

Louis F. Oberdorfer Oral History Interview – JFK#3, 12/18/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Louis F. Oberdorfer
Interviewer: Charles T. Morrissey
Date of Interview: December 18, 1964
Place of Interview: Washington D.C.
Length: 21 pages

Biographical Note

Louis F. Oberdorfer (1919- 2013) was the Assistant Attorney General in charge of the Tax Division of the Department of Justice from 1961 to 1965. This interview focuses on civil rights issues that arose during the Kennedy administration, such as the attacks on Freedom Riders in Alabama, and the Department of Justice’s handling of these situations, among other topics.

Access

Open

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed September 16, 1969, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. Users of these materials are advised to determine the copyright status of any document from which they wish to publish.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be “used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research.” If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of “fair use,” that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Transcript of Oral History Interview

These electronic documents were created from transcripts available in the research room of the John F. Kennedy Library. The transcripts were scanned using optical character recognition and the resulting text files were proofread against the original transcripts. Some formatting changes were made. Page numbers are noted where they would have occurred at the bottoms of the pages of the original transcripts. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy, they are encouraged to visit the Library and consult the transcripts and the interview recordings.

Suggested Citation

Louis F. Oberdorfer, recorded interview by Charles T. Morrissey, December 18, 1964 (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

Donor: Oberdorfer

NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY

Legal Agreement Pertaining to the Oral History Interviews of
Louis F. Oberdorfer

In accordance with the provisions of Chapter 21 of Title 44, United States Code, and subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth, I, Louis F. Oberdorfer, do hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America all my rights, title, and interest in the tape recording and transcript of personal interviews conducted on December 16, 1964, December 18, 1964, February 5, 1970 and February 12, 1970 at Washington, DC and prepared for deposit in the John F. Kennedy Library. This assignment is subject to the following terms and conditions:

(1) The transcript shall be made available for use by researchers as soon as it has been deposited in the John F. Kennedy Library.

(2) The tape recording shall be made available to those researchers who have access to the transcript.

(3) I hereby assign to the United States Government all copyright I may have in the interview transcript and tape.

(4) Copies of the transcript and the tape recording may be provided by the Library to researchers upon request.

(5) Copies of the transcript and tape recording may be deposited in or loaned to institutions other than the John F. Kennedy Library.

Louis F. Oberdorfer
Donor

May 27, 1991
Date

[Signature]
Archivist of the United States

June 10, 1991
Date

Louis F. Oberdorfer– JFK #3
Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
26	Attacks on Freedom Riders in Birmingham, Alabama
27	Getting alcohol tax agents to protect the Freedom Riders
28	Going to Alabama to handle to Freedom Riders situation
30	Assembling a force to protect the Freedom Riders
32	Escorting the Freedom Riders to Mississippi
33	Desegregating businesses
34	Importance of John F. Kennedy’s [JFK] leadership to desegregation efforts
35	Meetings between JFK and businesspeople
37	Responding to unrest at the University of Mississippi
39	Plan for marshals to escort James Meredith to the University of Mississippi
41	Robert F. Kennedy’s leadership style
42	Bombing of the Gaston Motel in Birmingham, Alabama
44	Troops being dispatched to Birmingham
46	JFK’s appeal to community leadership over civil rights

Second Oral History Interview

with

LOUIS F. OBERDORFER

December 18, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Were you involved in any way with the controversy caused by the Freedom Riders in May 1961?

OBERDORFER: Yes, I remember that my first contact with this problem was really informal. I was talking with Byron White [Byron R. White] and was around the attorney general's office when the problem was coming to a head. I was not formally involved until the bus burning incident and the efforts to get the Freedom Riders out of Birmingham [Alabama]. I am satisfied from what I observed and what I have learned since, that the attorney general did not have any part in the initiation of the Freedom Ride and had no particular interest in it until the bus bombing and burning in Anniston [Alabama].

I have been over this ground with Burke Marshall fairly recently and the chronology is fairly fresh in my mind. The bombing happened on a Saturday or Sunday. The mob in Birmingham attacking the Freedom Riders occurred on Mother's Day, 1961. Sometime during that subsequent week, I had a dinner party at my house and among the guests were Douglas Arant, a lawyer from Birmingham, and Byron White, who was then deputy attorney general. This was about a Wednesday or a Thursday night after Mother's Day. At that time the Freedom Riders were in Birmingham, or a delegation of them, trying to get out. I was talking on a counseling basis, the sort of relationship that has continued with Burke Marshall and Byron White in trying out ideas. I would go up and sit in the attorney general's office and talk to him a little bit about what could be done. This particular night, Arant, I remember, was expressing great anxiety about the safety of his family in Birmingham. He was concerned that he ought to go home and protect them or something like that. They didn't know what was going to happen. I remember standing by my dining room table with Arant and White, and White saying that we are going to have to get these people out of there

and keep them moving somehow. "How are you going to do it?" "Well, we will probably have to use soldiers." And I said, "Why don't you use marshals?" "Where are you going to get marshals?" "What about using a detachment of District of Columbia police?" That conversation that night involved me with White in trying to figure out some way to get a civilian force together in the event that the local police would not protect that bus--it was sort of a strike such as occurred on Mother's Day--so that they would be exposed to the Ku Klux Klan or whatever violent groups were there, and they were there, sure enough.

Byron explored the District of Columbia police idea a little bit, and then he withdrew from that to the idea of getting a force of marshals from the District of Columbia. I think that night, from my house, he activated some sort of standby plan for a group of fifteen or twenty marshals who would be available to go to Birmingham, if necessary, to provide physical protection for the movement of the Freedom Riders out of Birmingham. Sometime during that week, at one point, he had them lined up to go to Birmingham. All that was laid on. This was a force of twenty or thirty.

I had in my office and had had some conversations with the senior trial lawyer, Russo [Vincent P. Russo], whom I mentioned to you in another connection. Russo had regaled me with tales of his youth when he was an officer of the alcohol tax unit of the Treasury Department in and around Birmingham. He had told me something of the activities and capability of the alcohol tax unit. They were outdoor policemen, and their job was to chase rumrunners, go break up stills, and they were men of physical strength and courage. I learned from him, just bulling with him, that they had developed fairly good communications. They had radio cars and a radio net, and they were trained in the use of weapons. I am now giving only my role in the thing; I am just a little chink in the larger picture that has been portrayed by Burke Marshall, his conversations with the attorney general and the deputy, and their conversations with President Kennedy.

