Interview with **Harris Wofford**
October 31, 1985
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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize.*

00:00:02:00

[camera roll 305]

[sound roll 1304]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WE'RE GREEN.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SAY MARK IT AGAIN, RICK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: THANK YOU.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: SECOND STICK. SEVEN.

Wofford: So I don't have to worry what I do with my legs?

INTERVIEWER 1: NO, YOU'RE VERY COMFORTABLE. WHAT WAS THE—WHAT WERE THE CENTRAL ISSUES OF THE 1960s PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN, FIRST OF ALL, AND THEN IF, IF YOU WERE TO MAKE A LIST WHERE WOULD CIVIL RIGHTS HAVE APPEARED ON SUCH A LIST? PRIORITIES?

Wofford: The, the, the basic issue that Kennedy tried to strike was getting the country moving again. It was more of a theme than an issue. And under that civil rights was in fact a, a good example of what he might do. And he gave lots of examples of how he would get the country moving in civil rights. But if you turn the issues straight, for John Kennedy, foreign policy was his—from a young man his primary interest. And he put a lot of weight on that in the campaign. And, of course, the domestic economy was, was a major issue facing everybody. So civil rights would be down on the list of sort of specific issues, but it would be fairly high on the list of, of things that a President prepared to act would promise to act on and Kennedy did.

00:01:25:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT ABOUT SOMETHING LIKE THE MISSILE GAP? WOULD YOU SAY THAT WAS—

Wofford: The missile gap was part of his foreign policy position. He, he moved further than I like to hear into taking up Cuba as a, as a threat and a challenge to the United States. He even talked a lot about Cuba, Ghana, and Guinea as threats to us. He also talked about a new relationship with the Soviet Union. He had kind of a double-edged foreign policy position in the campaign. One edge that was very tough in talking about closing the missile gap and strengthening our defenses and the other was the, the moving out of the Cold War into a, into a new relationship with the Third World and, and, and with the Soviet Union too. But that double-edged foreign policy sword was the, the one that Kennedy liked to wield best. It was, you know, he wrote a book when he was nineteen years old, warning about the, the coming of Hitler and the unpreparedness of England. And foreign policy was always, I think, the fire in his belly that was, that was most genuine and that was there first.

00:02:39:00

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. NOW, IN YOUR BOOK, WHEN YOU WERE DISCUSSING THE 1960s CAMPAIGN AND YOU'RE BEING BROUGHT INTO THE KENNEDY CAMP, YOU MENTIONED ON THE PHONE, HOW REMOVED JOHN KENNEDY WAS, PERSONALLY, FROM CONTACT WITH BLACKS. AND CAN YOU JUST TELL THAT STORY ABOUT HIS, YOU KNOW, WHERE, WHERE HIS BACKGROUND WAS THAT—HIS PERSONAL CONTEXT?

Wofford: John, John, John Kennedy, when he realized he was in trouble with black voters and the black delegates to the 1960 convention, called me in and, and very candidly he said, you know, I'm way behind on this, because I've hardly known any blacks in my life. It isn't an issue that I've thought about a lot. You know, where should I go? Who should I see? I've got to learn a lot and I've got to catch up fast.

00:03:31:00

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. NOW, DURING THE '60s CAMPAIGN, NEITHER DEMOCRATS NOR REPUBLICANS REALLY TOOK THAT CLEAR A, A POSITION

ON CIVIL RIGHTS AS FAR AS WHAT WAS GOING TO BE DONE CONCRETELY. WHY WAS THAT?

Wofford: During, during?

INTERVIEWER 1: DURING THE CAMPAIGN. THERE DOESN'T SEEM TO BE A VERY CLEAR STATEMENT ON—BY EITHER PARTY OF WHAT'S GOING TO BE DONE EXCEPT FOR THE EXECUTIVE ORDER ON THE HOUSING.

Wofford: The—in, in the 1960 Campaign?

INTERVIEWER 1: RIGHT. WHY, WHY—

Wofford: That's—

INTERVIEWER 1: —DID THE ISSUE SEEM—

Wofford: That's not really accurate.

INTERVIEWER 1: NO? OK. WHY DON'T YOU FILL ME IN ON WHAT, WHAT THE TRUE PICTURE WAS THEN?

