

Lee C. White Oral History Interview –JFK #3, 5/28/1964
Administrative Information

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Interviewer: Milton Gwirtzman
Date of Interview: May 28, 1964
Place of Interview: Washington, D.C.
Length: 56 pp.

Biographical Note

White, Lee C.; Legislative assistant to John F. Kennedy (1954-1957); assistant to Joseph P. Kennedy, member of the Hoover Commission (1954-1955); Counsel, Small Business Committee, Senate (1957-1958); Assistant Special Counsel to the President (1961-1963). White discusses John F. Kennedy's [JFK] efforts and progress regarding civil rights. He also discusses the work accomplished by, and the relationship between, the Civil Rights Commission and JFK, among other issues.

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Lee C. White, recorded interview by Milton Gwartzman, May 28, 1964, (page number), John F. Kennedy Oral History Program.

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Lee C. White – JFK #3

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Third Oral History Interview

with

LEE C. WHITE

May 28, 1964
Washington, D.C.

By Milton Gwartzman

For the John F. Kennedy Library

GWIRTZMAN: This is the third interview with Lee White, Assistant Special Counsel to President Kennedy. The interviewer is Milton Gwartzman and the interview is taking place in the White House on May 28. During the 1962-63 period, the Civil Rights Commission issued a number of reports and recommendations that were in advance of the programs recommended by the President in the field of civil rights. What was his general relationship with the Commission and what was his reaction to the reports they issued?

WHITE: The Commission was of course in being when the

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President came into office. I don't know whether he knew chairman John Hannah of Michigan State University before his experiences as President with Hannah being the chairman. But Hannah was a pretty tough minded cookie and the President at times indicated that the Commission would probably be a lot more effective under different leadership. But it did have a rather peculiar status. The President appointed Dean Griswold [Erwin Grisold] of the Harvard Law School, a Republican who did give the Administration fits. I think there were many occasions when the President would

have wished to perhaps redo that particular appointment or remake it. By and large the day to day relationships with the Commission were handled by Burke Marshall dealing with Berl Bernhard, the staff director of the Commission or by my dealing with Berl Bernhard. Berl incidentally was an extremely competent fellow. He did great work in holding that Commission together and in serving in liaison capacity with the

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White House staff and with the President himself. President Kennedy was very much impressed with Bernhard, and I know when Bernhard left the Commission he wrote him a very warm letter in appreciation for his services. But even Bernhard was not able to handle the Commission. What I'd like to describe is the Mississippi resolution crisis. Things were not going well in Mississippi and I guess it was early in '63 the President had met with the full Commission and Berl Bernhard and myself on February 12, the day of the reception at the White House for civil rights that was referred to earlier. In that meeting the President, as of course, he did in all meetings, dominated the situation and controlled the conversation, indicated clearly that the situation in Mississippi and Alabama were extremely explosive -- he had firsthand information from the Attorney General and from Burke Marshall -- and urged the Commission to exercise as much restraint as they believed

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they could without attempting to flatly tell them that they should not go into either of those two states. He made it abundantly clear that there were other places where they could properly find a great deal of constructive work to do.

GWIRTZMAN: This was on the question of holding hearings?

WHITE: This was on the question of holding hearings. The members of the Commission were all quite responsive to this and indicated that they could understand the President's reasoning and that they would be glad to cooperate with him, recognizing that they had their own responsibilities and they were not making any flat pledge. If I recall correctly there was quite a bit of sweetness and light in the fact that the President was meeting with them and he had scheduled this reception, eased some of the earlier pain. This Commission was not much different from any other presidential appointees in the sense that they felt they didn't have enough

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personal contact with the President, although always professing to understand the heavy burdens of his office. The reception went well and the wives of the Commission members were all present and quite happy. Within six or seven weeks...

GWIRTZMAN: Can I interrupt? Did you talk to the President after the meeting about

how he felt the meeting had gone?

WHITE: Yes. As I recall it wasn't a long or detailed conversation but briefly he felt pretty good and said he seemed to have made headway with them, and I think we agreed that their response had been affirmative and encouraging. I can't remember exactly the length of time but your own notes would indicate probably within six weeks or two months the Commission had a meeting in Indiana. My recollection is that it was South Bend, although it might have been Bloomington, one of the two. At this meeting they were all very much upset and disturbed by the continuing crisis in Mississippi and felt a terrible sense

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of frustration, not only because they were unable to go there and to conduct hearings because I think they were satisfied that hearings, especially by their groups, would not ameliorate the conditions that existed, but rather because they were the official Civil Rights Commission of the United States government that there was some obligation on their part to speak out. So they drafted a resolution calling on the President to explore his authority to withhold funds from Mississippi until it satisfied him, the President, that they were not acting in a discriminatory fashion. We were advised informally through Berl Bernhard at the Commission's meeting of their decision and were told that we could work with him in looking over the drafts and would have an opportunity to make any suggestions. The Commission had already broken up its meeting and returned to their respective homes. But clearly Dr. Hannah was powered, or at least assumed the power to make any refinements or any editing in

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the resolution. The resolution itself was absolutely horrible, but in the original form far worse than that that was ultimately released.

GWIRTZMAN: In what way?