In any event, White told me go ahead and see if I could find out about the use of alcohol tax agents. Sometime on a Thursday or Friday, I think it might have been Thursday, the day after the night of the dinner at my house, I had a conversation with the commissioner of Internal Revenue, Caplin [Mortimer M. Caplin], with whom I was in daily contact, and asked him to consider alerting a large force of alcohol tax agents in the Southeast. That is where they are mostly concentrated. I found out from him or his man, Avis [Dwight Avis], the head of the alcohol tax unit, how many there were, where they were, and how quickly they could be concentrated in one place. Working with William Loeb [William H. Loeb], who was an assistant commissioner of Internal Revenue, we worked out a standby plan by which these men could be moved to Birmingham. I also got into some conversations with the Federal Aviation administrator, Najeeb Halaby, who was a law school classmate of mine, about providing air transportation for marshals and alcohol tax unit personnel. Somebody else, not I, I suppose it was White, through

General Swing [J. M. Swing], who is the commissioner of Immigration, arranged on a standby basis for the assembly of border patrol officers, called Border Patrol Inspectors, of the Immigration Service. They were alerted.

Then John Seigenthaler was in Montgomery on Friday afternoon. Again, I was in and out of the attorney general's office when he was talking to the governor. It was just a group of us around there who were conversing with Byron, and Marshall, and Katzenbach [Nicholas deB. Katzenbach]--to some degree, at that point, not too much. I remember the Friday night when it was understood that Seigenthaler had an agreement with the governor. I remember being in here Saturday morning with Marshall and hearing from him and being with him when he got the report from Seigenthaler from somebody. I guess John Doar [John M. Doar] who was in Birmingham got the report that the bus was moving from Birmingham to Montgomery and everybody breathed a sigh of relief and that was that. The highway patrol was protecting them.

There was a meeting of the tax section of the American Bar Association at the Mayflower Hotel [Washington, D.C.] that day and I went up there before the bus had arrived in Montgomery. After the lunch or during it, out of curiosity, I called down here. I think I spoke to Ed Guthman [Edwin O. Gutham] or Marshall, and they said, "All hell has broken loose" or something like that. Nobody asked me to come back here; I just came. I went in and sat at the attorney general's desk there when he came back. Meanwhile I had called for Bill Loeb who had the alcohol tax unit people, and I think I had started calling some of these other people whom we had put on standby that I knew about to find out what they could do. I was sitting at the attorney general's desk there. I remember Dave Hackett [David L. Hackett] was in his office. Byron was there, but Byron was just recovering from an ulcer operation and Burke was just recovering from the mumps. And Bob Kennedy said to me, "You take those marshals and go down there." I went out to his outer office and sat down with Byron and I said to Byron, "The attorney general has asked me to go down there and take charge of that thing." I said, "I'm not sure that it would be in the best interest of the country for me to do it. I am from Alabama. I am Jewish. This thing will be very controversial. I don't know whether Bob has even thought about those two facts. But if he, having thought about them, wants me to go, I'll go. But I just think we ought to talk to him about it." Byron said, "Wait just a minute." He went back in and talked to Bob and he came back and said, "We will both go."

So by that time Bill Loeb was down there, and we told him to start moving his agents into Montgomery, and we got in touch with Maxwell Air Force Base. I don't know how we did all of this, but we did, by telephone. Halaby made his plane available to us. I just have some recollections the night before of sitting down with a piece of paper--I wish I still had it--writing off a check list of the things that would need to be done if we had to move in a hurry. This was before, maybe it was Thursday night, before

the situation had apparently become under control with Seigenthaler and Governor Patterson [John M. Patterson].

I remember I sent for my secretary Peggy Gooding and asked her to join us, and Joe Dolan [Joseph F. Dolan] was asked by Byron to come along. I asked this fellow Russo to go with me, and he wouldn't do it. I don't think McShane [James J. P. McShane] went down on the plane with us. It was just four of us in Najeeb Halaby's Gulf Stream turbojet. We brought a bunch of books with us. We then knew that we were going to Montgomery, we knew that there had been this riot, we knew that John Dear in Burke Marshall's office was in Montgomery and would be able to plan some kind of lawsuit, or was planning it. We sat up in the plane there and dictated to Peggy Gooding, first, our theory of our legal authority--why we had the right to bring marshals in there and what we were doing. I remember saying to Byron White as we were in the air--I always thought at that point that he would probably succeed Bob Kennedy as attorney general. I really didn't anticipate that he would go into the Supreme Court but I knew that he had enormous potential. I remember saying to him, "Byron, if this thing is a fiasco, which it may be, bringing in a disorganized group like this, and we get clobbered, or somebody else gets killed, if it goes wrong at all, you'll never be confirmed for anything by the Senate again." I was thinking of Jim Eastland [James O. Eastland], He sort of grinned at that.

I remember two or three things about that flight. We had all of these law books that Russo had gotten for us. We were looking up the basis for the requirements of presidential proclamations and injunctions and things like that. Byron kept asking, "Do we have the right to protect a church?" But he knew and I didn't know that Martin Luther King had directly planned to come to Montgomery on Sunday long before the Freedom Riders were due there, and he was concerned about whether this force could protect that church with King there, whether there would be some basis for it.

I remember also, going back to the scene in the attorney general's office, his adding how many men were available to send down there. I remember telling him that we had figured out some sort of buildup, that we could get a hundred and fifty by nightfall or two hundred and fifty by the next morning, and he said, "Well, send five hundred in there." It was his idea, five hundred.

We went in there at Maxwell Air Force Base. I was there, sort of as Byron White's chief of staff in that thing. I remember he was really bushed because he had been recently operated on. He went to bed, and I stayed up most of the night as these alcohol tax agents and marshals were filtering into the base. The air force was putting them to bed and we were finding out how many there were. I was worried about transportation and talking to the chief of police about their going on the streets and nothing was happening in the town at that time. The Freedom Riders had been beaten up and they were off somewhere. King was still in Atlanta and I didn't know he was coming. It became during that period a sort of logistical thing.

I remember getting everybody up at 5 a.m. though and at daylight arranging for them to go on the street and just start patrolling back and forth between the railroad station and the bus station and the airport. During the night John Doar had gone out to Judge Johnson's [Frank M. Johnson, Jr.] camp in the suburbs of Montgomery and had gotten a restraining order enjoining the Klan from interfering with interstate commerce. That's the report that came. We used the marshals that had been assembled there in that time from 2 p.m. to, I guess, 10 p.m. or 12 p.m. Their first duty was to serve this injunction on leaders of the Klan and people named, and they went out in the night and did that. It was pretty dangerous work. Then the next morning we got them up early and got some men out on the street, and the alcohol tax unit set up a base radio in the barracks there, and they had radio cars around. Then the border patrol came in with radios and airplanes, and they set up their radios. We had communication. It was the organization problem, putting something like that together from nothing. And I don't know how we did it. I think primarily because these people had communications and because the border patrol had some sort of military capability.