Wofford: You, you had in the 1960 campaign, years of Presidential inaction on civil rights. For Eisenhower, it was an embarrassing subject that he gave no moral leadership too. When the Sup—when the Supreme Court decision was handed down on—the historic decision on school desegregation, Eisenhower said he wasn't gonna tell anyone whether he thought it was a right decision or a wrong decision. At the moment, when he should have given a, a, a turn to public opinion and helped mold it in favor of the Supreme Court decision, he said, I haven't even told my wife what I think about that decision. And so, John Kennedy came on the scene and the Democratic Party, in 1960, with that background of, of failure to give moral leadership. And the Democratic Party adopted the most far-reaching platform in American history on civil rights that was very specific as to comprehensive legislation across the board. The executive order against discrimination and housing. All out enforcement of the right to vote. It was, it was a maximum platform. In fact, nobody thought it would get through and nobody expected John and Robert Kennedy to support it fully at the convention. But they made the decision to do that and that's, of course, part of the high expectations that got aroused and some of which didn't get fulfilled fast enough for many people. And it, it caused some problems. It created a, a tension that, I think, in fact, was good, because it got it, it, it forced us to move. But that basic commitment was made in the democratic platform. And Kennedy spoke about it a number of times in major speeches.

00:05:57:00

INTERVIEWER 1: CAN YOU DEFINE WHAT WAY THE—A VERY STRONG CIVIL RIGHTS COMMITMENT WAS PERHAPS A LIABILITY FOR KENNEDY IN, IN CONGRESS?

Wofford: Not—a, a strong stand on civil rights by the candidate John Kennedy or by the President John Kennedy was, was a very dangerous or controversial thing for Kennedy to do. And he felt that, because he came out, as he once explained to me, he came out of a Boston Irish background where there was a lot of prejudice toward black people. And he worried a lot about a general backlash among white people. North as well as South. But he knew it, it, it endangered his chance of holding the majority of the white opinion in the South and carrying the South in the election. And then he won the election by that razor—thin margin just about a hundred thousand votes and it teetered all night as to whether he would have enough electoral votes to win. And he won a majority in Congress that might not really be a majority. It was so narrow that if a few southerners defected to the Republicans he wouldn't have a majority in Congress. And so, civil rights was, was a very, very difficult political problem for him, that might lose his hold on Congress if he moved too far and he feared it might lose his chance of uniting the American people if he moved too far.

INTERVIEWER 1: IN THE EARLY '60s WHEN THE SIT-INS, THE SIT-IN MOVEMENT BEGAN TO SWEEP THROUGH THE SOUTH—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I'M GONNA HAVE A ROLL OUT ON THIS ONE.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK.

Wofford: By the way, should I always look at you—

00:07:44:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Wofford: —or should look at the camera?

INTERVIEWER 1: YOU CAN LOOK AT ME. WE'RE—

00:07:47:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 306]

INTERVIEWER 2: HIS BOYCOTT DAYS. HE EMERGED OUT OF THE SIT-INS IN NASHVILLE AND—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I SEE.

INTERVIEWER 2: —COMING OUT OF A SEGREGATED—

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: EIGHT.

INTERVIEWER 2: —HE'S IN CHICAGO WHEN HE CAME DOWN, BUT HE DID MEET WITH KENNEDY.

Wofford: K—King?

INTERVIEWER 2: HE MET KING IN MONTGOMERY.

Wofford: At the boycott.

INTERVIEWER 2: IN '56.

INTERVIEWER 1: YOU TOLD ME BEFORE, WHEN WE SPOKE ON THE PHONE, HOW KENNEDY INITIALLY REACTED TO THE SIT-INS. CAN YOU GO INTO THAT? WHEN HE FIRST HEARD ABOUT THE SIT-IN MOVEMENT?

Wofford: The, the sit-in movement?

INTERVIEWER 1: RIGHT.

Wofford: You're, you're—what I said to you on the phone I'm not sure. One of, one of—when you're a speech writer for someone like Kennedy or a political figure, it's a very interesting process in which, in a sense, policy gets shaped by the drafts that are submitted to the person. And that happened often in civil rights and one, one of the occasions was after the sit-ins began it, it seemed appropriate to have a, a, a statement by, by Kennedy as a candidate. And the sit-in students were meeting in the, in the, I think, spring of 1960 in Atlanta. And we gave Kennedy a draft of a speech, of a, of a statement for him to send. A message for Kennedy to send to the sit-in students in Atlanta. And it had a strong statement in it which was the—something to the effect of they have shown that the new way for Americans to stand up for their rights is to sit down. And Kennedy loved that statement and said, you know, and people were saying, that's much too strong. That's really going to, you know, it's really going to bother the white southerners. And Kennedy said, go with it. That's good. Go with it. And we—throughout the campaign we used that statement on basic literature and we ran with that statement a long ways, but, but Kennedy liked it, which was, you know, one of the signs to me that he was gonna be fun in civil rights. That he, you know, that he wanted to get moving on the problem. Much as he was concerned about its political difficulty his instinct was to, you know, to get action and to, and to support people that were acting.