WHITE: I don't think it even called for the President to explore. It asked the President then and there to withhold funds, and it was not limited in any sense, or qualified -- all funds. The manner was not at all defined. I don't believe that I have copies of that draft, but they may well be in my files. If I do it's worth perhaps an historical footnote to see the original version of it. The President had a chance to look at the original draft and agreed that it was absolutely unbelievable that this Commission, made up predominately of lawyers, was so loose, so almost irresponsible. He worked with Berl, first of all to urge them not to issue it. He didn't believe that there was any freedom to re-open that question, that it had already been made and it was going to be issued. The question

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really was what was going to be issued. There were some changes suggested which did soften, qualify, and modify the original language. I think this was all cleared over the telephone through Dr. Hannah, again without suggestion, the President's suggestion, I think that Dr. Hannah and perhaps other members of the Commission knew that the President had requested that it not be issued. But it came anyhow The President gave a little thought to whether he should respond to the Commission's in effect resolving that he undertake certain action through a written letter to be released at the same time or shortly after the Commission's recommendation, but decided that he would not do so, recognized that the question would arise at an early opportunity either through a Salinger briefing or through his own press conference. And it did present itself very quickly. He had obviously given considerable thought to what the answer should be without having written down an answer should be without having written down an answer or without even having -- I don't recall that

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anyone handed him a draft suggested question and answer. But his personal familiarity with the subject matter and the thought that he had given it was all that was necessary for him to formulate his reply, which was that he neither possessed the authority nor did he believe that he or any other President should have the authority to, on his own initiative and emotion, withhold funds from a state until it behaves in a manner that he thought was suitable and appropriate. I think when Title VI of the Civil Rights Bill now pending before the Senate was under consideration it helped to have gone through this experience because obviously what is there now is aimed specifically at programs. It takes into account the point the President made in his reply which was that one of the worst features of the recommendation of the Civil Rights Commission was that if these programs were to be terminated, in many of them it would be the Negroes of Mississippi, the poor people of

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Mississippi, who would be made to suffer rather than those who were guilty of the discriminatory acts. As I suggest, that principle is now part of Title VI.

GWIRTZMAN: So even though he knew he was opposed to the recommendation he nevertheless undertook to soften the language of the recommendation. Why was that?

WHITE: I would say primarily to indicate to the members of the Commission what a very poor job they had done in his view, and perhaps to awaken them to what it was that they were suggesting. Now it's quite some time ago and we no longer have quite the same concern, and obviously one of our concerns was that the President not be put in the position that Negro groups would take up his cause,

that others would urge him to do it because he frankly felt that it was not wise, was not helpful and it wasn't even within his power to do it. With the benefit of hindsight however, I'd say that even though it tended a little bit to discredit the Commission and they

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caught hell throughout the country in editorials criticizing them for their rather peculiar recommendations, it did serve in one regard to let the President look like a fairly moderate human being and a guy who considered and thought about these things rather carefully. I don't know that it made any points for him in the southern states or southern areas, but surely many people could see that the President would not accept willy nilly recommendations even from so august a body as the Civil Rights Commission.

GWIRTZMAN: Once he had made his statement at the press conference, did the reaction of the members of the Commission to that statement get back to him?

WHITE: No. Well, I think he heard about it, but the reaction was not a very marked one in the sense that they did not challenge his reasoning and contented themselves or solved their own egos by suggesting, I think more to themselves than outside of the Commission, that they had performed a worthwhile service by directing attention to

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the problems of Mississippi, and if they served a useful role in being a little extreme and aided the President in so doing, they thought they were being useful. Rather tortured reasoning, but I think they, if they were asked today, would believe that it was a wise, not necessarily wise, it was a useful thing to have done and perhaps would even today redo it if the occasion presented itself.

GWIRTZMAN: Did the President to your knowledge directly involve himself in the congressional fight to extend the life of the Civil Rights Commission?

WHITE: Yes, the extension bill -- there was an extension I believe in '61 which was a year of paucity, as you pointed out earlier, in civil rights legislation. There we started off with a request for a four year increase and it got chopped down in the House committee by Congressman Celler's [Emmanuel Celler] group to a two year extension. And that was what actually became the law. It was to expire in '63 and that was one of the titles

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of the provisions in the February '63 bill which the President submitted with a special message. There was a very brief discussion as to whether the President should request a permanent commission or whether he should request one for two years or four years, finally concluded he would ask for four years rather than permanent because he did not want by that request to indicate he believed the civil rights problems were going to be with us forever. Hard to say how useful or how significant that point was, but I believe that was the basis for it.

GWIRTZMAN: In your judgment do you think that the President felt during his term of office that the Civil Rights Commission was a help or a handicap in the overall Administration effort in the civil rights campaign?

WHITE: Well, I never heard him attempt to evaluate it on a long term basis. There were times when I know he was mighty annoyed with them. And of course this Mississippi incident was the most flagrant. I think anything I say would be sheer

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speculation. I don't have any recollection of his having mentioned it to me. He may well have to the Attorney General and I know that there were times when he rather ridiculed the Commission in jest. But I would assume that he felt that it did perform a useful service overall.

GWIRTZMAN: Getting back to the summer months of 1963 would you tell us something about the conferences that took place in the White House between the President and leaders of various fields of life in southern communities prior to and after the introduction of the Civil Rights Bill?

WHITE: I can't remember exactly the date of the message.

GWIRTZMAN: The message was June 20. No, the bill was sent up June 20. The President's message was June 12.

WHITE: That sounds right because June 11 was the Tuscaloosa confrontation. In the latter part of May the Attorney General asked for Ralph Dungan and me to come over to his office and meet with Burke Marshall to kind of figure out whether there wasn't something we could do to, something

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that could be done in the way of getting public attention focused on these problems and enlisting public support. He had asked Burke Marshall to secure from the Commerce Department the names of business people who had holdings in the South, or who controlled

businesses in the South from outside, or who lived there. He added to it from the information that was at hand people who had contacts there. Lou Oberdorfer [Louis F. Oberdorfer] from Birmingham, for example, put together a group of about forty-five or fifty businessmen and invited them to his office on May 21, May 22, sometime in that period, and spoke to them very frankly and very candidly about the tough situation that was building up in many of these southern communities and how important it was that they themselves undertake to do something in a constructive fashion to take away the cause for the grievances of many of the Negro people. The type of individual

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that was there I think is represented by the fact that there were vice presidents of Paramount theatres who had a string of theatres in the southern states, a few people from the restaurant industry, one guy from Austin, Texas, who was the president of the Austin, Texas Restaurant Dealers Association or something like that, a few Chamber of Commerce types. They all listened very attentively. They all were extremely responsive in terms of what experiences they had had in other communities where they had desegregated. They in fact gave a little moral support to each by indicating that in those communities where they had business open, where they had desegregated, the world had not come to an end, their businesses had not fallen apart and they had been able to exist beautifully. Not so much from the exhortation of the Attorney General, but from mutual encouragement and inspiration they agreed to go back to their own homes and own towns to their businesses to see what they could do,

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with the idea that they would report back. There was an informal group monitoring. As I recall Arthur Krim was on that, a fellow named Manger [Julius Manger] from the hotel chain was on it. This worked very well. I think it was at that point that the idea for having these meetings sort of evolved. The Attorney General talked to the President who said it might be worth doing; these businessmen were quite responsive. So the meetings were born. I worked with the Attorney General and the President in putting together the list of people who were to be invited, preparing the brief memo indicating who were represented at the meetings and some of the points that might be discussed. The meetings ran from June 4, which was the first one, through June 22 when the President left for Europe, and resumed on his return. There were two additional meetings in July. The basic format of these meetings were to have approximately 250 to 400 people from leadership positions throughout the country

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invited to the White House. In an off the record, informal atmosphere the President, the Vice President, the Attorney General, in the case of the labor leaders the Secretary of Labor, and in the case of educators and the Commissioner of Education made very brief presentations. The meeting normally then turned to the floor where there were questions and comments and observations. Included in the group were meetings with businessmen -- incidentally the

nucleus for that was the same group that had met earlier with the Attorney General. One of the clear recollections of that particular meeting was the pride with which these people who had first met with the Attorney General reported to the others the successes that they had had during the intervening three or four weeks. I recall the fellow from Austin, Texas, indicating that when he returned to his home city following the meeting with the Attorney General he had called all of the restaurant owners to have breakfast with him on Sunday morning in his restaurant.

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He had prepared something that he himself had written. In effect all of those who were present at that breakfast meeting were going to pledge themselves to desegregate their restaurants. He said of the 23 who were there, seventeen signed on the spot. The other six indicated that they had to check with their partners and other people that had a voice in the management of the restaurant. Ultimately all but one or possibly two had signed up. This guy was obviously just filled with pride at his achievement, and properly so. The President had handed to him a resolution adopted by the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce in which it called upon all members of the Chamber of Atlanta to desegregate their facilities. The President praised this as a type of community leadership and action that could be effective. There was a little bit of comic relief when subsequently at the question and answer period a fellow from Bloomington, North Carolina -- no, Charlotte, North Carolina, stood up and was recognized by the President and

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said that he didn't want in any way to deprecate Atlanta as a fine city, but that Charlotte had passed a similar, Charlotte's Chamber of Commerce had passed a similar resolution at least a month before Atlanta had. Again, the whole atmosphere was one of attempting to indicate that here were a group of business leaders anxious to do a job when they were called upon.

GWIRTZMAN: Were there any people attending the meetings who were obstreperous, who were opposed to this voluntary...

WHITE: Yes, there was one scoundrel in the religious group. I can't remember his name but he was a Southern Baptist minister.

GWIRTZMAN: Did he have an exchange with the President?

WHITE: He had an exchange with the President which was a very awkward and embarrassed thing and probably he did more to help the President because he handled him in a very dignified fashion. Unfortunately there is no transcript and I can't recall the precise nature of the insult. But

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it was something like asking whether certain biblical interpretations of the justification for segregation were being disowned by the President and whether he didn't think this was un-Godlike. There were some very reasonable...

GWIRTZMAN: Do you remember how the President handled it?

WHITE: No, I don't. It was obviously not a direct response, it was a sidestep in a very adroit fashion. The matter did not fester and grow bigger. I think that everybody was mighty glad to see that guy sit down, including the people, all the others in the audience. The business group was predominantly white. Most of the other groups were mixed, considerable mixed. Other meetings included a meeting with labor leaders. There the President's thrust was that regardless of what happened in legislation, regardless of what the committee did, and regardless of what business did, that the people who really were sitting there at the point where they could make a difference were the guys in the hiring halls. Those fellows at that level, they were

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the ones they had to get to and they were the ones the President was appealing to. He knew that the international union didn't have any difficulty with these things. It always passed resolutions. His concern was to urge them to pass on down into their locals and to the people. Not only represented at that meeting were officers of international organization, but also state building and trades people, community building and trades people. The first response was from Walter Reuther. He was the guy who said in just so many words that the President means well and obviously he's going to do a great job, but it is you sitting here who really have it within your own control to make the difference between success or failure in this program. I don't know how many people were converted on the basis of that eloquent plea, but it was both eloquent and unvarnished. Another meeting was held with educators. There the emphasis was on encouraging people to be schooled and

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trained to the limit of their ability in order to take advantage of the increasing job opportunities that were being made available. These memos were drafted by me normally after some brief conversation with the agency people who had some feel for the subject matter. And in this particular one I recall clearly that I had four or five or six items. Lo and behold the President, checking off some of those, he didn't use them all, said something about the wealthy schools that were represented, and there were some of the big eastern schools, some of the big midwestern state universities, and said that he had known how successful some of our programs had operated where these schools had established relationships with foreign universities or sent branches of their own school to foreign countries. So that....

[END TAPE IV; BEGIN TAPE V, SIDE I]

I think I was explaining the session with the educators in the series of meetings held by President Kennedy in the summer

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of 1963. There had been a memorandum prepared and submitted to him with five or six different suggestions as to items that might properly and fruitfully be discussed with the group that was present. He had used some of them and then he came up with the suggestion that the wealthier and the more developed universities in the country might well contemplate a program of providing assistance and mutual cooperation in faculty and student body exchange with some of the predominately Negro schools fo the South. He said rather directly, recognizing that there were present in the audience a number of heads and deans from Negro schools in the South, that there was going to be integration in the North, that there was going to be integration in the South in our higher education colleges, but that this was some time off and for at least the foreseeable decade or so the caliber of Negro leadership was going to be determined by the quality of the Negro institutions, and that he urged therefore

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that the schools that were able to do so were represented and others as well should undertake to look into this possibility. As far as I know this had never been mentioned to him by anybody. This was not among the materials sent over by Commissioner Keppel [Francis Keppel]. It wasn't on anything that I handed the President and I doubt that he talked about it to anyone. It was just as he stood there this particular idea came to him and has since proved to be one of the more hopeful approaches. Many schools have already announced relationships with southern predominately Negro schools.

GWIRTZMAN: At the close of these meetings were any pledges or resolutions asked of these people by the President or were they just....

WHITE: No, none were asked. On occasion some were volunteered. For the most part people were speaking as individuals. They were an agglomerate group and it was pretty hard for one to find

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anyone else present. In the meeting with religious leaders I recall that Irwin Miller [Joseph Irwin Miller], who was at that time the head of the National Council of Churches, a layman, made some of the more moving and eloquent statements. The groups kind of offered in their response as you would expect. The lawyers themselves decided to establish a committee in an ad hoc and a nevertheless continuing basis which is in existence today. They have gone a long way in bringing their own influence in the community to bear on the side of the law,

compliance, understanding of the issues. The President made a few good points with them, saying that even though he was not a lawyer, that he assumed that they were trained or instinctively had the talents that were so much in need, mainly to get people to get out of the streets and come into a conference room and sit at a table and air their grievances, to define the issues and then on a reasonable basis, provide the solutions for them. One of the more dramatic

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instances was the Attorney General's rather blunt remarks to the lawyers. He told about the problems of some of the southern judges who regardless of what they may have thought about the merits or wisdom of various decisions, had no choice but to interpret the law as laid down by the Supreme Court; how some of them had been ostracized without the local bar having raised one single word in defense of these judges who were after all only fulfilling their oath of office. The most incredible story was the one he told about a judge who had learned to be ostracized not only by lawyers but barred by virtually the entire community in which he resided, but he could hardly stand the personal pain that resulted when the grave of his son who had been killed - a twenty one year old boy who had been killed in a automobile accident - was desecrated and defiled in his own community. I think this really did stir some of the lawyers. They were a bit embarrassed,

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as were many of the religious leaders. I'm not sure, but I have a hunch that sometime in a generation or so that if people take the time to look back and figure out where the national consensus arose when we had gone along for maybe eighty years with only casual interest in this it may well have been that these series of meetings started, couldn't have done it themselves, but they were instrumental in getting....

GWIRTZMAN: Did the President ever express to you or in your presence his feeling as to the success of these meetings, as to whether they'd been useful?

WHITE: I think that he did later in the summer, on occasion, indicate that he thought had been quite helpful. It's of course virtually impossible to measure the degree of assistance that came from this or the degree of success.

GWIRTZMAN: For example, did they put him in personal contact with people whom he would not otherwise have been in personal contact with, so later on he was in

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a position to -- he or members of the Administration were in position to call them?

WHITE: Unquestionably some of the groups that were pulled in would never have had any personal contact with the President had it not been for this and these are groups that have done a remarkable effort in undertaking to go back to their communities and to arouse and elicit the interest of the organization. One group that I have in mind are the heads of women's organizations. The group there was -- I think we got some rough estimate, they probably represented membership of somewhere in the order of 17 to 19 million women. A lot of them were overlapped and duplications and certainly many of the women were never touched or heard at this meeting. But many organizations really hopped to it. They also formed a continuing committee which is presently in existence. It was co-chaired by Dr. Horton, Mildred McAfee Horton, formerly president of Wellesley, and by Patricia Harris,

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a professor of law at Howard University. Mrs. Horton's response to the President as one woman sitting in that group of four hundred was one of the most touching and eloquent I've ever heard. It's just unfortunate these things are not recorded. The President did not want them to be inhibited by tape recorders or stenographer.

GWIRTZMAN: When was the President first made aware that Negro leadership was contemplating a massive demonstration in Washington to help pass the Civil Rights Bill in the summer of 1963?

WHITE: I'm not sure I know precisely when word first reached the President's ears because an awful lot of people had thought of some means of demonstrating. But the bill, the President's message had been up before the Congress for a couple of weeks when this series of meetings -- he met with between twenty and twenty-five civil rights leaders, these obviously the cream of the crop. I recall the meeting very clearly.

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It was in the Cabinet Room which was large enough to accommodate the group. It was the middle of the day because the President immediately after the meeting, or within a half hour after the meeting, left the south grounds by helicopter for his European trip. There really gathered were the big names in the civil rights movement, the real leaders. They made it clear to the President that from what they could gather there was a lot of commotion going to take place during the summer months. I believe that the first individual of any status who suggested that there was going to be a march or that there was likely to be a march on Washington was Philip Randolph. Mr. Randolph had lived through the time when he had threatened to march on Washington during President Franklin Roosevelt's Administration during the war when he asked for equal job opportunities for people who were being killed

equally. And President Roosevelt, upon hearing of this, headed off Randolph's move by issuing an executive order

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which set up the first forerunner of the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity; fair employment, government contracts, or something like that, kind of a designation. But that's what it was all about. Mr. Randolph who is of course now the elder statesman in the Negro civil rights and labor worlds, was present. At that point a lot of time and attention began being focused on how to first of all get out of this thing and not have the march and if there was to be a march on Washington the -- and it turned out there was no legitimate and easy way to stop it if there was going to be one.

GWIRTZMAN: Are you saying that the President's first reaction was to try to forestall such a demonstration?

WHITE: Sure. He believed not only was there an inherent danger in it, but that it just couldn't possibly succeed. If the object was to get Congress to act the last way that he believed you could get Congress to act was to have thousands and maybe even tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands

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of people coming to Washington demanding that Congress act. As far as the actual mechanics and the handling of the march, the Negro leadership had met with community leaders here, the district commissioners, the district police and the Justice Department's principal negotiator and principal coordinator was an assistant attorney general by the name of John Douglas, Senator Paul Douglas' son. The Attorney General used to use his top staff people in the most remarkable fashion. They were all equal to the task and did a superb job. There were just entirely too many people involved in the August 28th march to determine who did right and who did wrong but the important thing is that it turned out to be one of the most positive demonstrations ever known.

GWIRTZMAN: Once the President realized that the march couldn't be prevented the effort took shape to try to give it positive direction and make it the

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most effective and the most peaceful possible.

WHITE: True. The idea of peacefulness was pretty paramount. The desire to get that many people here and out without anybody getting hurt was very high. The question as to whether the President would participate in the program was raised. I don't think he had any hesitation in saying he didn't think that he

should participate in the program. He was however perfectly willing to meet with the big ten that constituted the board of directors or the corporate leadership of the march, and they did come into the White House where he met briefly with them and discussed his views. He watched not all of the proceeding, but certainly some of it on television and I recall clearly how impressed he was with Martin Luther King and his performance as a leader -- everyone else was.... He had a brief statement commenting on the march which was issued publicly. He spoke very briefly but nevertheless with a sense of relief and a sense of admiration

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for what had been achieved with the leaders.

GWIRTZMAN: Who were the direct liaison with the Negro leaders in trying to change the nature of the demonstration from one at the Capitol to the meeting in front of the Lincoln Monument?

WHITE: I don't know for sure but I think it was the Attorney General. He was obviously -- he played a key role, and was right on top.

GWIRTZMAN: Did the President to your knowledge take any part in the work leading up to the march, the contact with the Negro leadership?

WHITE: No, I think he was kept advised by Bobby. As I said, John Douglas really was the one that -- he was the field general. He was there all the time. It was he who -- he had delegated to him the responsibility but he kept in close touch with the Attorney General and through him with the President.

GWIRTZMAN: First of all, President Eisenhower approved what he called "proper demonstrations" in civil rights. Do you know whether that was done after --

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did anyone from the Administration contact President Eisenhower?

WHITE: No, I have no recollection of anyone -- that doesn't mean it didn't happen, but I have no recollection of any one leader being called by President Eisenhower or calling President Eisenhower to discuss it. There is one thing I wanted to mention before I forget about the meeting with the civil rights leaders in June -- I thought it was June the 22nd, but you said the 23rd, but anyway it was one or the other -- one of the remarks that he made only semi-facetiously stuck with me. He said, "Incidentally, I know you fellows have done a great deal for civil rights but," he said, "when this thing is all over I think you'll make the biggest mistake of your lives if you don't

erect a statue to Bull Connor [Eugene Bull Connor.] That guy has single handedly done more to promote civil rights than I think any of the rest of us ever could have.”

GWIRTZMAN: On the day before the march and the day of the

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march did you detect on the part of the President any fear that there would be violence?

WHITE: I was in and out of the, his office, that day and I don't recall any nervousness or any concern. I think all of the intelligence reports -- to use the military term, it was almost like a military operation -- were satisfactory. Everything looked like it was going smoothly from the very outset. I never once deemed any impression that this -- that the President felt the thing was about to break open. Obviously he was greatly relieved that there hadn't been any incidents up to the time that he met with the leaders in his office.

GWIRTZMAN: Did he feel that the march as it took place had any effect on Congress?

WHITE: I don't recall him ever saying one way or another. Certainly I think almost everyone who had had anything to do with the Congress had to be impressed and had to believe this would have impressed Congress too. And of course the

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statements that were made by members of Congress indicate that they were impressed to the same degree.

GWIRTZMAN: During that period there were two other matters, and I wondered if you remember the names of anyone who participated in them. The first was the Department of Defense directive that areas in the South that had practiced relentless discrimination would be declared off limits to military personnel and that caused a very great reaction, a negative reaction in the South. Do you know if the President was consulted before that directive was issued?

WHITE: Yes. There's a little bit of a story to that, probably worth telling. The President appointed a Committee on Equal Opportunity in the Armed Services. This was a kind of screwy committee in the sense that they were really on the payroll of the Defense Department as consultants. Gesell [Gerhard A. Gesell], a corporate lawyer in town here heads that committee. Abe Fortas is on it, Whitney Young of the Urban League, Sengstacke [John H. Sengstacke]

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from California, a guy from Virginia by the name of Muse [Benjamin Muse.] They went into this in a very systematic fashion and they found that by and large the military on base did a pretty good job with the thrust of their efforts. This was a response to pressure upon Roy Wilkins and other Negro groups that things weren't going so well off base. The President was of course just flabbergasted with some of the horrible experiences of highly trained technicians who happened to be Negroes being moved into an Army base, not of their choosing but for the convenience of the country, only to find that their families were denied an opportunity even to live in a decent place let alone all the personal humiliation and abuse that went with it. A member of this Committee-- I was in his office a couple of times and they came up with some pretty salty recommendations. This particular recommendation was about declaring communities or parts of communities off limits if they did not live up to the requirements

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of the nondiscrimination codes that would be available. The President's letter to the Secretary of Defense, sending for his review the reports submitted by the Gesell Committee, did not wholeheartedly and unreservedly endorse every feature. For the life of me I don't think the President saw that letter although he probably signed it. I hate to say he didn't see it, he didn't really focus on the fact that that letter because it was silent did not endorse this recommendation. I worked with Adam Yarmolinsky on this one and when it got over to the Defense Department they had the hot potato and they worked with it. Secretary McNamara's [Robert S. McNamara] decision was that he would not repudiate that, he would indicate however that he expected that it would never have to be used. The President was not -- I can't say that he actually knew about the recommendation when it came from the Committee. He knew about what the Defense Department intended to do about it before it did it and he concurred in that

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decision. There was however one time when he did not know about something that was going to be done and which he made crystal clear to me that he had known about it he would have taken a different course of action. This arose out of a phone call I had from Adam Yarmolinsky one day involving a situation in an air base near Rapid City, South Dakota, I believe, and the question was, "What should the local commander do about the Negro servicemen who wanted to participate in civil rights demonstrations and picketing, off duty and out of uniform?" I frankly did not see the significance as I should have in the whole thing and I said, "Well, Adam, what do you propose to do?" He said, "Well, what we're going to tell this guy is that if they're off duty, out of uniform and that wherever they're doing does not in any conflict with their fitness for duty, it would be alright." I said, "That's alright with me. It sounds fine." He said, "Okay." This turned out subsequently to be a

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policy issued by the, not only that local commander, but by the Air Force and managed to get into the *New York Times*. The President called me, saying, "How the hell did this happen? Did you know about this?" I said I didn't know about the policy but I knew about the plan which came out of the conversation, which is -- I think he decided that this was something that he would not have done, and that it would be a hell of a good idea if I would check with him on things like this in the future. The fact of the matter is that at about that time, can't quite identify it clearly but it's somewhere in the middle of 1963, the President got awfully sensitive about seeing things in the newspapers that were happening in the civil rights field. Many of them were of course a result of policy decisions taken months and in some cases years ago. But because they were far more newsworthy at that point they started appearing in the paper and the President gave me strict instructions to

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call everybody in every department or agency that might have anything to do in this kind of an area and say, "Don't do a bloody thing until it's been cleared." Some of those things were -- of course it was so obvious that they were going to be approved and they were approved, but there was a definite decision on his part to attempt to hold down the announcement of actions or even the taking of decisions during that time so as to not louse up the situation in terms of Congress.

GWIRTZMAN: Would you say that that time coincided with the President's first sensitivity, the fact that there might be a white reaction against the civil rights movement?

WHITE: No, I think this really related almost exclusively to Congressional sensitivity and his desire not to rock any boats he didn't have to rock.

GWIRTZMAN: The other incident that occurred at that time, late August 1963, was a statement by the President in response to a question that he opposed a quota system to enhance hiring Negroes in

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northern cities. Were you involved in that?

WHITE: Just very casually in sort of discussing the problems, but I never participated in any detailed conversation with the President on that.

GWIRTZMAN: How did the President first learn about discrimination as it concerned Negro doctors in the Negro Medical Association?

WHITE: The Negro Medical Association through the national president requested an audience with the President just as dozens, and hundreds and probably thousands of the other organizations did. I don't recall precisely but this is the type of request that normally would come to O'Donnell. O'Donnell would say to me, "What do you think about it?" and I'd call Louis Martin and say, "Do you know these people and who are they and what are they up to and what kind of arrangement is it?" In this particular instance the decision was to meet them. They were a fine group and they were about twelve or fifteen Negro doctors. They had a little brief prepared, I'd say maybe twenty-five or thirty

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pages detailing some of the fantastic situations that existed in communities, particularly in the South but not exclusively. Many northern communities, so they advised, were equally at fault. The hospitals simply would not permit Negro physicians to have the use of their facilities. In some communities this was accomplished by requiring that only members of the local medical society could use the hospital facilities or admit patients to the hospital. The medical society itself was the one that had the restriction against Negro membership. The President was aghast at the fact that some Negro physicians with fantastic skills, surgeons, were not permitted to bring their patients into hospitals and said that he wanted to see if he could meet with people from the American Medical Association or whoever -- he wanted to know who could he meet with to correct this kind of situation and encourage the opening up of hospitals. His assassination prevented anything from happening. This was

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fairly late, either August or September of '63 and we had not been able to set anything up prior to that time. But I recall clearly how astonished he was. This just, you know, showed him something that neither he nor any of the rest of us appreciated.

GWIRTZMAN: Taking an overall look at President Kennedy and the civil rights issue, how do you feel he looked at it as a political issue during his presidency and especially in the 1963 period?

WHITE: I don't think he ever forgot that he had a tremendous percentage of the Negro vote in 1960 nor that the numbers of Negroes who voted was very high. When anyone wins as narrow a victory as President Kennedy did every group that says to him, "You know, if we hadn't voted for you, you would have lost," is telling the truth. He knew just clearly that without the Negro vote he would never have been president. But my own view, and it's always a little hard to know exactly where this derives from, is that he believed he could maintain

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that vote, recognizing that he would have to alienate some of the southern states -- he lost a few of them in the '60 election anyhow -- but that he had to work with the southern elected officials in the Congress. He had an understanding of their problems. For example, there's one incident that to my view demonstrates clearly how cautious he wanted to be in terms of understanding their problems. When the executive order on employment was extended to include construction we first ran into a problem about highways where the tight, tough compliance requirements of the executive order were to be incorporated into highway construction contracts. A state highway engineer in Louisiana whose name I don't recall got in touch with Senator Long [Russell B. Long] and Congressman Boggs [Hale Boggs] and said that they'd been sandtrapped and mousetrapped and every other kind of way trapped and that the Administration was doing them dirty. That came up at a pretty critical time with the votes and Senator Long called the President and said, "Those fellows aren't playing fair, they're not doing what they're supposed to do." The

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President called me and said, "What in the world is this all about?" I began to check into it and found out that there was a little freedom here; the Bureau of Public Roads could be tough or they could be a little bit lenient. The President was unmistakable. He said, "Well you tell them for God's sake on my say so not to insist on anything, that if the regulations aren't quite done yet, don't require them to do anything until the regulations are done. When the regulations are drafted you better look them over carefully and let me know what kind of problems they present." Rex Whitton [Rex M. Whitton], the Federal Highway Administrator was told about that and he said, "Fine. Could we get in touch with the Louisiana guy?" And they did and there was some little misunderstanding. And again the state highway commissioner went to Senator Long who again went to President Kennedy who again called me who said, "Listen, we can't goof this up. Now get those guys together and make sure that they understand what is

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required of them, and don't put any burden on them are not absolutely essential." This is exactly what happened. One of the reasons I'm telling the story is to suggest that I don't think the President ever believed that he was engaged on some great crusade. I think he knew what was morally right and what was required and when the tough decisions came along he made them. I don't think he ever pictured himself as the President whose principle or major achievement was going to be in achieving civil rights progress. That isn't to say that he didn't believe he was going to live up to the campaign promises and to the platform of 1960 upon which he ran, but, merely speaking in terms of the tremendous significance and prominence that this was doomed to have occupied in his short Administration. I think that's what you were driving at.

GWIRTZMAN: Right. But as far as you know he never at any time felt that he was in danger of losing the Negro vote that he had had?

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WHITE: Well, I don't recall his ever having said anything that would suggest that. He did have a little sense of the political drama. The incident that arose, not in '63, but back in '62 over his recommendation that there be a Department of Housing and Urban Affairs. He was annoyed by the vote in the House on the departmental bill he had submitted. Now I recall what happened. The bill was reported out by the House committee, but it was denied a rule by the Rules Committee. This was straight legislation. The alternative open to the President was to take the same language and submit it as a reorganization plan which required the Congress to vote it up or down within sixty days. At that point he announced that he was going to submit it to the Congress so it could be voted upon. He was asked if he secured the Department he had in mind who would be the secretary. An easy answer would have been, "We never build agencies before we have them" or, "We never

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give names for jobs that have yet to be created." But I don't think there was a lot of conversation or debate about it. I think his impromptu and instantaneous reaction was, "Of course, I'll appoint Dr. Weaver [Dr. Robert C. Weaver.]" I think he did this primarily to make it tough on those who wanted to vote against it on the grounds that they would be faced with the prospect of having to present their vote as an anti-Negro vote. Nevertheless it went down in crashing disaster, as you may recall.

GWIRTZMAN: Did he ever say anything that conveyed the impression that he was sorry he adopted that strategy?

WHITE: Never.

GWIRTZMAN: When the bill was being considered in the Rules Committee did President Kennedy make any calls to members of the Committee to try and change votes?

WHITE: I just don't know. That was very....

GWIRTZMAN: Did he sense the growing opposition to him in the South that began when he first established

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federal marshalls?

WHITE: Well, I never heard anything specific on that, but I used to kind of

tease Bobby and get a little kick out of the fact that Bobby was the guy that caught all the hell. He didn't. It was almost like the Eisenhower detachment from the activities of his Administration. They were separated on this particular one. Bobby was the real arch villain and the President was, if anything, was regarded sort of in sorry as the guy whose brother had loused him all up. He did get a lot of family preaching about that.

GWIRTZMAN: Do you know whether he read any of the southern newspapers, regularly?

WHITE: No, I can't say that I remember any regular newspaper reading on his part in the South.

GWIRTZMAN: How about the summer of '63 after the bill was introduced, after the demonstrations had gone on and had spread to the North, do you recall anything he said that showed his sensitivity to the growth of the so-called "white backlash" against the

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civil rights movement?

WHITE: No, as I suggested in the discussion about the executive order in housing, he'd heard about it from some congressional people and that area was in the news. I don't think that...

GWIRTZMAN: For example, I know that certain northern liberal congressmen, from let's say the Chicago area were very vocal in August and September of 1963 about the fact that the people in their districts were worried about their own property values -- Negroes had moved in -- and were in some way relating this to the Civil Rights Bill and to the provisions of the bill, that they thought what the President was doing was to encourage more assertion of rights by Negroes in the North that would be injurious to their own interests.

WHITE: Well, as I say though, that was kind of a public notice of something that he'd already been aware of and again was related, not exclusively, but at least primarily to the housing end of it. I don't

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recall anything that indicated to me that he believed that the backlash was there. Part of our difficulty is that we have had during the six months since his assassination, I think, an accentuation of this. It's a little clearer now. But I don't recall anything then that indicated that. I think he recognized that there was great danger that the demonstrations and the actions

taken by Negroes were going to antagonize whites, but I don't recall his ever having said that the time had come, that this was it and that everything would be done counterproductive, as the State Department likes to say. There is one other thing that occurs to me that might be worth nothing and that is the Cabinet meeting the President used in part to discuss the results of a survey of the Birmingham situation. When Burke Marshall was talking to the white power structure in Birmingham he indicated that one of the things that certainly was necessary to alleviate the

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situation was the providing of jobs for Negroes. They laughed him out of town practically, saying, "you're a fine one. The federal government has done a wretched job. Just walk around town and see." So a special team headed by John Macy [John W. Macy, Jr.] the Civil Service Commission Chairman, went down to Birmingham and the results were absolutely wretched. The national figures all looked very good and even some regional figures looked good. But to pinpoint that one particular city, the results were embarrassing to say the least. The President had this, together with about twenty-three or four other cities that were in the process of being surveyed and where he had tentative results. He used the standard technique of going down the list, saying there are zero Negro employees in the labor office in Birmingham and there are zero Negro employees in the Agricultural Department's program down there. It so happened that the two that looked pretty good on this kind of rundown were the VA [Veteran's Administration] and the

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Post Office Department, and so noted and there were a couple of chest expanded; these guys had single-handedly handled the whole damn war effort successfully. But the word really got through at the kind of a session. The follow up was for Macy to send to each of these Cabinet officers and agency heads a breakdown of what was going on in these particular key cities in the South with the clear and unmistakable instruction from the President that they see what they could do. The situation in the Dallas post office had already broken by that time and he was not anxious to justify that kind of behavior, and in effect issued a -- at the same time that he asked them to do that he issued a warning that they shouldn't do it unreasonable: they couldn't hire unqualified people; they couldn't violate civil service law or regulations, but within the framework of law and regulations that he wanted results. And of course there were results that changed dramatically.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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