Then by Sunday afternoon we had probably five hundred people. It was the roughest looking bunch of guys, some of them, that you ever saw in your life. Byron got word, I guess at noon, that King was coming, and we sent a bunch of marshals out to this airport to meet him and escort him into town. There were threats against him if he came, so under the cover of that injunction we escorted him to where he was and guarded him there at the parish house next to this church. Somehow, I don't remember now, we got wind of the fact that there was a mob forming to mob the church that night. We were on the Maxwell Air Force Base [Alabama] but our orders were that we couldn't use military personnel and we couldn't use military vehicles. Where do you get vehicles to move five hundred men? Some of them had come in their cars, and that would take care of fifty or seventy-five; and we had them all divided up, so many marshals and so many alcohol tax agents. We also got prison guards from all of the federal prisons. They came flying in from Chillicothe, Ohio, and Atlanta, Georgia. I don't know where all. But they were there, and there was a federal prison installation on the air base and we got two or three state trucks from them. We called the GSA [General Services Administration] to find out where all the cars were. We needed cars. They were in Atlanta or some other place.

We hit on the idea of getting the post office to make post-office trucks available, and the city postmaster came out and an hour later we had just scores of post-office trucks. We must have had a hundred of them. They lined up there and we deputized the postmen. A lot of them were colored and that was dangerous. But they were ready to go. We deputized the drivers of these things. Apparently the post office wouldn't let anybody else drive those trucks. So we had to deputize the postmen.

So by 6 p.m. we had our force and we had some kind of leadership in it and we had it motorized. Mind you, this was 6 p.m. on Sunday and this whole operation had started from a standing start from all over the United States at 2 p.m. or something like that on Saturday afternoon. Except for the movement alert, there was no organization at all. Jim McShane was in charge of

the marshals, and we made him in charge of the whole thing, so far as the actual direction of the marshals. I don't think Jim had ever had any unit command. I remember I kept asking Jim over and over again all night long, "How many men have you got, Jim? Where are they? Who is in charge of them?" And he would fumble around, and sometimes he would know the answer and sometimes he wouldn't.

This thing at the church got pretty hot, and Byron directed all of them to go over there. I remember he had a conversation with the chief of police about this time and the chief said, "Goddamn it, you guys are here with all of these marshals. Do they know how to fight fires and direct traffic, 'cause my fellows are thinking about just going home and leaving the city to you?" This was the mob raging through the place. This was the great weapon they had. If they were going on a strike, we would have been in extreme difficulty.

In any event, Byron ordered all of these fellows down to the church, and nobody reconnoitered the street. There was no patrolling of the street at all. I knew the town. It was my wife's hometown, and I remember that there was a viaduct on the way to the city from which ten people could have held these marshals there for half the night. But nobody apparently interfered with their movement. One of the things that happened--it was night by this time, dark. I guess it was after 6 p.m. It must have been going on 8 p.m. And by these barracks where we were located was this vast convoy motor pool lot full of postoffice trucks, and when the things began to get hot down at the church, Byron and Jim McShane and I went out on the lot there and started waving these trucks, "Get going. What are you waiting for?" "Let's get moving." And we looked and truck after truck was pulling out empty and heading downtown. "Get on downtown." I remember Byron putting his hand on his head and he said, "My God, another Cuba."

But we stopped that and got the trucks loaded and the next morning in the paper they had a story. "The federal forces were so well organized, that they anticipated the possibility of outbreak of difficulties in other parts of the city, so they had extra trucks standing by to move marshals from the scene of the riot to some other place."

I also remember Byron picking out two particularly competent-looking border patrol officers. I can see them now. One of them showed up again in Oxford. And he said, "I want you fellows to go down to the church in your car. I want one of you to stay in your car and stay on the radio and the other of you to step out of the car and look around. I don't want you to do anything but look and tell me what you see. No matter what happens, that's what you do." That gave him a basis of communications, which was terribly important, because they would radio in. Then Byron and I were on the phone. We had an open line back up here to Bob in his office and we could give him a fairly accurate account of what was developing. Included in that account, of course, was the prognosis as to whether or not the marshals would hold or be overrun.

Meanwhile, up here they had alerted troops at Fort Benning [Georgia], and it was just a near thing as to whether--apparently part of these troops were either as they say under the wing or in the plane awaiting for orders to move to Maxwell Air Force Base. The marshals held for some time and then the state police were finally sent in by the governor and then the unit of seventy-five national guardsmen came and that saved the situation finally.

But for the period that the marshals were there by themselves I think they made it by themselves. They held it long enough for the governor to make up his mind that he had to contain the situation. We stayed there. One of the things that has always been noteworthy to me about this--those marshals went on the street and into Montgomery at more or less in daylight on Sunday, and by 2 a.m. Monday morning when the National Guard was there in force, Byron ordered all the marshals back to Maxwell Air Force Base. They were not again on the streets, except a week later. They went to the court-house when the hearing occurred on this injunction. They were not used, I guess, more than a total of fourteen or fifteen hours.

Then the problem came of the movement of these Freedom Riders to Mississippi. We actually developed a plan with the help of some alcohol tax agents from Mississippi as to how we could, if we had to, escort these people with marshals and put a force of marshals into Jackson, Mississippi, to protect them there. We discovered that there was a veterans' hospital there, and we got a map and worked out how the marshals would get into town, get to the bus station, and get back to the veterans' hospital. Then the night before the Freedom Riders were supposed to leave, Byron had a conversation with Governor Barnett [Ross R. Barnett]. Byron said that the Freedom Riders were coming and Barnett said, "You ought to come over here with them. Come over here and have dinner with me because those folks are going to be just as safe as they were in their baby beds riding over here. We are going to take care of them." I remember Byron laughing about the law and order in Mississippi.

I don't know how much of this story is documented. This is just my worm's eye view of it. It was an important demonstration of the determination of the Kennedys to enforce the law. Also, I think, it was quite a feat to accomplish that without the use of military. Part of the political strategy of the people in the South at that time, I believe, was to provoke the use of military, and the use of a civilian force, I think, was important at that time. The fact that soldiers were not used--every effort was made to use civilian force there, and at Oxford until it was apparent that the situation was beyond their control--was important to satisfy the country as to the bona fides of the federal effort and of the violence and danger inherent in their resistance to it.

MR. MORRISSEY: Running your eyes down this list, what is your next item in which you were involved?

MR. OBERDORFER: I was only involved as a spectator in all of these things. A lot of it was just by a conversation. The way that Bob Kennedy ran this office--we all had pretty good access to him, and we were around his office when these things were happening and participated in conversations with him. He would call five or six people in and ask their views on what should be done. Also, I was always very close personally with Byron and also with Burke Marshall and had conversational contact with these developments.

I knew about the ICC [Interstate Commerce Commission], the request for the ICC regulations which was one of the things that came out of the Montgomery episode. I knew about the efforts to desegregate airports. I remember particularly the discussions with Douglas Arant from Birmingham about the desegregation of the airport in Birmingham. They actually built the new airport terminal in Birmingham with white lavatories and colored lavatories and white fountains and colored fountains. But they just knocked down the wall between them as they opened. The FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] was really responsible for accomplishing that.

There was some discussion of using defense contracts as a device for increasing employment opportunities but I didn't have much to do with that. I remember discussions of the suggestion of the Civil Rights Commission that federal funds be cut off in Mississippi, and I remember that it was just not very warmly received here. People didn't like that idea. I didn't have much to do with Prince Edward [Prince Edward County, Virginia], or the housing.

I did have a large role, I think, in the voluntary desegregation of theaters, hotels, and so forth. That grew out of the demonstrations in Birmingham when we came back from that. Burke Marshall and Ed Guthman and I went with the attorney general to Asheville, North Carolina, where he made a speech on a Saturday. We went down this time in an air force plane and came back. Going down and coming back, the four of us discussed what was indicated in the way of federal action to get the pressures that had been generated in Birmingham under control, to devise mechanisms for getting the disputes that we had in Birmingham off the streets and into the courts.

I don't remember the precise detail but one of the suggestions that came out of that was the invitation that Bob issued. The first invitation was to a group of chain store owners, the chairmen of the board or the president of Woolworth's [F. W. Woolworth Co.], Kress [S. H. Kress & Co.], J. C. Penney [Co.], McCrory [Corp.]. Sears Roebuck [and Co.] was also involved. He had them to lunch on a Wednesday up in his office, and just before the lunch somebody said that he wanted me to join them. After the lunch he made me his delegate to coordinate a series of meetings that were planned at that lunch of the chain store leaders. We also worked out meetings that weekend in New York with a group of theater owners, a group of restaurant owners, and a group of hotel owners. We sent out a number of invitations to these people, and they met with Bob and Burke and me in a suite in the Waldorf [Waldorf-Astoria Hotel], either Friday afternoon and Saturday, or Saturday afternoon and Sunday. We got commitments from many of

them to see what they could do, each in his community, each in his national chain, to begin desegregation of places that had not been desegregated, places of public accommodation, and a system of reporting.

J. C. Penney officials came in and gave us a report from all their places where they had outlets of what the status was as far as desegregation of public facilities was concerned. On the basis of that and reports that we had solicited from our United States attorneys, we began giving the attorney general a daily report on the status of voluntary desegregation. This began about the twenty-second of May, 1963. Those reports are on micro-film now in the Library.

This series of meetings that the attorney general had was followed by a series of very important meetings at the White House at which President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson], appeared. Secretary Wirtz [W. Willard Wirtz] came to some of them. Secretary Rusk [Dean Rusk] spoke to one. They were meetings first of business leaders in the public accommodations area. More or less, the meetings that were organized out of the meetings that were held by the attorney general in New York in May were begun in the White House in June. At the large meeting of theater owners, hotel men, restaurant owners, the president spoke to them about the lesson of Birmingham, mainly that we had twenty million people that we have been treating as second-class citizens and who had not been able--I remember, as Vice President Johnson put it--to stop to get a cup of coffee as they drove over certain parts of the country.

I think that these meetings had a very large impact. There were six or eight or nine of them. The business council came in for a meeting. This was very effective. There was a lawyers group which came in for a meeting, and then formed the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights [under Law] under the leadership of Harrison Tweed and Bernard Segal. This has been very significant.

There was a meeting with churchmen in which a man by the name of Irwin Miller [J. Irwin Miller], who was the lay president of the National Council of Churches, accepted an appointment as chairman of a committee of religious leaders. They were very effective during that summer in encouraging voluntary desegregation. We had occasion to talk to them about the March on Washington. They had a lot to do with making that integrated, making it disciplined, making it peaceful; and then in the fall after that March there, their efforts turned very effectively to supporting civil rights legislation.

I would say that the meetings the attorney general had with the business leaders, the meetings that the president had with the business leaders and the religious leaders, and to a lesser degree with the lawyers, brought to bear on the civil rights problem forces that had never been committed to its solution before. I think the president's leadership was terribly important in that, and I think the national consensus that developed to ultimately produce the Civil Rights Act was only possible because the conscience of leaders of that caliber, the Protestant religious leadership and the conservative, potent business leadership became satisfied that segregation had to

go, that it was not morally defensible any longer, if it ever was, and that it had become an intolerable economic and political problem. I think that the business leaders from their experience with labor problems recognized the destructive possibility, if this thing had to be fought out on the streets in the way that the labor movement had to fight it out. They recognized the propriety of having a law that provided a forum for the peaceful solution of these problems. The president, the attorney general, the vice president said that all very well in these meetings. I think that laid the keel for the ship that is now sailing.

Do you have any questions about that area at all? It is pretty well documented, except that the president never kept any notes. These meetings at the White House were off the record, and there was no stenographer present. So far as I can tell, there is no record of what President Kennedy said. What he did say, the way he said it, when he said it. By that I mean the context of it was critical, terribly important. I think it changed the course of our history.

MORRISSEY: No, I have no questions unless you have any additional recollections about any of these meetings.

OBERDORFER: No. I remember one unfortunate aspect of that that probably isn't recorded anywhere. I have the responsibility of maintaining liaison with the lawyers' committee, through Irwin Miller and Bob Spike [Robert W. Spike] of the religious group, with the business council--Bob Knight [Robert H. Knight], who had been general counselor of the Treasury and had been very helpful to us in the Cuban prisoner exchange, agreed to help us with the business group. He had gone to New York, and he is with a distinguished business firm there. It was to his advantage to have something to do with these people, and it was to our advantage that he would be a go-between. Not that I had been a party to it, but the administration had been a party to this controversy with the business community over the steel strike. We felt that Bob could be helpful and he was, extremely. He arranged for a series of meetings between Burke Marshall and me and Mr. Kappel [Frederick R. Kappel] the chairman of the American Telephone Company [American Telephone and Telegraph Co.] and Kappel was very, very helpful. He did commit himself to this thing in a conscientious, effective way. At least I thought he did. He was always on guard, too, at the same time. It was an arm's-length relationship. There was no question about that.

After the business council meeting with the president, Newsweek put out a little blurb to the effect that the president was angry because when he came into the room to meet with the business council nobody stood up. I don't know where Newsweek got that from, but they did print it, and Kappel was just terribly upset with us, Marshall and me, because of this, and he wrote a letter to the president, denying that it happened and apologizing if it did, as I recall his letter. The president wrote him a nice letter back. It was a good illustration of the tenderness, the fragility of the relationship between the president and the business council-type person. It is

silly that anything that insignificant could be important, but it was important to Kappel. I'm sure it was important to all of those fellows.

MORRISSEY: In regard to the troubles in Birmingham in September of '63, if I recall correctly, there was some dispute about the role that U.S. Steel [Corporation] and specifically Mr. Blough [Roger B. Blough] could play in Birmingham in effecting changes in the racial situation?

OBERDORFER: Actually, at the time of the demonstrations in Birmingham which I described to you, which preceded the airplane ride to Asheville [Alabama] that I mentioned to you, Blough had been very helpful, along with a number of other people, in calling his vice-president in Birmingham, a man by the name of Arthur Wiebel [Arthur V. Wiebel]. I am sure that Burke Marshall's chronology and Joe Dolan's chronology describe in greater detail than I can any negotiations that Burke and Joe had preceding the agreement which was reached between the white community in Birmingham and Martin Luther King. I had some part in that up here. The day before that agreement was finally executed, I was called over to the White House to meet with Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] and a number of other people about what could be done, and while I was there I had a call from Burke Marshall who asked me to start a telephone campaign, to have people we knew call people they knew in Birmingham urging them to support settlement as distinguished from--I gather the alternative was to have the governor declare martial law. I remember the attorney general--I believe it was the attorney general; it might have been Secretary Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon]--called Blough and Blough called his man Wiebel down there and got him to support the thing. The president called; I believe he called Colonel Marion Rushton who was president of the Protective Life Company [Protective Life Insurance Company] in Birmingham. I called a friend of mine there by the name of Mervyn Sterne [Mervyn H. Sterne] and got from him in short notice a list of the names of the people that he considered to be the key men in the situation and who could most effectively call them. I remember Kenneth Royall [Kenneth C. Royall] called some of them. Irwin Miller, I believe, called some of them. But we fanned this out the best we could in a matter of hours. Then I went down there after that and was with them as that thing was being brought under control.

In connection with the Birmingham incident, one of the matters that may not have been recorded was the arrangements that were made to raise the bond money for the, literally, hundreds, if not thousands, of adults and children who had been put in jail because they had demonstrated. I made the suggestion to Bob Kennedy that the labor unions might be willing to provide the bail money, and he put me in touch with Joe Rauh [Joseph C. Rauh, Jr.] up there, the United Auto Worker. Rauh made arrangements to raise the money, and I arranged for it to be sent down to Birmingham for deposit with the Birmingham Trust National Bank, the president of which had been helpful to Burke. The bailing of those children was one of the factors that made it possible for King to come to the agreement that he did. I don't know whether

the president had anything to do with that or not. I imagine that the attorney general worked that out pretty much himself. Now I forget what your question was that precipitated me back to the . . .

MORRISSEY: You already answered it. It was about Blough and U.S. Steel in Birmingham.

OBERDORFER: I remember during that time President Kennedy went through Tennessee and Alabama, and I remember getting advice from a number of people down there that it wasn't safe for him to do this. For all I know, one reason he went by helicopter from Muscle Shoals to Huntsville rather than going by car was because of the expressions of the anxiety about his safety. I believe Governor Wallace [George C. Wallace] went in the helicopter with him, was on the platform there.

MORRISSEY: Did you make the advance arrangements for that trip?

OBERDORFER: No, no I just knew about them. I was in Birmingham all the time. This meeting that Bob Kennedy had with the Negro leaders in New York was during the time of the meeting with the hotel men and restaurant men. I did not go to that meeting; Burke Marshall did. The three other major events that involved me were 1) the episode in Oxford, Mississippi; 2) the public school crisis in Birmingham in September of 1963, and 3) the Blaik [Earl H. Blaik]-Royall episode also in September of 1963.

So far as the Oxford thing is concerned, I had very much the same role in that that I had in Montgomery with the Freedom Riders. This was sort of a natural progression built on my experience in Montgomery and in Birmingham. During the week before the Oxford episode I had, as in these other situations, participated in a counseling way in those activities in deciding what to do and really not making any decision, just being somebody to bounce things off of and putting in my two cents when I thought they were useful. Actually the organization of the force of marshals up to a point, as I recall it, was the responsibility of the deputy's office and Bill Geoghegan [William A. Geoghegan] back there. I believe on a Friday before the Sunday I went up to see the attorney general to tell him something about the Chacharis case and while I was there, he was in the process of trying to decide--by that time there were some marshals already assembled in Memphis [Tennessee] at the Millington Air Force Base--whether to send Katzenbach down to Memphis or to send me. He finally decided that he would send me down there to talk to the marshals that had assembled there. It was much the same group that had been in Montgomery. That is, the same components, except for the alcohol tax unit people. The secretary of the treasury had insisted that they not be employed in anything like this hereafter except on the direct order of the president, so nobody asked him for them. Apparently, they had objected to their exposure. One of them had been hurt in Montgomery. In any event, just with no notice at all, Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] asked me to go down to Memphis to see if that outfit was shaped up and also to see if I could explain to the men why it was necessary for them to do this. So many of them were Southerners. He was afraid that there

might be some of them that didn't want to go. He asked me if I wanted to take somebody with me, and I asked for Joe Dolan. I don't know whether you have been over this ground with him.

MORRISSEY: No, I haven't.

OBERDORFER: You interviewed Joe, didn't you? He didn't talk about it?

MORRISSEY: We haven't finished it.

OBERDORFER: So we went down to Millington Air Force Base on Friday afternoon, got there Friday afternoon. We went by commercial airlines, along with Don Coppock, who is assistant commissioner of Immigration in charge of the border patrol. Before we got there the group of marshals had been under the supervision of a man named Cameron [John W. Cameron] who was in McShane's office. McShane was there too, but McShane was moving around escorting Meredith [James H. Meredith] while Cameron was minding the store. Again they built up a force of about five or six hundred marshals and they had planes there from the border patrol, and they had ordered a convoy of military vehicles prepared to build a campsite near Oxford and that was all at Millington when we got there. The FBI was represented, the border patrol, and the marshals, and then they went in the same force of prison guards. The border patrol had a lot of cars but not enough to move all these people. Again, on a very short turnaround, we put together this force of marshals. Have I been over this with you, the plan to go into Oxford? I have just told it to somebody fairly recently. It wasn't you?

MORRISSEY: I don't think so.

