

**Ralph E. McGill Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 1/06/1966**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Ralph E. McGill  
**Interviewer:** Charles T. Morrissey  
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**Biographical Note**

Ralph E. McGill (1898-1969) was a journalist and the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution* from 1942 to 1960 and its publisher from 1960 to 1969. This interview focuses on Southern politics, John F. Kennedy's views on civil rights, and the role of civil rights on the 1960 presidential campaign, among other topics.

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Oral History Interview

with

RALPH MCGILL

January 6, 1966  
Atlanta, Georgia

By Charles T. Morrissey

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MORRISSEY: Let me start by asking when you first met John Kennedy.

McGILL: I remember very well when I first met John Kennedy, that is, to have a talk with him. I had been introduced to him before he became a Senator. In April, after he had become a member of the Senate in January, Lawrence Winship, editor of the Boston Globe, was in Washington and had a small luncheon in a hotel suite to which he invited Senator Kennedy and Senator [Leverett] Saltonstall. This was at the time when a great many of the Southern states were, as they still are doing, unhappily, offering all sorts of exaggerated inducements to New England textile mills to move South. They were offering tax free years; they were building factory plants and offering them rent free for the first year, small rent the second year, and so on. These and other inducements.

Senator Kennedy had spoken in the Senate against these because his constituents were alarmed; they were losing jobs. Some of the cities and towns were suffering. I remember that Lawrence Winship, editor of the Globe, interjected to say that he thought this was good, and I remember him saying,

"Ralph, you will never see an editorial in the Globe deploring the movement of a textile mill out of New England. For the most part," he said, "they're no damn good. They pay low wages. They try to bring everything in their cities down to the lowest common denominator. And the long net effect is that they are bad for the community--any community. You will rue the day you get them," he said. This, I remember, struck Senator Kennedy as a new idea, and we talked on at some length about that. I do know that he quieted down on his public utterances, and later on I talked with him about this--it must have been three or four years later--and he said that he did then begin to talk with other persons.

This was, I think, some of the motivations that led to New England letting the textile mills go without too much complaint and beginning a movement to being in industries which would take advantage of the great skills that were there in the labor force. So when we talked about that later, Senator Kennedy remembered that little point as having influenced him. We could already then begin to see that the South was suffering, and certainly it's true today. A great many of the smaller mills with old machinery which moved into our region in the South already have folded up, gone out of business, unable to compete. This is one little item of no real interest, but I find myself thinking of it as I look at our textile industry.

Then I remember a very personal thing. In December, a few days before Christmas, 1960, after Senator Kennedy had become President-elect Kennedy, my wife and son and I started for Key West, Florida. My wife was then quite ill, but able to ride in a car and walk a little bit. Actually, she had, as it turned out, just about a year to live. I wanted to surprise her, and the evening before we would reach Palm Beach the next day, I telephoned a friend of mine, a reporter, [William H.] Bill Lawrence, then of the New York Times. And he set up for me a little surprise for my wife and son, but especially for my wife. The next day, at the appointed time, I told her that we would drive by and see where the Kennedys were living. Well, we stopped there and went in. He was out in the lawn, behind the wall which was around the garden of his home. We went in, and he was very kind and showed my wife about, and we talked there. Then he told me after a nice visit of some thirty or forty minutes that his brother Robert [Robert F. Kennedy] would like to see me. The President-elect and I talked for a few minutes

about his ideas about the civil rights legislation and plans. He wanted to ask a few questions about some of the Southern states, some of the Southern leaders. We went from there over to see Robert Kennedy, then already named to the Cabinet as Attorney General, and had possibly an hour's talk with him. I will always remember with appreciation his great kindness to my sick wife.

I think the next thing I remember that might be of some interest is in January of 1963, I went for the State Department on a tour of some of the West African states. This included Senegal, Guinea, Ghana, Togo, Dahomey, Nigeria, and the Congo. At all these places I made talks at the universities, a number of talks--three or four--because student groups had a number of various political organizations and political clubs and sometimes journalism classes. I also talked to some of the groups of teachers and journalists--always to journalists and to students.

So when I came back from this trip, which was one of a little more than two months, I was asked by the President to come by and sort of go over the trip with him. This I did, and I answered questions he had about Nkrumah, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. I had the good luck to have a long, forty-five minute talk with President, or Premier, Kwame Nkrumah, and he is a puzzling man, as he is to this day, and certainly no friend of this country. I had tried to probe into that because Nkrumah had spent a number of years in the United States, had gone to Lincoln University, and had spent a total of almost twelve years, as I recall, in the United States. Much of this had been an embittering experience. He told me at one time of being desperate, broke, out of money, and sleeping on park benches. But he would not, curiously enough, be drawn into any discussion of his racial views. I thought then--and still think--that this was because at that time he had had a shock in that some of his students in Moscow had been physically attacked and had suffered beatings, including some head wounds that had to be bandaged. And, indeed, some of these had arrived in Ghana while I was there. I've had the feeling that this led to a turn by Nkrumah toward the Chinese. Well, all of this and more I tried to relate to the President.

Then, what might be of some interest to the future is he was at that time troubled with civil rights legislation and with other domestic legislation. And the talk turned to Senator Richard B. Russell of Georgia, then, as now, one of the more influential members of the Senate, and a man who had, as the President noted, rendered very great service to the country in a number of hearings, handling them very well so that they did not get out of hand and embarrass the nation. Particularly, I recall, he mentioned, and we talked about, the hearings when General Douglas MacArthur had been removed from command by President [Harry S] Truman. General MacArthur then made his historic, dramatic, "old soldiers never die; they just fade away" speech before the joint session of the Congress and so on. We talked at some length about the great assets and great contributions by Senator Russell.

Then I remember the President said, "I admire Dick Russell very much, and I wonder if you could explain to me a man like him. The Southerners, the really able Southerners that I've met in the Senate and in the Congress, have been extraordinarily gifted men in parliamentary matters. The good ones seem to have a grasp of government and how to carry out the political maneuvers quite beyond that of the able men of other regions." And he said, "I suppose that the South has always had a lot of politics and been interested in politics, although," and he grinned and smiled, "we could not exclude New England from that interest." [Laughter] "And perhaps the Eastern states. So, that can't be the answer. But," he said, "I don't know any person that puzzles me more than Senator Russell. Here's a man of great gifts and great capacity for friendships and loyalties. The whole world is changing, and the whole nation is changing. And yet this gifted man remains adamant and defiant in the matters of any measures which tend to enter the field of race--civil rights."

And he talked of how Senator Russell, of course, had great power, and how for many reasons he did not want to have any open break with him. One, for the very practical reason that it would be bad politics and would make no sense and would divert the attention given the bill--civil rights bill--and one or two other pieces of legislation that Senator Russell was quietly holding back. "But," he said, "for the

other reason, it just would make no sense to do this, and I wouldn't want to do it because I like Dick Russell." I remember he was sitting in a rocking chair and he kept rocking as he talked, rocking gently, and there was a look of puzzlement and concern on his face. Then he said, "I sometimes wonder if Dick ever looks to the future in this."

And he noted that Senator [Herman E.] Talmadge, also from Georgia, the junior Senator, had taken a much more realistic view. He said he didn't know whether Senator Talmadge had changed any of his opinions, but Senator Talmadge knew realistically that it was no longer possible to deny the qualified Negro citizen the vote, to have jobs, to participate equally in all of the gifts of our Constitution and citizenship in a pluralistic society. And Senator Russell, on the other hand, was quietly adamant.

Also, it seemed to disturb President Kennedy as we sat chatting there--it was rather late; about 6:30 one evening--he wondered about Senator Russell because he had heard that Senator Russell was more and more withdrawing and that Senator Russell's friends were concerned that he was becoming lonely, that he was not well, that he tended to withdraw more and more from contact with fellow senators. It was obvious he had a real respect and affection for Senator Russell, but he felt kept at a distance. This is how I felt about it: Here was a president confronted with a very formidable adversary who was really holding up civil rights legislation, making it impossible to go along with it, and yet, it seemed to me that the President's concern for the moment was equally that for a human being whom he thought was a man of great gifts and potential who had yet found it in his mind to carry on what really seemed to be a petty, personal. . . . Oh, what shall we say? Not a vindictive feeling because I don't think the President felt there was any of that in it. But he wondered why a man of such gifts would have this sort of attitude when all the world was changing, when his own state was changing, when his fellow Senator was changing. And it puzzled him to find this in a human being.

I remember thinking as I sat there, "This is an odd thing. Here is a troubled President, an overworked President, and he's sitting there rocking with this look of concern, or mingled concern and wonder on his face." And it became more or less a sort of philosophical discussion about man, man alone--sort of an existentialist thing about the absurdity of man at times. I will always remember this conversation which went on about twenty minutes. It began about, "If I knew why Senator Russell took such an adamant position . . ." And then he went on, and it quickly became the concern of a man for another.

This is, I think, my major personal memory--sitting there, the two of us, in his office. We had talked about the African trip, and he had asked a good many questions, chiefly about Nkrumah, as I said, because Nkrumah then, as now, has got his hand in all the subversions and intrigue that's going on in Africa, and was turning even more toward the Chinese. But we got away from that, and it came down to a talk of a senator who was in opposition and then a senator as a man and a human being. We went onto this for some time--a sort of philosophical talk, discussion. At any rate, this I find one of my chief memories. I suppose that is about all that I have.

I have many other memories of brief talks on the campaign tour--moments of him. I remember one of the funniest ones we ever saw. We were all amused, and so was he, and pleased, by the great fervor aroused. And we used to tease him a bit about how the ladies of all ages seemed to be so pleased. I remember we were in Ohio coming, as I recall, from Springfield, Ohio, back toward Dayton, and we were coming along an expressway or freeway. And as we approached an overpass bridge, it was thronged with people, and not only that, but they had climbed out, and they were seated on the grassy slopes all along the approaches to the bridge. And there was one middle-aged woman, I remember, seated there on the bank. She had rather ample hips which were revealed in pretty tight-fitting black slacks. And she had a gay blouse on and a black poodle. As the car went by, the President waving, in a sort of ecstasy she picked up this poodle and kissed it. And we teased the candidate that night--not then President--we teased him and asked him to explain the symbolism of this kiss. [Laughter] Well, a lot of things like that, but they don't belong in something like this.

MORRISSEY: What was his answer to the poodle question?

McGILL: Oh, he said, "Well, what kind of poodle was it?" And we told him, you know, and it was just. . . . He never gave us a direct answer to the symbolism. [Laughter]

MORRISSEY: We would be interested in your other impressions of the campaign.

McGILL: Impressions of the campaign. I do remember another time, after the campaign, and we talked about it. I'm sure that this is something that many persons have said who had this from him. Obviously, everyone will talk about the debates with Mr. [Richard M.] Nixon. And he talked about this, the debates. But he did say--and this maybe he didn't say--that he himself felt, after the debates, not any great surge of confidence that he was going to win necessarily, but he did feel a surge of confidence that he could cope with the whole campaign; that after these debates, nothing else would be any more difficult than they; that they were a sort of combined, contained encounter, as they literally were. They were in a private room with only one or two hidden technicians about, but millions of persons were looking on. But after the great tenseness, concentration necessary for these, he felt confident, he said, that out in the open then and seeing the audiences or the crowds face to face wouldn't be as difficult as that, and it would be easier because he felt that they had a sort of understanding of him and a rapport with him because of these debates. I'm sure that this is nothing new.

Then I had a talk with him once--this is of no great meaning--about the campaign. I said that I had all my life, since as a youngster I had gotten interested in Woodrow Wilson, been a real card-playing Democrat but that in the 1958 campaign, especially, while I was strongly for Adlai Stevenson, I had nonetheless developed a sort of liking for Richard Nixon, and I had tried very hard to understand him. And I told him of an incident at that time. President [Dwight D.] Eisenhower early in that campaign, you will recall, was ill, not well. And for the first weeks of it, and indeed, for most of that campaign, Vice President Nixon was carrying the major load.

I remembered and told the President about a talk I had had with Mr. Nixon. I'd had a private breakfast with him on his plane. The back part of the plane was curtained off, and we were making an early morning flight from El Paso into California--Sacramento, as I recall. And Mr. Nixon asked me to have breakfast with him in his curtained-off back quarter of the plane. He talked then very strongly about the Republican party: How he felt it had not gone after young people, young voters; how he felt that during the Depression years, the leadership of the Republican party had been so unaware politically of the meaning of the Depression that they had permitted the party to become what seemed to the nation simply a force which was opposing all of the reforms of the New Deal. And it was easy to translate this opposition, he thought, into the image of a party which didn't really care about people, which was a party only of wealth and of privilege and big business. He thought it was necessary to have a sort of rebirth in a great struggle to recreate the Republican party into a new image.

Well, I expanded a little bit on some more of these. And the President expressed also a respect for Mr. Nixon, but he agreed with me that he was a puzzling, complex man who was difficult to know and difficult to follow. I ventured the thought that perhaps Mr. Nixon, along with Mr. [Arthur] Larson and others, might have been responsible--that Mr. Nixon might have been one of those really responsible for the 1956 Modern Republicanism idea which was proclaimed at the Republican Convention that year. And the President thought this was certainly a possibility.

Looking back on it now from these days of the John Birch Society and of the really frightening, to me at least, frightening overtones of the Goldwater Convention and the people who had taken over Senator [Barry M.] Goldwater, of the split that has come in the party and the efforts of the party now to shake itself loose from all that is symbolized by the John Birch state of mind, I sometimes find myself even more puzzled about Mr. Nixon because I recall that at that time he had spoken of the Californian concentration of these as kooks and nuts and so forth. But at any rate, I

always had this feeling of wanting to know Mr. Nixon better and a feeling that there was something in this man that was very valuable--could be very valuable. But neither he nor the times could break it out of the shell of the man. I think the President shared this. I judge so from what he said. I guess this . . .

MORRISSEY: Theodore White emphasizes in his book on the 1960 campaign that when Richard Nixon early in that campaign received a very affirmative response here in Atlanta, this response caused Nixon to think in terms of carrying some traditionally Democratic states in the South. Did you ever doubt in 1960 that Georgia would stay Democratic?

McGILL: I had fears, maybe doubts. I knew that the racial angers were rising. I was fearful for the whole of the old Cotton South because we are still largely rural and most of our rural areas are depressed and they're losing population. And there is a sort of permanent resentment in the depressed and sort of dying out rural areas. Their county seats are poor; their shops are closed; their movies--many of them--are closed; their hotels are closed down. So I was frightened, but Mr. Nixon quite missed the boat. I never thought his Atlanta performance had any meaning much beyond Atlanta.

What had happened here was that the old Republican organization, which had been known as the Post Office Republicans, who got active every four years and the rest of the time they were hand-in-glove with the worst of the Democrats in the legislature and around the capital and all this. . . . There was no real Republican organization in the South, but beginning in 1952 in a few of the states--and more notably in Georgia than others--a great many fine people had gone over to call themselves Eisenhower Republicans. And they did get control of the party and oust the old corrupt--they were really corrupt, most of them--corrupt crowd that had been in there just as a shadow skeleton organization. This new crowd set up statewide organization at considerable cost. I would imagine that these Eisenhower Republicans in Georgia must have spent a quarter of a million of their own money because the national organization didn't have the money, didn't have any faith in it, and didn't put it in here in any amount.

Well, this again--I'm coming up to one of the inexplicable things about Mr. Nixon--local Republicans worked very hard and very intelligently in preparing a great welcome for him. They put out a lot of money. They organized Young Republicans; they had them dressed in blazer coats and straw hats, the old boater-type straw hats. They put on a tremendous parade; they had a great crowd--a beautiful day, a great crowd in a beautiful little park we had. There must have been twelve, fifteen thousand people standing. Well, a great day, And they took Mr. Nixon out to the airport.

The next day I had lunch with one of the chief architects of the new Republican party in the state and one of those three that had put on the big welcome. I never saw a man. . . . He was proud of the great demonstration, but he said, "You know, Mr. Nixon never said, 'Thank you,' or 'It was a great job,' or 'I really appreciate this,' to any of us. I had a lot of men there who wanted to like Mr. Nixon." Incidentally, I told this story to the President as we talked about the campaign there. So at any rate, there was no great fervor for Mr. Nixon in Georgia. He did get a substantial vote, but, of course, Mr. Eisenhower had also received a substantial vote in two previous campaigns. But the only thing, chiefly, that worried us was the Roman Catholic issue. But the President's superb performance before a group of Baptist ministers in Texas had rather dispelled any real chance of the worst of the demagogues in that area doing anything.

But do you know, it may well be--and the President was aware of this, too--that the campaign turned right here in Atlanta, the 1960 campaign. Martin Luther King, the great Negro leader who had risen from Montgomery but who had moved to Atlanta where he had been born and where he had gone to school and where his father was pastor of a large church--Martin Luther King had been arrested and put in jail by a judge from an adjoining county to Fulton, where Atlanta is located. It was so obviously an act of prejudice and really a distortion of legal processes and judicial powers that a great many persons were outraged, but no one did anything.

At that time our mayor was Mayor William B. Hartsfield, a fine man, as indeed is the present mayor. Mayor Hartsfield was indignant about this. At that time, you will remember, no one really knew what the Negro vote would do. It had not really jelled. Mr. Nixon had quite an appeal for many of the Negro leaders. Mayor Hartsfield tried very hard to get in touch with then candidate John Kennedy. He couldn't reach him. He was out West somewhere, as I recall, and moving by plane. He tried then to get Robert Kennedy and couldn't get him. But he did get some people high up and said, "The candidate ought to say something." And he said, "I'm going to say it, anyhow. And I'm going to move to do what I can to get him released." And he also told him that he knew that the local Republican Negro leadership was interested in this, too, and he felt sure they were trying to get in touch with Mr. Nixon or President Eisenhower to get him to say something about this.

Well, finally, the truth of it is that something had to be done, and Mayor Hartsfield, made absolutely confident, one, that John Kennedy would want to say something if he could be gotten in touch with and have the matter explained to him, and, two, that he should say something and that time was of the essence, Mayor Hartsfield really, in effect, did a very daring thing. He sort of quoted, if you would examine into it. He brought Jack Kennedy's name in by saying he was disturbed by this--he had never been able to get him--that he was disturbed by this and wanted everything possible to be done to try to alleviate it. Well, it's interesting that two Negro leaders were at that moment also in touch with people in the Republican headquarters in Washington.

You asked about Atlanta and Nixon. This has led me into this because I think the two are related. Of course, when later on Mr. Kennedy did get word, he did react exactly as Mayor Hartsfield had predicted. The Negro people were justly aroused about this affront to Martin Luther King. So was I, and so were a lot of us. We were editorially denouncing it here. It was a very outrageous act. Wholly aside from the political thing, it was just an outrageous action by a judge, a small judge. Well, that night, you will recall, John Kennedy--candidate John Kennedy--telephoned Mrs. Martin Luther King, expressed his concern, asked her if there was anything he could do, and expressed the hope and the wish that the authorities would correct this injustice.

Well, I really think, seriously think, that the whole national election may have been decided right here in Georgia because that was a catalyst which precipitated the Negro vote in the large cities of the East for candidate Kennedy. And I think it ought to be remembered that up to then they were not committed. They had taken no position. But this forthright act, really done by the mayor of Atlanta--also, as I said facetiously, a card-carrying Democrat all his life--this had precipitated it. Now, the fact is that the Negro requests from Atlanta had received a sort of bureaucracy treatment; that is to say, it had reached the proper authorities early, whereas Mayor Hartsfield was never able to reach them. He just issued the statement himself, without any authority, as if it were coming from candidate Kennedy and from the Democratic headquarters.

The Republican headquarters had it early. And they debated about it, and they called up southern leaders. This I know. This isn't surmise or hearsay; I know they called up. And President Eisenhower thought something should be said, but he didn't want to do it. He bowed to the advice of the National Committee. At that time [William P.] Rodgers of North Carolina was the Attorney General. He thought something should be done. I know this because he later told me so. So this isn't any hearsay either. He even prepared a statement. All the while the great minds were meeting on this, and they finally said, "No. We've got a chance to carry Georgia and South Carolina. We must defend the white segregationist vote because we've got to have the segregationist vote to carry those states if we do carry them." So they telephoned around, and of course, then these southern states--South Carolina--said, "No. Don't have anything to say in behalf of Martin Luther King." And so the great moment passed.

Now if you go back and look at it--the majority of sixty-odd thousand votes--I feel very, very strongly that this one little episode here in Atlanta, Georgia, probably was the pivot on which the election turned and was won. I know that later on Mr. Kennedy felt this to be possibly quite true because it did turn. . . .

Remember, Mr. Nixon for some time had gone out of his way to support civil rights--never precisely or in any positive legislation, but the general concept of civil rights he had supported and, I am sure, sincerely so. So there was a great feeling on this. Some of the Negro leadership in Atlanta was pretty strong for Mr. Nixon until this one little Martin Luther King story broke and the candidate John Kennedy telephoned. But this all grew out of a pretty unusual decision by Mayor Hartsfield, a great friend of mine and--he won't mind my saying--a somewhat eccentric man.

MORRISSEY: Do you recall during the 1960 campaign if candidate Kennedy ever commented on the importance of carrying the Southeastern states?

McGILL: Do you mean publicly, privately?

MORRISSEY: Privately to you. I'm thinking of the two Carolinas and Georgia.

McGILL: No, he didn't just to me, but I do remember him commenting about it. Let me see. It seems to me that it was at the time of his journey into Ohio. I remember he spoke in Dayton, Ohio, and that James M. Cox, who is the president of the company which publishes the papers in Dayton and in Atlanta and the son of James M. Cox, who was the Democratic nominee for the presidency in 1920 when he had a young man named Franklin D. Roosevelt as his second man on the ticket, presided. Mr. Cox presided over this speaking. Later there was a little luncheon. As we sat around talking at this luncheon, we began to talk about the whole campaign. Mr. Kennedy, John Kennedy. . . . I remember him saying then that it was going to be a hard race and he felt maybe that the religious issue was going to hurt him, but it was very important, he knew, to carry some of the Southeastern states. He didn't know if he could win without it or not because he had already been told there in Dayton that Ohio was pivotal and doubtful, that it would be very difficult. Yes, I recall--I can't pin them down except this one in Dayton after this small luncheon. But there I do remember that he spoke about it.

And certainly at other times he did talk about the importance of the Southeast. And he was so pleased with the fact that the Baptist Ministers Association in Texas had asked him to talk with them. This had been broadcast, and he felt that he had done very well in this question and answer period, as indeed he had.

MORRISSEY: Was that film shown widely in Georgia?

McGILL: No, not widely, but it was shown. It did have the effect of quieting the doubts of some very influential Baptists here in the state. So there was no religious opposition to speak of in Georgia. Some of the small town, you know, idiots got into it, but not really.

MORRISSEY: Before I went to work for the Kennedy Library, I was working for the Truman Library. Of course, Mr. Truman is a good Baptist and a good Mason, and he campaigned in 1960 for John Kennedy.

McGILL: Oh, yes.

MORRISSEY: Do you think he was effective here in Georgia on the religious issue?

McGILL: No, except very indirectly. Mr. Truman didn't come into Georgia.

MORRISSEY: Oh, he didn't?

McGILL: But the fact that he was campaigning was well known. You know, you have a curious dichotomy now that's been here all our lives. The South has always been a great prohibitionist area. That is to say, it makes more moonshine liquor than any other region--and drinks more--but it's always had this split personality imposed by the Protestant tradition, I suppose. There's always a tremendous opposition to drinking. You get some of our Protestant ministers greatly agitated about the sale of

liquor. These same men have never opened their mouths about the greatest social problem of our time--the one of race, civil rights--but you open a liquor store somewhere and you can get a great crowd of these people out.

These same people didn't like Mr. Truman because Mr. Truman was a whiskey-drinking, poker-playing man. The description that John L. Lewis once applied to old [John Nance] Jack Garner, that he was an "evil, whiskey-drinking, poker-playing . . ." A lot of our more extreme Baptist ministers, especially in the rural areas, including some in our city, had great doubts about Mr. Truman, so I don't know whether he was any help in this particular, specific area. [Laughter]

MORRISSEY: You told me about John Kennedy's ruminations about Senator Russell. Did he ever ruminate about Mr. Carl Vinson?

McGILL: No, not to any great extent, except I remember that he did have an admiration for the "Admiral," as all the Navy people used to call Mr. Carl Vinson. He was such a rugged old veteran that I think nearly everyone had an admiration for him. But I never had the opportunity to hear him talk to any great extent. "You can always count on Carl Vinson," I remember him saying. Carl, the great old fellow, he had done a lot for the Navy; he had done a lot for this. But I don't remember to any great extent. But he had a great admiration for him, appreciation for him. He could always count on him, he felt. That was true: he could count on him.

MORRISSEY: Going back to that first meeting you had with John Kennedy in 1953 about the textile industry. Do you recall his viewpoint at that time about the movement of the textiles from New England to the South?

McGILL: Yes, I think I do remember. He thought this was deplorable, and he had made one of two strongly critical public speeches about this

Southern attitude of these communities that would just buy a mill in. They said, "Come on in. We won't charge you any taxes. We'll give you a building free for three years." He thought this was wrong, and it was wrong--some of this is still going on, incidentally--and he had been strongly critical of this on the floor of the Senate. But after this little set-to with Larry Winship of the Boston Globe, as I recall it, he slowed off on this. And this might be sort of a key, because if he had kept on with this, he would have built up an image of himself as an anti-Southern fellow. This he never did. Of course, there were others doing it at the time. He was not alone. But I've often thought this might have been one of those little unimportant things of the moment which had importance, greater importance for a period later on.

MORRISSEY: One of the interesting aspects about his race for the vice presidential nomination in 1956 was that he got extensive support from the Southerners, and his opponent, of course, was the Senator from Tennessee [Estes Kefauver]. And this has usually been described as anti-Kefauver sentiment being expressed as pro-Kennedy sentiment.

McGILL: Well, that's true.

MORRISSEY: It is?

McGILL: Absolutely true. I remember being on the floor. Mississippians gave John Kennedy great support in that. I remember, I think it was the chairman of the Mississippi delegation I was with, and we asked him about this. "How come you fellows from Mississippi are supporting this New Englander?" And he said, as I recall--maybe it wasn't the chairman; I think it was--at any rate, the spokesman said, "Well, we'd be for anybody against that damned, nigger-loving Kefauver of Tennessee. He's too damn liberal to suit us." This was a queer thing. It simply illustrates how very little national attention had then been given John Kennedy. It illustrates, also, how quickly he came to national prominence after that.

Of course, it helped, the fact that he almost got the nomination there. I think back in politics many times when it is the little things that have meaning later on.

MORRISSEY: Going back to that Palm Beach visit in 1960, I was wondering if that picture was taken there.

McGILL: Yes. That picture there by my desk was taken there. You can see the President standing there. When we came in, he already had his coat off. You can see in the picture that he has the coat on his arm. He had been talking with two or three visiting senators who had come in there to talk with him. They were just leaving as we arrived--my wife, son, and I and Bill Lawrence, then of the New York Times. In the picture made by some photographers there who were taking pictures of the senators, you see that the President had just really met us--my wife. I knew him. And he met my son.

Later, we chatted there in the sun, just under the edge of a tree there by the corner of the house. He later escorted my wife, who then was so ill that she walked with some difficulty, around back of the house to the sea wall, looked out at the sea, showed her the gardens, took her into the house and then came back out. And she and my son sat and rested while the President, the President-nominate, and I talked, and Bill Lawrence was with us. That was when he told me that his brother wanted to see me. Lawrence drove my son and wife and me to another house where Robert Kennedy and his wife were talking. And I remember we sat around the swimming pool there. I'll always be very grateful, too, for how gracious Mrs. Ethel Kennedy was to my wife.

MORRISSEY: Do you recall at that time what Robert Kennedy's attitude was to civil rights legislation?

McGILL: Yes, I do. He had it very much on his mind, and this was what he wanted to talk about. He wanted to ask what I thought the reaction would be in Georgia and the other neighboring states. He asked for the names of some people whom he might call on and see. He asked for people who might be willing to serve in this area.

There's another little thing that isn't a memory so much about John Kennedy. I happened to be in New York at the time they had a little advanced showing of the Kennedy Library material with all the pictures and photographs and writings and documents and so on. I went and was talking with Mrs. Kennedy, Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy, and with Robert Kennedy. And I was saying to Robert Kennedy that I regretted that I couldn't get back by commercial plane the next day to the morning ceremony at Carrollton, Georgia, which is a city about fifty-two miles southwest of Atlanta where is located a branch college of the University of Georgia, West Georgia College, where they were going to dedicate the next day a chapel named the John F. Kennedy Interfaith Chapel. Robert Kennedy said, "Well, look. We're flying. I can't leave till tomorrow either, and we're flying down in the morning. Join us and come on down."

So I did this because I had really wanted to attend and there simply wasn't a flight that I could get that would enable me to get to Atlanta and get a car to get over to Carrollton. So I flew down. Mrs. Ethel Kennedy and the Attorney General and two members of his staff....

I remember the students were ecstatic. They gave him a great welcome. The townspeople turned out very well. Then we had a luncheon at the president's house. Card tables had been set up; there was fried chicken--a very nice luncheon. There was a little fellow who was a member of the Board of Trustees. I remember this old fellow, who didn't like the Kennedys at all and especially didn't like Robert Kennedy, was at one of these card tables with Mrs. Ethel Kennedy. She's a charmer, of course. After the thing was over, and they were gone, I stayed over.

BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE I

Anyway, I was saying, Mrs. Ethel Kennedy was at the little card table with this crusty, old fellow who disliked the Kennedys intensely, especially Robert Kennedy. I stayed over. I went out to the airport and was among those who saw them off, going back to Washington. And I stayed over in Carrollton, spent the rest of the afternoon and had dinner that evening with some people. I just sort of wanted to pick up reaction.

Incidentally, the little chapel, beautiful chapel, previously had served as an Episcopal mission chapel and then later as a Catholic mission chapel and then was given and moved to the campus. It had been located in the town. It was moved to the campus to serve as a center for the chapel named for John F. Kennedy.

At any rate, after they had gone, the president of the college told me an amusing story about this crusty old man who had disliked the Kennedys, especially Robert Kennedy. "Well, I'll tell you this," he said in a grudging, reluctant voice. "Any fellow that girl Ethel would marry can't be as bad as I thought he was." [Laughter] He had fallen hard for Ethel Kennedy. Everyone does, of course.

MORRISSEY: Before I came down to Atlanta, I went through the index of the White House appointment books and noticed you are listed on six occasions as coming in to visit the President. The first was on March 1, 1961, with the President's Advisory Committee on Labor and Management Policy, and likewise with the second and third. The second was on July 11, 1962, and the third on May 1. Do you have any recollections of those meetings?

McGILL: Well, yes. The President came into these meetings and talked with us. I don't know that the committee ever had any great accomplishment, but it is, or was, the only labor-management committee that had met more than once. [Laughter] A number of them had been appointed in past years. But we kept meeting, and we turned out. . . . Well, members of the board: Henry Ford of Ford Motors, Walter Reuther, George Meany, [Richard S., Jr.] Reynolds of Reynolds Metals--some of the top leaders--and five public members, of which I was one. We turned out a number of reports that went to the President and to the Congress and which were, I think, of some value, minor value. But the President was eager to have this committee because he felt that it brought these leaders together and made it necessary for them to have a meeting of minds and discuss these problems when they weren't involved in an actual labor case. And it had a great value.

I can remember Mr. Reynolds saying one day to Walter Reuther, "Well, you know, Walter, I never really thought I'd like you very much, but I do. I enjoy being with you, and I want to tell you that a speech I heard you make the other day (it wasn't on a labor subject) was one of the best things I ever heard." Well, you get little touches like that. Mr. [Thomas J., Jr.] Tom Watson of IBM was on.

It was up to the public members to preside sometime in committee meetings. I remember once a furious debate--I would rather not name the two principals. Two notable economists got into a shouting, finger-waving argument; this was a committee meeting, not the whole board. I was trying to preside, and I can remember these two distinguished figures leaning across the table shouting. [Laughter] Yes. It was interesting to see the President. He thought this committee was of some value. President Johnson has continued the committee, although for the past year we've had no meeting. But at any rate, it was interesting to see the President and hear him talk. Sometimes he would come in and talk a half hour to these committees.

MORRISSEY: Do you recall him talking about the steel price increase?

McGILL: No, I do not.

MORRISSEY: In the White House appointment books you're down for October 2, 1962, off-the-record, with the President.

McGILL: October 2, 1962, off-the-record. Oh, that was. . . . I think, as I recall, that was something about the congressional races down here, some of the Southern political things. And the civil rights. . . . The usual things that it has been my fate to have to talk about. As I recall, that was it.

MORRISSEY: Do you recall specifically what was bothering him?

McGILL: He was interested chiefly in, as I recall it. . . . I could look that up, but I'm sure he wanted simply an evaluation of what these very hostile governors were likely to do and what could be done to help the situation with a fellow like Ross Barnett, then in Mississippi, and with Alabama and so on. And we were doing pretty well here in Atlanta and fairly well in all of Georgia. And he wanted to know what we had done and could it be applied to elsewhere.

It couldn't. Here you have newspapers, and you have a mayor; you have a business community that has wanted to go along even though they might not all have liked it. But in these other communities you had the opposite. You had a governor and mayor and newspapers and business community that was adamant, defiant. This was the real tragedy of the situation--the real tragedy of the terrible riots at Oxford at the time of James Meredith when they had an actual attack on the U.S. Marshals and troops later. A great pity.

MORRISSEY: The last two meetings I have you listed for were March 22 and April 9, 1963, both off-the-record.

McGILL: Well, I should have been sort of looking up. I don't keep a diary or anything. What were the two dates again?

MORRISSEY: March 22 and April 9, 1963.

McGILL: Oh. March 22 was the meeting I discussed earlier, the talk about the African trip, and that's when we got off on Senator Russell. April. . . .

MORRISSEY: I think that might have had something to do, the April meeting, with the U.S. Arms Control General Advisory Commission.

McGILL: Oh, yes. Yes, it did.

MORRISSEY: Were you a member of that committee?

McGILL: I'm a member of that committee, also. I'm sure that was it.

MORRISSEY: Do you recall what was discussed?

McGILL: I do, but that's still very much off-the-record. I mean the whole committee. It's high level security.

MORRISSEY: Did you have any discussions with President Kennedy or high officials in his Administration about the integration at the University of Georgia?

McGILL: Yes. I recall that one of these meetings. . . . I talked with the President on the phone a few times. I certainly talked with Attorney General Kennedy about that integration at the University of Georgia. And, also, I can't recall where, but I do remember the President laughing as I told him how the integration came about.

In the beginning it was rather humorous. Everything was very quiet. Nothing was going to happen in Georgia. The legislature was going to convene on Monday at 10 o'clock. There had been several days of meetings, and Governor [S. Ernest] Vandiver in the Sunday papers was quoted as saying, "Nothing is expected to come up in the area of segregation." The Georgia laws still covered it, and he didn't think any new legislation would be necessary. And everything was to be pretty quiet. So we got off to a nice quiet start.

Bang! Early Monday, the order had come in to submit these people's classes that morning. And so they were in classes at 8 o'clock, these two people, Charlayne Hunter and Mr. [Hamilton E.] Holmes. Well, by the time the legislature could meet, the University of Georgia was integrated. It was a fait accompli.

Then a curious thing happened. The Southern states--I suppose like any other state, but I have a feeling the Southern states, having had so difficult a struggle to attain public education. . . . Of course, the state legislature is quite an old one. We like to say we were the first state university chartered. And this is true. But we didn't get going until the University of North Carolina had actually already begun, but this is the second oldest. But I don't mean to. . . . But public education in general at the secondary levels and branches of the university didn't begin to come until 1910, '12. So all over the state there is a great attachment to the university.

Well, a curious thing happened. The Governor had either to close the university, the whole university. . . . And he could not close it just in Athens, where the integration happened, because all the other branches are literal branches under the same board of regents. He was urged at first to close it. Then some of the same people who were calling, when told that this meant closing a branch in their city. . . . And, of course, in any city, especially a small Southern city which has very little industry, a branch of the university is the biggest industry and the largest payroll in the town. So there began to be second thoughts.

As the day wore on, and the Governor did nothing. . . . By the next day, the legislature and the Governor were beginning to get telephone calls and telegrams saying, "Well, don't close it. I'm angry. I'm mad. I don't like it a damn bit. But," some of them would say, "my boy is over there, and he's going to graduate this year. My daughter's over there, and I don't want her education interrupted." They would damn the Kennedys and damn the government, but, "Don't close the university."

So they had a little riot over there one night which was largely, if not entirely, actively created by the White Citizens' Council element, and the Klan joined in it. I know--not by hearsay--I know the White Citizens' Council people in this state, the leaders of it, one leader, at least, sent money to some of the students to help organize and create this student riot. Only a few students joined in. Some of the people from neighboring small towns, a few from Athens, a Klan group from Atlanta and other areas went over. Six of those were arrested, put in jail. So the integration went off really rather well.

They were lucky in having Miss Hunter and Mr. Holmes. Charlayne Hunter is a very nice, intelligent, outgoing person. And Holmes, a serious, quiet, introvert student. I was pleased that when his grades made him eligible for Phi Beta Kappa, the Phi Beta Kappa chapter at the University of Georgia elected him. And then he went from there to Emory University Medical School and is doing very well there. So the university was lucky in having Miss Hunter and Mr. Holmes. Both of them did a very good job there.

MORRISSEY: President Kennedy developed the custom of meeting occasionally with editors from a state or a region of the country. Did you ever attend one of these sessions?

McGILL: No. If you will look at the lists, he did a pretty smart thing. He did it on the advice of other people in the newspaper business. If you look at it, he invited, for the most part, editors from smaller towns who would rarely get an opportunity to be in Washington and to see the President. You won't see on those lists many persons who had an opportunity to see the President other times. This was after discussion and by design and planning. And I think it was an intelligent way to handle it.

MORRISSEY: I think I've run out of questions. Do you have anything else?

McGILL: Well, I talked much more than I thought I could.

MORRISSEY: Well, if we think of anything else, we can add it to the transcript.

McGILL: Fine.

MORRISSEY: Thank you very much.

McGILL: Thank you.