00:10:02:00

INTERVIEWER 1: A LITTLE A, A YEAR LATER THOUGH ON THE FREEDOM RIDES?

Wofford: A year later he was President of the United States. He was heading to his first confrontation with Khrushchev. He was concerned about his slim majority in Congress and he had his own agenda and civil rights was not on the top of his agenda then in his first months as President. And here the Freedom Riders came along. And they said this is—by their actions they said, this is the number one moral issue in the United States. It's the number one issue for us and we're gonna dramatize it in such a way that it goes to the top of your pile on your desk Mr. President. And Mr. and Mrs. American people, we're gonna put it on the top of your conscience by this action and by our, our courage and by our suffering and by whatever happens, including the violence. And Kennedy's reaction then was, you know, I'm in charge. I'm the President and, you know, this isn't what I want to do right now. I want to go and see Khrushchev and, and, you know, stop it. And he called me and said, get your friends off those buses. You know, this isn't the time to be doing that. I'm going to Geneva—Vienna, you know. Get your friends off those buses. And I said, well they wouldn't be my friends Mr. President if, if I tried to get them off those buses. And they wouldn't appreciate it from you either. He said, all right, but work it out. And hung up.

INTERVIEWER 1: HOLDING THE BAG. OK.

Wofford: But, but I, I, I—although John Kennedy was slow in his first year to strongly state the moral issues, which he had stated in his campaign, and he relied perhaps unduly on the law and order argument, and support the courts, and no violence, rather than the basic moral issue that ending segregation was right. Nevertheless, once the Freedom Riders rode and got in violence he was all out to say, you know, we must send people down. We must stop the violence. And, and within, within two weeks, with his backing and goading, the Justice Department had moved to the Interstate Commerce Commission to get an order to end all kinds of discrimination in interstate transportation. So he responded. He didn’t—he wasn't pleased that they—the—that the Freedom Riders changed his agenda. In fact, he was irritated at them, but he then responded. And it's partly cause, I think, one of the best things about John Kennedy is he had a real sense of humor and he didn't take himself that seriously. And if he, if he blew his stacks and got angry, you know, five minutes later he would be laughing about it, partly at himself. And, and he did that with John, with, with—on this issue, issue on a number of occasions. There was one time when, after the March on Washington, which he also had wondered whether it was well timed and things like that. While Martin King was telling him at the end of the successful march and Kennedy was paying tribute to them Martin Luther King said, and you know, Mr. President there were even some who advised that we should not have undertaken the Birmingham Movement. And Kennedy laughingly interrupted and said, and I believe the Attorney General was one of those. I mean he was able to see that they were wrong on, on, on a number of occasions like that. And you don't find many politicians who look back and see that they were wrong on something and, and laugh about it.

00:13:54:00

INTERVIEWER 1: GOING BACK, NOW, TO THE, TO THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN. CAN YOU GIVE THE BACKGROUND OF AND TELL THIS WHOLE STORY THAT LED UP TO THE FAMOUS PHONE CALL IN OCTOBER OF 1960 BETWEEN KENNEDY AND, AND CORETTA KING? AND JUST, I GUESS, WE JUST NEED WHAT HAPPENED EXACTLY AND HOW—IT SEEMS TO ME, LOOKING BACK ON IT, IT'S ALMOST A SERIES OF COINCIDENCES. THERE, THERE ARE SO MANY LARGE COINCIDENCES AND IT'S AMAZING TO ME THAT THAT ONE EPISODE COULD HAVE SUCH A HUGE EFFECT.

Wofford: The, the, the story of the calls to Mrs. King and to the judge, first by the candidate John Kennedy and the second by the campaign manager, Robert Kennedy, is full of accident and irony. In that, in that—first of all, King didn't want to be arrested in Atlanta at that time. He really thought that it would better not to have a racial crisis during the election campaign. And he had wanted to be meeting with Kennedy somewhere in the South. And negotiations had gone on for a Kennedy-King meeting, but each time something went wrong King said, well, I'll also have to invite Nixon to meet with me. And Kennedy would say, well then why should I go all out on a limb to, you know, risk my southern support if you're then gonna meet with Nixon? And the, the meeting that would have been almost scheduled in Miami got cancelled and King had to be in—had no excuse for not being in Atlanta. And the student—sit-in students were starting the sit-in of Rich's Department Store. And King, who had not really wanted to be part of it and wanted to have a reason to be away, didn't have a reason to be away. So he joined it and he got arrested. And the whole country was then galvanized, not just by the arrest of King, but the fact that the judge then sentenced him to six months on a hard labor gang, gang because he had had a previous arrest for driving with an out-of-state driver's license. And it was a, it was a horrible, it was a shocking sentence. And it, it went like waves across the country and, particularly, among black people in this country. But, I think, the whole American people realized that that was an absurd sentence. And so, the question then was, what would you do about it? And we drafted, initially, a very strong statement that Kennedy liked sup—opposing what had happened to Dr. King and calling for his release. And then the Governor of Georgia called and said, look, if—

INTERVIEWER 1: WHO WAS THAT?

Wofford: Governor, Governor Vandiver. The Governor of Georgia called and said, look, you know, I'll get the son of a gun out, out of jail if you won't issue a public statement. Believe me, I'll get him out. And Kennedy—so Kennedy called me and said, look, we can't issue the statement because what we want is to get him out and the Governor says he'll find a way to get him out. And so, there was no statement, but then the government—the Governor dragged his feet. Whether he was going to do it or not really going to do it or how long, nobody knew. And day after day, the question was, what would you do? And Kennedy having promised not to issue the public statement was sort of locked for those days. And the idea came to me and, and backed by some—by Louis Martin and others in the civil rights campaign that why shouldn't he just call Mrs. King. She was pregnant. She was very anxious. She had been on the phone to me telling about how worried she was and the thought came, why can't Kennedy at least just call her and say, we're working at it. We're going to get him

out. You have my sympathy. A personal direct act. And we then said, you know, how do we get this to him? He was out in the field. He was in, I think, in downstate Illinois then. And we couldn't get through. Nobody would answer us. And, finally, we called Sargent Shriver and said, look, you know, here's an idea, but, you know, nobody wants to hear us from the civil rights section right now, cause we'd been bothering them too much. And he said, that's a wonderful idea. You know, hang up. I'll get to O'Hare International Inn where Kennedy is for another hour and a half and I'll put the idea to him. Shriver got there. He looked around. He saw the, the strategists of the campaign and he said, if I bring it up it'll never go through because the, the, the wise guys will all have reasons why it shouldn't be done. So he waited until Sorensen went off to work on a speech and Salinger to meet the press and O'Donnell went into the bathroom and, finally, Shriver said to Kennedy, why don't you just call Mrs. King?

00:18:51:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Wofford: You wanted to know what you could do. Give her your support and sympathy.

INTERVIEWER 1: SORRY [laughs].

Wofford: I'm doing this too long, I realize.

INTERVIEWER 2: MAYBE YOU COULD CUT.

[sync tone]

00:19:00:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 307]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK IT.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: NINE.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK, WHENEVER YOU'RE READY.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK, JUST LET ME GET MY SHOT. OK, I'M FINE.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK.

Wofford: Take yourself back to the last weeks of the 1960 campaign, October 1960. ***There's Martin Luther King sitting in a county,*** county ***jail*** with a sentence of six months on a hard labor gang. An absurd shocking sentence. And, ***and Kennedy wanted to do something, to say something.*** But he had promised the Governor of Georgia he wouldn't issue a public statement because the Governor was gonna find a way to get King out of jail. But he couldn't say that. And the country was waiting. And, and so ***finally, they, we, some of us had the idea that Kennedy might just call Mrs. King and express his sympathy and tell her what he was doing to get King out of jail.*** And, and we, we got this idea to him through Sargent Shriver who, who waited until O—O'Bryan, O—O'Donnell, Sorensen, Salinger went and did other things, to the press, to work on a speech, into the bathroom. Finally, Kennedy was there all by himself and Shriver said to him, look, you've been trying to figure out what to do about Martin King. Mrs. King is pregnant, she's worried, she's anxious. Why don't you just call her on the phone and express your sympathy? And Kennedy looked up and said, that's a wonderful idea. