President said in his speech that this was a crucial factor in getting this bill passed, and it showed great courage on the part of the young senators who agreed that it ought to be in, and said that Senator Kennedy was one of those who made this agreement.

The thing that interested me was we in the civil rights groups were very much opposed to this amendment; the Vice President, who was then Mr. Johnson, of course, was speaking to a civil rights audience; but the admiration of the audience for President Kennedy, who by that time had become President, was so great that--or maybe it might have been the Vice President's delivery--his remarks were followed by a tremendous ovation from the audience, which, of course, was the exact opposite of what I would have thought it would be since we were against that jury trial amendment.

Well, whatever is the correct explanation, he, Mr. Kennedy, did vote against us, and the jury trial amendment did become a part of the bill. At that time we were very exercised about it, and when his presidential ambitions began to flower a little more and become a little more obvious, there were some of us who tried to remind him of it, and I was one of those, of course. We felt that this represented something less than a full commitment to the cause of civil rights at that time.

STEWART: In the early stages of the 1960 campaign, going back probably to the latter part of 1959, in your opinion, how did Kennedy compare with the other Democratic candidates as far as the suitability from a civil rights point of view?

MITCHELL: Well, it was my opinion that the most desirable candidate from a civil rights standpoint would have been Vice President [Hubert H.] Humphrey, who of course then was a senator. Following him, and this is only my personal opinion on the basis of their records and working with them and that kind of thing, following him, I would have chosen Senator Stuart Symington, who was a person that I had known for many years and who had a very good record on civil rights, always voted right, and who personally would do a number of things to eliminate racial segregation. My personal knowledge of him, also, was that he was undoubtedly fully committed because I had known him as Secretary of the Air Force and also known him when he was the head of a company in the Midwest. This company had discriminatory practices, and he had been instrumental in eliminating them.

I thought of Senator Kennedy as a very fine person and one who undoubtedly would have a lot of appeal to people, but I

honestly did not think that he was as committed on civil rights as I would like to see a presidential candidate at that time.

STEWART: Were you generally satisfied--I assume you were--with the civil rights plank of the 1960 Democratic Convention?

MITCHELL: Well, no, I wasn't. Actually, I had quite an interesting experience at that Convention. One of the things that is kind a joke among us who work around here in Washington is the statement, "You would rather have an issue than a bill." The origin of that joke is that President Johnson, who was then majority leader in the Senate, used to twit the liberals by saying they were asking for such impossible legislation that he was convinced that they would rather have an issue than a bill.

Well, when the time of the Convention rolled around and the platform making got underway, I was out there and working along with other people in civil rights organizations for a good plank. But I had some dissatisfaction, in fact a great deal of dissatisfaction, about some parts of the plank, and in one of our heated discussions about it among civil rights groups, I remember one of my friends who always resented this statement, you'd rather have an issue than a bill, turned to me rather heatedly and said, "I think you'd rather have an issue than a platform." At that time it was an irritating thing, but I mention it only because I did not think that the Democratic platform at that time was all that it might have been or was as specific as it might have been.

STEWART: It has been said that the plank actually went beyond what the Kennedy people had originally intended.

Do you feel that Kennedy and his staff had a realistic understanding of what could be accomplished? Do you feel that they were convinced that such a program, as limited as you may have thought it was, could be carried out?

MITCHELL: Well, I think that it went beyond whoever was the original platform framer. Whether this was the Kennedy group or some other group of Democrats, I don't know, but the committee which was working on the platform had a less bold plan to start out with. This was one of the

things that some of the liberal Democrats were working on trying to make sure that the committee came up with an improved and strengthened platform. They succeeded in improving it and strengthening it. They thought--I mean these people who were working on the inside--that this really was a monumental job, and I guess that was one of the reasons why some of them were very chagrined when I had expressed some reservations about it. So I think it's quite likely that whoever framed the original platform got more than he or they thought they would get in the beginning when the final product was ready.

STEWART: Was there any real discussion at that time among civil rights leaders as to whether this could be implemented, especially from a legislative point of view?

MITCHELL: There was probably general discussion, but I didn't remember that anybody thought it couldn't get through. We had been in a situation where we had managed to make a breakthrough in '57, and we had seen the majority leader, who was then Senator Johnson, work to get a civil rights bill passed. Even though we didn't think it was as strong as it ought to be, nevertheless, it was a bill which he was sponsoring and pushing, which was a new trend in the Congress. So there were many of us who felt that the possibility of getting this was not at all remote. Of course, I had never felt myself that any of this legislation was impossible. I've always felt that the Senate of the United States with or without cloture rules could do just about whatever you had the votes to do.

STEWART: Did you fear, during the campaign, that the Kennedy camp was going beyond what they realized they could deliver and, thus, that there may be some disillusionment after they actually took office?

MITCHELL: No, I felt that both sides, the Republicans and the Democrats, were saying things which it seemed to me needed to be said and which probably would help to raise the level of consideration of Negro matters. I remember somebody said something about quoting Senator Lodge, who, of course, was vice presidential candidate on the Republican

ticket, to the effect that [Richard M.] Nixon would put a Negro in the Cabinet. To me that did not seem at all unreasonable, and I thought it was a great thing. Apparently it started a lot of consternation in the Nixon camp. But on the other side of the coin, it seemed to me that what the Democrats were saying and promising were things that were not only things that were deliverable, if they really worked at it, but things which were absolutely essential if they were really going to have a claim on the Negro vote.

STEWART: Were you in general agreement with the action taken in the post Convention congressional session, the special session in August of 1960 at which the balance of the Eisenhower civil rights bill of that year was put down?

MITCHELL: No, I was not in agreement. I thought that in a situation such as that, you take what you can get at the time that it's available. It seemed to me that with a presidential campaign coming up, the test of whether these candidates on both sides really meant what they said would be the degree to which they could get support from their parties in Congress to get through that legislation. I was not at all in agreement with that idea of shelving it. There may be some of my associates who were, but I didn't share that view.

STEWART: Did you have any contacts with either Mr. Kennedy or Mr. Johnson during that session?

MITCHELL: Yes, I spoke to both of them. I felt that they were interested in the campaign. I didn't think they were quite as interested in trying to do something on the legislation at that time. But in fairness to them, I should say that it didn't appear that Nixon was interested either. I recall one meeting that we had over at the Capitol, and we decided that we would split up into two groups. One group was supposed to try to get a meeting with Mr. Kennedy, and the other group was supposed to get a meeting with Mr. Nixon. We got word that Mr. Kennedy was awfully tied up and probably couldn't see us; we also got word that Mr. Nixon was tied up. I didn't go originally with the Kennedy group. I went to the

Nixon office. I never did find the Vice President. But the group did find Mr. Kennedy, and although he had a really busy schedule, he had a good excuse for not seeing them, if he hadn't wanted to see them, but he did see everyone, and he did talk, I guess, for a couple of hours. It may not have been a couple of hours, but it was a considerable length of time.

STEWART: Were you fearful at that time that Kennedy had made commitments to people in the South at the Convention time or before the Convention time that would hamper any legislative action in the next Congress?

MITCHELL: Yes, I thought that as a price of getting support from the South, he probably had made some bargains that wouldn't be the kind of bargains that we would like to see made. Of course, I had felt that way when he got so many votes for the vice presidency against [Estes] Kefauver in the previous Convention. I had felt that the South was rapping Kefauver's knuckles as a Southerner who had run out on them, and they were therefore going along with Kennedy to show their displeasure. When he got the nomination as President, I did feel that there must have been some kind of consideration which, while good for the Democratic party and good for part of the country, might not be good for civil rights.

STEWART: Did you ever get any specific information along those lines?

MITCHELL: Well, I don't say I ever got any specific information along those lines, but his first operation in office supported that notion. It did seem, when he first came into office, he fell into the traditional pattern of the Democratic presidential candidate who runs for office. You see, the formula of Democrats, starting with President Franklin Roosevelt, was "We will try to do what we can for the Negroes in executive action. We favor progress in the courts. But we won't do anything in the Congress because this would divide the Southerners who are for the common man from the Northern Democrats who are for the common man. This would mean you wouldn't get civil rights legislation, and you also would not get the great social welfare legislation." Most of the Democratic leaders that I've known in the years I've been around here have followed that pattern. Well, it was rather clear when he came

into office, when President Kennedy came into office, that he was following that pattern. There was one almost humorous twist to it, and that is he had so charmed a lot of the Negroes that they not only thought this was a good idea, too, but vigorously opposed anybody who acted like he thought it wasn't a good idea.

STEWART: One further question on the campaign. Were you generally in agreement with the approach that the campaign took to the whole civil rights area as far as the type of people who were included as part of the campaign organization advising the President and so forth?

MITCHELL: Well, I knew a number of the people who were around him. As far as I could determine, the main advisor on matters of civil rights from the Negro group appeared to be Mrs. Lawson, who is now or was Judge Marjorie Lawson. I must say that I've always regarded her as a person of great integrity, and I always felt that we had the same point of view on these things. It was my belief that if the candidate would listen to her, she would undoubtedly give him the right advice. I wasn't aware of whether there were other Negroes who were really in a position to get the candidate's ear. I say that because I found that a lot of people who seemed to know the candidate really didn't. And I also found that he had very few Negroes that he had known intimately enough to have the kind of rapport with them that a candidate needs if he's going to get complete frankness from his advisors. Now Judge Lawson came closest to that as far as I could see.

STEWART: Possibly you're not aware of the details of it, but there was a certain split within the advisory group as to just who had what role and who had what priority and so forth?

MITCHELL: I had that impression, but I wasn't close enough to know. I had the impression that there were advisors around who would have been quite happy not to stress civil rights and Negro matters so much, I think partly because they assumed that the Negro was going to vote the Democratic ticket anyway and why make any special effort.

STEWART: I'd like to ask you a few general questions about the whole handling of legislation by the White House during the Kennedy years. Naturally this would relate, in your case, specifically to the civil rights area. First, what impact did you assume at the start of the Kennedy Administration that the Vice President would play in the whole legislative process?

MITCHELL: Well, I certainly thought, on the basis of my personal experience with the Vice President, that we were going to have a hard time in that he was not a proponent of civil rights legislation. And I stress legislation because I recall a conversation with him when I first met him--that is, with Mr. Johnson when I first met him--in which he outlined the program of the Democrats that I have mentioned before: that is, the desire to make progress with executive action and the desire to make progress in the courts but not to do anything in Congress because it would split the party. Of course, this made sense from the standpoint of the Democrats. It could even be said to make sense from the standpoint of those who were interested in social welfare legislation and who felt that if you got over into civil rights, you might jeopardize social welfare legislation. I didn't agree with them, but at least I could understand their point of view. Well, knowing that this was the view of the Vice President, who was Mr. Johnson, I felt that we were going to have some tough times in getting our programs underway in the Congress.

STEWART: Well, as it turned out, did you feel that he, during the Kennedy Administration, played the type of role that you had anticipated at the beginning?

MITCHELL: Yes, I think he did up until the time of critical developments. In other words, it was very clear from the beginning that President Kennedy was going to do more than any of his predecessors had done in the area of executive action. I thought this addition to the White House staff of Andrew Hatcher, and I think he very early brought in Louis Martin in some top capacity as well as other Negroes who were brought into key positions. . . . Then there was that little incident in which the President during the Inaugural had mentioned something about Negroes not being in one of the marching units.

STEWART: The Coast Guard I think it was.

MITCHELL: All of these things convinced me that he was definitely going to stress the executive aspect of things. Also, it did seem that he was going to try to be sure that in the judiciary the persons who came in would be open-minded. I didn't think he was going to try to have people who were flaming civil rights advocates on the bench, but he did seem to be trying to get people who were open-minded.

Now that is a little more than a product of my own reasoning; it's supported by an occurrence after he became President. We had, in the first year of his administration, a national convention of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and as part of that convention, we decided to have a special train come down to Washington to meet with the President. The train did come and had all of our distinguished people on it. We met over at the Senate auditorium.

A delegation was supposed to go from the auditorium over to the White House to meet with the President. This delegation was then going to report back. I was invited to go with the delegation, but I didn't because I foresaw what was going to happen, knowing the President's charm and knowing the political situation and the legislation situation at that time. Sure enough, they got to the White House, and they were received very cordially. In fact, the President took them on a personally conducted tour of the White House, showed them Abraham Lincoln's bed, and sat down with them, and just generally kept everybody very happy, but didn't make any promises on doing anything on civil rights legislation.

The delegation came back to the general meeting, and I guess by that time the spell had worn off a little and they were about to present their report. They seemed then to realize that they hadn't gotten very much on legislative commitments. There was quite a scene when they made their presentation to the group and revealed that the President had taken them on a personally conducted tour of the White House, had shown them Abraham Lincoln's bed, and also had not made any commitment on legislation. I heard a voice from the audience say, "We're not interested in Abraham Lincoln's bed. We want to know what happened on civil rights legislation."

STEWART: So you don't think many people's minds were definitely changed because of that meeting, or at least you don't think he gained any more support than he already had?

MITCHELL: This is the curious thing. I'm sure that, so far as that meeting is concerned, he did not lose a single friend. And it's entirely possible that he gained some. I don't believe any other--at least no President that I have seen in office could have done that. I think that if it had been [Dwight D.] Eisenhower, let's say, or [Harry S] Truman--possibly Franklin Roosevelt could have gotten away with it--or if it had been President Lyndon Johnson, I think the group coming back would have been outraged; it would have been denouncing the President. But this group instead came back in a very good mood, and I doubt very much whether he lost any friends as a result of that meeting.

STEWART: How, generally, would you compare the effectiveness of [Lawrence F.] Larry O'Brien's operation with similar operations in other administrations as far as their general handling of legislation was concerned?

MITCHELL: I think it was superior to any that I had seen around here, and I've been around a long time. I'm not just referring now to civil rights, but I think in the general area. I admit that at the outset when I had not seen Larry in action as closely as eventually I got to see him in action, I had a kind of lack of enthusiasm about him and the things that he was doing. But as I had occasion to see him from a closer vantage point and see some of the things he was able to accomplish, my admiration increased, and I certainly felt that he was very effective. And in the area of civil rights, there wasn't any question that once Larry got the clear indication that this was something which could be achieved, he would go at it in a way which was most constructive.

I mentioned the point about getting the idea that it was something that could be achieved because we did have some differences in the civil rights fight as to what we could get. Larry, for example, didn't think, or at least didn't seem to think, that we could get a bill which included a fair employment title. I had the impression that the Administration--I

use the word "Administration" because I don't want to attribute this to Larry--but I had the impression that the Administration thought that Title VI, which is now the law, was something which might be given in exchange for being sure that we could keep Title II, the public accommodations title. But Larry is a wonderful person to work with, and I think I haven't seen anybody on the White House level who could operate as effectively as he could. In other administrations, members of the Congress seemed to carry the ball more for the White House, but in this case I thought Larry was a good ball carrier for the Administration.

STEWART: It's been often said that the President himself had no real taste for so-called arm-twisting. Do you generally feel that he personally did as much as possible in handling his own legislative program?

MITCHELL: I think he did as much as he could do, but I didn't think that he had the kind of--now I'm speaking of President Kennedy, of course--I didn't think he had the kind of relationship with some of the people whose arms needed twisting that President Johnson had and has. After all, President Kennedy in the Senate was a kind of a junior member and not within the charmed circle in the Senate, so that I think that he was not in a position to reason with people who didn't like reasoning, you know.

STEWART: Do you recall seeing any examples of this very thing, of older senators remembering very vividly that he had left them as a very junior member, and thus their relationships were still based on this old situation?

MITCHELL: Well, I can't think of anything at the moment that would pinpoint it except that I know that when proposals would come over, you'd hear among some of the members of the Senate various kinds of grumbings about what was being suggested by that young fellow. I didn't think it was definite enough to cite as an example.

STEWART: Did the overall approach that the NAACP took toward the whole legislative process change to any extent during the Kennedy Administration? Was there any

significant change in techniques or in strategy during those three years, or was it pretty much the same type of an operation that had gone on before and has gone on since?

MITCHELL: I would say that it's pretty much the same--it was pretty much the same type of operation that had gone on before and has gone on since. Our basic belief is that no matter how much excitement you create, if you haven't got the votes from the areas where you need the votes, it doesn't do you much good. Therefore, our desire through the years has been and continues to be the desire to get people active in the congressional districts and in the states, try to exert influences on the members of Congress.

The Kennedy Administration brought a factor into the picture which many had hoped other administrations would do, and I think it was of tremendous importance, and that is of calling in broad segments of the population to let these segments of the population see the importance of getting legislation passed. This was done, as you know, with lawyers and with women and with other groups. To me this was a very significant and very helpful development. It was almost as though the lobbying efforts of organizations like the NAACP were suddenly supplemented by a very helpful and benevolent sponsor.

STEWART: Well, this was done on a very big scale in the summer of 1963 on the legislation. Do you feel that that effort by the President was a significant factor in the eventual passage of the bill or. . . .

MITCHELL: There's no doubt that that was a thing which undoubtedly got the country in the frame of mind to pass the legislation. I think that would not have been enough to get it through, but at least it got the stage set, let people know that the Administration was serious about this. I felt that the Administration was somewhat slow in reaching that point.

The reason I say that is I was constantly after various officials in the Administration about conditions, and I remember one meeting that I had with the then Attorney General, now Senator Robert Kennedy. John Seigenthaler was present at the meeting; he at that time was the administrative assistant, I think, to the Attorney General. Well, there had just been a

terrible tragedy in Alabama in which the freedom riders had been attacked and brutally beaten. My recollection is that this occurred on Mother's Day. I was in talking with the Attorney General the following day, a Monday. I didn't think that he could see how really terrible this was, and I didn't think that he could see how this could happen to anybody, not just Negroes.

Then a short time later, I suppose because the Attorney General had wanted to get a better picture of what was happening, Seigenthaler was down on the scene when one of these things occurred again, and he was, as you may remember, knocked down and beaten. I think he got a fractured skull. I felt that after that occurrence, the stark realities of this situation were much more clearly etched in the Attorney General's thinking than they had been before because it had happened to somebody he knew, and he could see this was not a thing which was occurring because somebody was trying to change the mores. Here was a man who was just trying to help somebody who was being chased.

So I say that to pinpoint my belief that the Administration was very slow in coming to grips with the enormity of this problem. To the credit of the President and all those who were advising him, once they grasped it, they really knew how to move and did move in a way which, as I said, harnessed a large part of the energy of the country.

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

STEWART: To what extent did you feel that the growing divisions within the civil rights movement hampered your own effectiveness as a lobbyist on civil rights legislation in general during the three years?

MITCHELL: I'd just like to know a little bit more of what you mean by growing divisions in the civil rights movement.

STEWART: There, of course, have always been, as there are in any grouping of organizations, certain divisions, differences of opinion. And certainly in the early 1960's these divisions between the more liberal and the more conservative groups became much more in the open, if nothing

else, and became much more of a factor. Did this at all hinder your operation?

MITCHELL: Well, I didn't think . . .

STEWART: Or don't you agree with my basic premise?

MITCHELL: No, I don't agree with your basic premise because I can't divide the civil rights groups into the conservative, militant-nonmilitant categories that some people tend to do these days, primarily because I think those terms have very little actual meaning when applied to individual situations. There was this broad grouping in the sixties. There was the NAACP, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and also Dr. [Martin Luther] King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, with CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] also in the picture.

Well, to take them in reverse order, CORE, for the most part, was a highly mobile group of people, didn't have much of a mass following; they usually depended on going into a community, dramatizing an issue, and, hopefully, pulling in other organizations such as ours to do whatever it was they were trying to do. Dr. King had a philosophy of nonviolence which was not too attractive to many Negroes in that we have, for the most part, tended to believe that the right of self defense is a good American institution, and you don't give it up. It's very hard for many people to accept the idea that you allow yourself to be slapped and spat upon and that sort of thing as a means of arousing the conscience of your opponents or putting them to shame. So far as the student group was concerned, many of us looked upon that as a thing that was long overdue. We had felt that students were not interested enough in what was happening, and if it meant they now were going to become vocal and active in their everyday affairs, that was a good thing.

Then to deal with the NAACP, we have always had a broad approach to these things, making use of whatever technique that would fit a given situation as long as it fitted within the constitutional framework. Many people were under the wrong impression that we were just interested in going into court. Some didn't even realize we were interested in legislation.

So that with all those factors in the picture, I would say that in the sixties the situation was such that everybody who was engaged in any kind of a constructive program was badly needed if what he was doing was making a good contribution. Everyone was so busy that I don't think there was a whole lot of time available for internecine fights in the civil rights movement. There might have been people who, for one reason or another, were unhappy about a given technique in a given area, but, for the most part, I thought that the groups worked together in the early stages rather well.

STEWART: And certainly, as far as your function or your position is concerned, this real or imagined split among groups was of no consequence at all.

MITCHELL: No, I found that there were people who would be very exercised about something that CORE had done or Dr. Martin Luther King had done, and for that reason would say, "Well, we don't have much desire to act on civil rights because of this." But there were many, many more who felt that this was dramatizing the problem, and I think those things tended to balance each other out.

I would say, though, that we never got away from the necessity of having to continue to try to get interest aroused in areas where there was no activity going on. This would be in states like Nebraska and Iowa and the mountain states. If we were going to get those votes, we had to do something in addition to what was going on in the South because I did a lot of traveling in that period, and it was my experience that once you got west of the Mississippi, you had a kind of breakdown of communication with the rest of the country on civil rights matters. Things which looked awful to us in the East had a kind of a muted impact in those areas.

STEWART: Let me ask you a question that I think will set the stage, so to speak, and clarify the record. How, in general, does your function here in Washington tie in to the operations of the national office in New York? For example, you've mentioned the emphasis on activities within states and the relationship between this and the votes of individual congressman. How, in general, do you coordinate, so to speak, your activities with those of the New York office?

MITCHELL: We are a part of the New York office, actually. Except for the fact that it's important for us to be close to Congress, we would be in New York, and therefore, we are a part of the national staff. Generally, we will in this office attempt to do all of the day to day things that are necessary in working on legislation. This, of course, includes testifying and meeting with members of Congress and also being in touch with their constituents with the hope of getting their constituents active. We also in this office go out through the country to take the message. Usually on weekends I'm out talking with people.

The New York operation, of course, is much broader. They are interested in things other than legislation so that when the New York office comes into the picture, it is primarily on the matter of perhaps bringing Roy Wilkins down to testify or arousing the country by a statement that he might make and getting our branches aware of the fact that this is something really important. As you can imagine, in a large organization like this they get so much from the national office that sometimes if the name of the executive isn't on it, they don't pay much attention to it.

STEWART: Okay. You've mentioned that long before January of 1961, you foresaw that there wouldn't be a major legislative effort. When did you first definitely learn that the Kennedy Administration wasn't planning a major legislative effort in 1961?

MITCHELL: Well, I got it in a kind of indirect way. But some of my friends had been over to talk with the President. They were not only friends but also associates in the civil rights movement. I had not talked with him. And the general message that they brought back was that we've got to concentrate on doing things in the area of executive responsibility. There followed a great deal of activity in that area. One of the things that it was agreed would be stressed was the thing, or things, that could be done by the executive branch of government without any new legislation. We got out a very extensive and significant report.

Of course, obviously this report can't be seen on the tape, but I am handing you a copy of it, called "Federally Supported Discrimination, A Survey of Its Extent, A Program of Executive

Action to Eliminate It." It's put out under the auspices of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights and submitted to the White House on August 29th, 1961. This action really put together a lot of very valuable information on what could be done even without new laws. This was clearly in line with the President's thinking and was to some extent an outgrowth of earlier meetings with him. We had in this office done this before on a modest scale, but this time it was supplemented with funds from various sources so that it was a very good thing. This, as I said, was being stressed, while the idea of legislation was sort of under wraps at the time this activity was going on.

STEWART: Had you any contact with Congressman [Emanuel] Celler and Senator [Joseph S.] Clark either during the campaign or just after they had been appointed to formulate a civil rights legislative program?

MITCHELL: Yes, I have known both of them for a long time, Senator Clark ever since he came to the Senate and Congressman Celler ever since I've been in Washington. I met him very early when I came here. So that I was in touch with them on civil rights matters.

STEWART: They did make some proposals that the Administration very quickly said did not have their support early in 1961. Do you recall this? Did you feel any hopes whatsoever that there would be any point in even presenting any proposals without the Administration's support?

MITCHELL: Well, I was aware of the Administration's lack of enthusiasm for the things that they were suggesting. I did feel that it was important to make the fight. It seemed to me that in that situation, if we could recruit any strength from the Republicans, we might have been able to get the Administration in a position where it would feel that it had to do something on legislation.

I had the impression that somebody or some people at least in the President's circle of advisors were concerned about the possibility that they might be embarrassed if a coalition of liberal Democrats and Republicans got together with a civil rights program because there were people who were going around

the country making speeches about these people who are shedding crocodile tears about the lack of civil rights legislation and not seeing the great gains that are made on the executive front. One of them was my good friend Carl Rowan who made a speech--I don't know whether he had me in mind, but his description fitted me pretty well. The burden of his speech was that here are people still insisting on legislative action when a President is in the White House who is making numerous appointments, who is taking bold action in the executive field and doing a number of things that ought to have been done a long time ago. Well, of course, I agreed with him that all of these good things were happening, but it seemed to me that the times also demanded some pretty forthright legislative action, too.

STEWART: Speaking of executive action, how did you view the apparent success--or do you think it was successful--of the programs of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity headed by the Vice President, John Feild, and Hobart Taylor?

MITCHELL: I didn't think the program was very productive. I was all for the idea. I was for the idea because I was one of the early proponents of that under the Truman Administration. When the Fair Employment Committee established by President Roosevelt went out of business at the end of World War II, there were certain legislative hurdles that had to be overcome before a new committee could be established. I undertook to try to explain those to anybody who would listen, and eventually we got from President Truman an executive order--well, really there were two, but the one that's pertinent here is the one which dealt with defense contracts. We got this executive order, and it always, as far as I was concerned, was a bridge between the old wartime executive order and the day when we would be successful in getting legislative action in Congress. I had hoped that this committee would keep the idea of federal action in this area alive so that we would be able to have public sentiment for fair employment legislation.

Well, when the Truman Administration went out of office, one of the main things I was interested in trying to accomplish with the caretaker group, which was headed by Senator Lodge, was to see that the Eisenhower people kept this order alive. They did. Interestingly, when the Kennedy Administration came in, it wasn't

necessary to prod them at all on the idea. They immediately kept it alive with a strengthening of language, but somehow or other the impression got around that this was a new thing although, as a matter of fact, it had been in operation before. Well, I felt that it was about as good as it could be under the circumstances.

I do not believe that you can accomplish a great deal with executive orders. I think you really need legislation. I felt they were doing about all that could be done with their powers, but to me the overriding value of this was keeping the fair employment idea alive and leading to legislation.

STEWART: There was a certain amount of criticism that the so-called Plans for Progress and the ceremonies surrounding the signing up of companies was a lot of publicity, but really it didn't have that much substance behind it.

MITCHELL: I think that was a fair criticism. I think it couldn't be a criticism laid at the door of the Kennedy Administration alone. Back in the Eisenhower Administration, I had met with some public relations people who had been engaged for the purpose of trying to project the image of the Committee, which was, as I said, under the Eisenhower Administration. They were trying to decide whether they would do the kind of thing that was eventually done under Plans for Progress or whether they would play up the individual successes of the Committee.

The general impression I have is that this public relations group reached the conclusion that rather than try to play up individual successes, which would be modest, they would deal more in generalities which would sound impressive. I think that the Plans for Progress group fell into that kind of a method of operating, which looks good but, when it comes to producing concrete results, is not good because even if something worthwhile happens as a result of it, it's so hard to trace it to this public relations origin, you see. I have always felt that it's better to have a few really good successes that people can see and you can point to than to have these generalities. I must say there are people in the civil rights movement who don't agree with me on that. They feel that the public relations approach creates an atmosphere in which you can do a lot of things.

STEWART: Do you want to cut it here?

MITCHELL: That's all right if it's all right with you.