OBERDORFER: Not the other day on tape? About the rehearsal we were having? Well, these marshals had had some training, but not much, on riot control, but they had never operated together. They hadn't had their equipment issued to them. So we spent the afternoon Friday and Friday night doing very much what we had done in Montgomery, requisitioning buses and trucks from the navy, setting up an organization chart, dividing the force into groups with group commanders, and units within the groups. I forget what we called them. We called them something. We really didn't know how or under what circumstances we would be used, whether we either could be flown into Oxford and go from there--there was no transportation in Oxford--or we could go over the road to Oxford. We didn't know which we were to do and who was to decide which we would do. We worked all day Saturday with these men. I remember I assembled them all in a theater and gave them a speech about their duty as law enforcement officers to carry out unpleasant duties, this situation in which the court of the United States had entered an order and the order had not been obeyed.

Normally, as the marshals there knew, when a court entered an order and the marshals served it on the defendant against whom the order ran, that was all there was to it. The defendant did what he was told without

anything further. But the marshals' historic responsibility was that if the defendant didn't do what he was told, the marshals would have to arrest him. Or if they were evicting somebody that hadn't paid their rent, the marshals in the District of Columbia would move them right out on the street. This was an unusual circumstance. It was important to the country. It was in the context of the evolution of constitutional doctrine that the federal government was superior to the state, and when the Supreme Court entered an order, it had to be obeyed. Otherwise, we would have chaos. I thought I had not much preparation for it; but apparently I gave them effective background on what their general mission was, and told them at the end that if there was anybody that didn't want to go, they didn't have to. The border patrol people should go to the head of the border patrol if they didn't want to go. The marshals should go to McShane if they didn't want to go. One man, one border patrol officer, came to Coppock and asked to be excused and then the next morning recanted his request.

That afternoon we had them out drilling in their formations, and it occurred to me that this thing could really go wrong if they hadn't had any training and they weren't organized. We had better have a plan. So I staffed out to a border patrol man and one or two of the marshals who had military service the job of drawing a plan for entering the University of Mississippi campus with Meredith over the road and, alternately, for arriving by air and being moved from the airport. I got Bob Kennedy to have the Defense Department send in a tactical officer and a transportation officer from some of the military units that had apparently been alerted for this thing to counsel with us about our operation.

They sent a lieutenant colonel who was a fine guy. I wish I could remember his name. It ought to be recorded somewhere. I can dig it out of the file if you haven't noticed it. He came in, and by this time the plan had been developed, and I went over it with these fellows, and then we presented it to the colonel. He went over it for a while and said that he thought that it was the best that could be done and approved it.

By that time I think we learned that there was a tentative agreement between the administration and the governor that on Monday morning when Meredith was to be presented for admission for the umpteenth time, this large force of marshals would arrive in this convoy that we assembled. They would come out of their buses and form a V, and one marshal would pull his gun on a force of deputy sheriffs and state highwaymen who would then stand aside and allow the convoy to proceed. It was to be a token threat of the use of federal force. A crazy idea. That's what had been negotiated and that's what we were preparing to do. We still didn't know whether we would go down, risk putting this whole group on those highways, dangerous as they were bound to be. We would have no police escort; we didn't have motorcycles or anything like that. So we were also developing the alternate plan of having the men fly down in these four planes provided by the border patrol. We didn't have but a limited amount of transportation. The idea was that, as I recall it, the convoy would take the men out to where the airplanes were and then drive on down the highway. The men would get on

the planes and fly down there, and they would arrive about the same time. It was a timing problem there. An empty convoy wouldn't be much threat, and then all of a sudden there would be men for the convoy to pick up at the airport. For some reason we thought that timing was important and we had to work out how long it would take this whole group to move from the barracks where they were at the air force base to the planes, and then how long it would take them to load on the plane. There was no way to calculate that. It had never been done. We just had to do it.

On Sunday morning we had all these men together and told them what we wanted to do and then set up a rehearsal for it. I had told everybody to carry their gear. Some of it hadn't been issued, so some of them didn't carry their gear. So the only way that we could find out how much room there was on the planes for helmets, gas guns, and all the carriers and everything was to try it. Nobody could possibly work it out on paper. While those fellows were getting into the buses and trucks to go to the planes for the rehearsal, Barnett and Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] worked out this arrangement whereby Meredith would be admitted on the campus on Sunday instead of Monday. So we had this same border patrol, base radio, and the border patrol cars and we sent word to the cars, while they were on the way from the barracks to the plane, cancelling the drill and telling them to get on the planes and go to Oxford. The same dumb luck, as the Sergeant York case. I'm sure Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] still doesn't know how I got those marshals to Oxford so fast. It just so happened that they were already on the way. They got on the planes and went. They were there in just a few minutes. I'm sure the state of Mississippi didn't know what happened. I remember that there were three waves of marshals down there and they were there before the agreement. It was sort of like the Germans landing in Rotterdam. I suppose the people of Mississippi were very surprised at how quickly those fellows. . . . They didn't know anything about the planes or anything else.

I went down with the second or last group of planes, and by the time I got there, it had been decided for Katzenbach to come in from Washington to take charge, which he did. The Civil Rights Division had set up a base and a radio in the federal building in Oxford, and I went there and spent the evening there. Katzenbach came in and took the marshals to the Lyceum [University of Mississippi] and was there for that night. We were in telephone contact and I had open wires to Washington.

I remember now who I was telling this to most recently. Walter Lord is writing a book on this subject. He was in here the other day and I went over this story with him.

MORRISSEY: Anything else you can add to the. . . .

OBERDORFER: I think that gives you the flavor of it, my part that is, the part of it that involved the president and more directly the attorney general. I remember one thing. After I had been there about a week, I had a case to argue in the Supreme Court so they let

me come back, and I brought back with me four or five or six of the marshals who had been particularly outstanding in their performance that night. One was a man named Charles Chamblee, who was a border patrol officer from New Orleans. He had spent the evening going between the airport and the Lyceum bringing gas, and it kept those marshals supplied with gas, just running right through this mob back and forth. How he survived, I don't know. A couple of times people stopped him and tried to pull him out of the car. Chamblee is one of the champion pistol shots in the South. Just a strong, sturdy man. He would beat them off his car with his billy club, as he told the story. He and a number of others, some who were hurt, came up in the plane with me, and we went up to the attorney general's office and he got the president on his phone. The president had a cold, and he came on the speaker phone, and he spoke to these men about how gallant they had been and how they had served in the best tradition of the United States marshals service, which they had. A very, very dramatic thing.

There are many episodes about that that could be told. One of the things that is very vivid is my recollection of this moment at Millington Air Force Base when the attorney general told me to move the marshals to Oxford, with no notice at all, just changed all the rules. I thought back about why I was so responsive to that, no argument at all. He wanted it done and we would do it. This wasn't a military relationship; this isn't a military organization. I have often thought that the relationships that he establishes in situations like that are. . . . As I say, he gets people around to play over their heads. I just knew that if I did all right, that would be fine, but that if it had been a disaster in some way or if my responsibility in it had not come off--we couldn't know how it would work, we were just doing the best we could--but I never had the feeling that somebody was going to point the finger at me and say, "You messed it up." I just knew that if it went wrong, the attorney general or the president would take the responsibility and not try to alibi it on to me.

I remember so vividly a day after the Bay of Pigs fiasco when the president spoke to a group and it was carried on television in the attorney general's office. I sat right there, a group of us, with the attorney general and watched the president say, "The responsibility is mine." He never said the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] messed me up; he never said the Joint Chiefs of Staff messed me up; he never said the Cubans messed me up. He took the responsibility. And that example was in my mind in Oxford, Mississippi. I was asked to do something, and I would do it as best I could with confidence that I would not be--assuming that I would do it the best I could, as I had every intention of doing--I had no fear of being shafted from the rear if the thing went wrong. With those fellows behind you, you didn't have to worry about your back. That's important.

By this time the military, Major General Abrams [Creighton W. Abrams, Jr.], now full General Abrams, was in this little headquarters at Millington and General Billingslea [Charles Billingslea] was there. They really did look askance at this ragtag thing we were doing. I remember Abrams got on the phone and talked to somebody, I believe it was Cy Vance [Cyrus R. Vance],

but I don't know. I remember Abrams saying, "Now, I am not afraid to assume command responsibility. But I understand that in this situation you don't want me to assume it." And he didn't. I remember during the night when the army was so slow in getting there--I knew how far away they were. I don't know if Nick did or not, and we kept on trying to reassure the men just to hold on. They were calling in on the radio and asking, for instance, if they were fired on with rifles or shotguns, could they open fire? We would have to tell them on the radio that on no occasion to open fire. We tried to be as calm as we could. I think we were.

I remember in the middle of that the president just raising hell because the army hadn't arrived, and getting a telephone call from General Abrams who was stuck back there at Millington. Helicopters that were supposed to bring the army were scattered, and he didn't know where they were, and he couldn't find all of his men. He apparently had become responsible for removal of the body of the French correspondent who had been killed. The thought went through my mind, here is a fellow that I saw this afternoon, big barrel-chested impressive looking major general of the United States Army. Here it is ten hours later and he is in charge of the grave registration detail. But I miscalculated. Abrams was not that badly treated, and he subsequently showed up in Birmingham and Tuscaloosa. As I say, now he is vice chief of staff of the United States Army, and a very fine man.

Well, this is catch as catch can about the chronology of Oxford. I can't present in this context without more rehearsal. It is there in the record. For instance, Don Coppock kept a log of the radio traffic in our base radio that gives the chronology of the events of that evening.

I would like to revert to what I would call the second phase of the episodes in Birmingham of May, 1963. I have previously referred to the demonstrations led by Martin Luther King which ended in a settlement negotiated by Burke Marshall assisted by Joe Dolan. When that agreement was signed, it was on a Saturday. Burke and I came back to Washington on a plane that left Birmingham at about noon. Burke, who was exhausted, immediately went to his country place in West Virginia. I stayed in Washington. My father lived in Birmingham at that time. He had a colored man working with him who lived in Bessemer. My recollection is that early Sunday morning, this colored man called me and told me that this terrible riot had broken out downtown. There had been a bombing of the Gaston Motel [A. G. Gaston Motel] downtown and that the state police had come in great force. In his primitive way he described to me a very dangerous situation. I immediately heard it on the radio, the same thing, and I didn't feel that I had a continuing responsibility to report to anybody about it. But I stayed home that morning. One reason was that I was tired; I slept late.

About 11 or 12 o'clock Katzenbach, who was then deputy attorney general, called me and said that the attorney general and the president wanted me to go immediately to Andrews Air Force Base [Maryland] and get on a plane and go down to Birmingham, that the situation was critical. Burke

was not available immediately.

He rounded up a whole lot of other people. There was Joe Dolan again, Ramsey Clark, John Nolan [John E. Nolan], among others. I think McShane went, but I'm not sure. I came down here to my office first and had some conversations with Judge Lynne [Seybourn H. Lynne] in Birmingham and with Vincent Townsend [S. Vincent Townsend] who is the assistant to the publisher of the paper [Birmingham News] there to get an estimate of the situation. I talked to the assistant director to the FBI who maintains liaison with us; his name is Courtney Evans [Courtney A. Evans]. I learned that there was a meeting scheduled that afternoon of the same committee that had met with Burke Marshall and Joe Dolan previously to work out this agreement, the Senior Citizens, they called themselves. I remember telling Evans that I wanted the FBI to meet us with four or five cars so that as soon as we got off the plane, we could go to different places, and that I wanted to meet the chief of police and the sheriff and the special agent in charge of the FBI as soon as I got to Birmingham.

The situation was that this Gaston Motel has been bombed the night before. When the firemen came to put out the fire caused by the bomb, a Negro mob attacked the firemen. They withdrew until police arrived in force and the police in turn were reinforced by literally hundreds of state highway patrolmen under the command of this Colonel Lingo [Albert J. Lingo] who works for Governor Wallace. They had just laid siege to the whole neighborhood around the Gaston Motel and were not allowing people in or out. The colored population, which was armed, was getting more and more restive, and violence of serious nature was very, very possible, and that was the reason we were sent back. I don't know what authority we had, really, unless the president was going to declare that the local authorities were incapable of maintaining order. After I got down there, Ramsey Clark went to this meeting. John Nolan went out and met with the Negro leaders. That is why he needed a car, as I remember. Somebody else met with somebody else, and the sheriff and the chief of police came to my office. I set up an office in the FBI headquarters there in Birmingham. I was asked to make a recommendation as to whether or not it was necessary that evening to send in soldiers. A command detail was already on its way; first a colonel--I guess a colonel went down there with us, as a matter of fact, in plain clothes. He went out and made a reconnaissance. Later on that evening a brigadier general, and later on Major General Abrams came in and General Billingslea also from Oxford--you see the sequence of these things.

But sometime while it was still daylight, I understand--I don't know this; it can be verified somewhere else--I understood that there was airborne a battalion or more of troops headed for the airport in Birmingham to move in there in that situation. I was asked, first by the attorney general who was at the White House and then by Secretary McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] who was at the White House, to make a recommendation for the president as to whether or not those troops should be brought in. I, on the basis of my estimate of the chief of police and what he told me--I had never met him before--and my estimate of the sheriff and what he told me--

I had never met him before--I recommended that the introduction of troops there was not indicated.

Later on that evening Burke and Ed Guthman arrived and direct responsibility shifted to Burke from me. Actually, I stayed there for several days after that, again serving with Burke in the way I had served with White at Montgomery as sort of second in command. Again I was not conspicuous at all. I didn't go out to my father's house very much. He wasn't very well, and I was afraid to attract attention to him or to get him very excited about this thing. I stayed at a motel there with these fellows.

One of the other things that happened during that period. The army had had the experience at Oxford of having to come into a place, Billingslea in particular, without any advance headquarters and without any reconnaissance. Apparently they got authority to put a little command establishment there in Birmingham. They had General Abrams and General Billingslea and this other brigadier general. The first thing you knew that night they had a dozen or so people there in a great big room. This was on Sunday and by Monday night they had over a hundred people there, the command echelon of this division that they were alerting. Sometime during the day apparently the president started asking how many soldiers have they got in Birmingham and he was told--first they gave him a little smoke screen that there was only a little command group. Then he began to ask how many there were and they kept putting him off, and by the time they had finally to answer him, they had gotten those fellows out of there, most of them, down to maybe a dozen. But at one point they had over a hundred and thirty men in there, with their barracks bags, uniforms, rifles, riding up and down the elevator in an office building. Really, it could have been a scandal. But Abrams sensed immediately that somebody had to turn the spigot off. It was at this time that the president ordered troops into Maxwell Air Force Base and into Fort McClellan, Alabama, into military bases in Alabama, but he didn't put them off of military bases at this time. The government got sued by the state of Alabama for use of troops in a time when it wasn't justified. The original action went to the Supreme Court. The defense was, of course, that all the president did was to put some troops on federal bases in Alabama. Nobody ever got down to the detail of the hundred and thirty men in the office building in Birmingham.

The other time that I was in Birmingham had to do with the integration of the public schools in the city of Birmingham. On Labor Day of 1963 my father had a stroke and I went down there to be with him, and while I was there, this crisis developed and I stayed there. Burke Marshall came down and between us we handled the situation. On the day the schools actually opened in Birmingham, Katzenbach came down to take charge of soldiers if they were to be used in Birmingham. Actually, a detachment of National Guardsmen had been at Tuscaloosa, on account of the integration of the University [of Alabama] at Tuscaloosa, were brought over to Birmingham while Katzenbach was in the vicinity. But they were never used. They stayed in

an armory and then went back to Tuscaloosa after this was over.

So I came on back after that, and then on another Sunday there was this horrible church bombing. The attorney general was put upon by a delegation of ministers, and Harold Stassen [Harold S. Stassen], and a few people like that to send soldiers into Birmingham because of the church bombing. The next morning Burke Marshall and I, while out on one of our walks, were talking about what we could do about the situation there. People were very anxious, very concerned, and we talked about one of us going down, or Katzenbach going down. We hit on the idea of some layman, and the attorney general and Ed Guthman hit on Royall and Blaik. They had known Blaik through something to do with--maybe the thing that MacArthur [Douglas A. MacArthur] had settled, and the attorney general knew Royall from some other place. They got authority from the president in a matter of fifteen or twenty minutes. They came down that afternoon to Washington, and I met with them here in this office with the assistant to the mayor in Birmingham and sort of briefed them on the situation they were going into. Then a couple of days later they went down and stayed for about two weeks. They really didn't accomplish anything except to maintain a status quo until there could be a disengagement. I think they had a quieting effect on the situation, but they didn't reach the problems. Their ultimate proposal was that the city should appoint some Negro police, and that was in September 1963. There was still not any Negro police in Birmingham.

I think as far as the other parts of it are concerned, the most important work I did, I guess, outside of these crises was to maintain continuity of relationships between the department and the White House, on the one hand, and these groups that came to visit the president that were organized by the attorney general with respect to voluntary desegregation. They became the nucleus of the people who gave the real impetus to the civil rights legislation.

MORRISSEY: When Blaik and Royall went to Birmingham they were met at the airport by a delegation of white citizens, and later during their stay there was some criticism about their conferring with, I think, leaders of the White Citizens Council. Did you get involved in any of this?

OBERDORFER: Not really. I cautioned them about what they should do when they got there. I remember one thing that I did do was to arrange for them to be served the New York and Washington papers every morning. We arranged to have the airlines send them down there by the stewardesses and the pilots so that they would have the New York Times every morning. It impressed me so both in Mississippi and Alabama how quickly you could lose touch with what the rest of the country was thinking if you depended on the local paper and the local radio. They didn't have most network broadcasts down there. One thing that I did do was make sure the New York and Washington papers--I don't know if they ever knew who arranged it. Wherever they went for those two weeks, they got

those papers. It was to keep some kind of perspective. They were very vulnerable and almost did get brainwashed.

I want to go back a minute, for emphasis, to the series of meetings that President Kennedy held over at the White House at the time he appealed to the leadership of the country--not the political leadership, but the community leadership: church leaders, business leaders, educators--that they focus on the situation that confronted the Negro population in the United States in general as well as in the South, that they stop sweeping that problem under the rug and look at it in the eye, recognize that we had permitted a wrong to be perpetrated and perpetuated, and that it was in the power of everybody to do something, some more than others, but everybody could make a difference in trying to turn the country around on the thing. Those speeches or talks that he made in the White House were not recorded. They were not transcribed and yet they were as tremendous a feat of leadership--an exercise of the president's power as leader not as commander in chief, not as the director of the executive branch of government, not as a person with political leverage over the Congress, but as the leader and spokesman of the conscience of the people. His exercise of leadership in those meetings was a monumental feat of statesmanship. There is no question but what they, by his presence and by his effort, turned the country around on the question of civil rights. It is a tragedy that his words were not recorded.

I have tried to remember some parts of what he said. I remember his saying over and over again to these groups, reciting statistics that showed a Negro child born in this country had how much less chance of earning ten thousand dollars a year, how much less chance of finishing college, how much less chance of finishing high school, how much greater chance of contracting tuberculosis, how much less life expectancy, and a whole gamut of figures to show the results of discrimination, namely the factual demonstration that the Negro was deprived when compared to a white person born at the same time.

His appeal in each case, having recited these facts, having referred to Birmingham, having referred over and over again to the obvious injustice of not allowing a soldier to eat in a restaurant, or requiring a soldier and his family to travel hundreds of miles out of their way in order to find a place to sleep at night--having pointed out those injustices, he always ended each of these meetings with a request that the people present do something, go back home and form a biracial committee, if there isn't any. If there is one, participate in it. If you own a business, check to see if you are really being fair to your Negro employees. If you have a business that is serving the public, make sure that it is open to the public. If you can't do it yourself, bring together a group of leaders in the community who can do it. It is necessary to do this to relieve the pressure. This isn't going to be the solution, but it is a start to the solution. It is necessary to make a start. It is not only fair, but we are liable to have an explosion if it doesn't happen. I am sure this is a poor reconstruction of the message, but it was given eloquently, it was given pointedly, and it had an enormous impact.

MORRISSEY: Thank you.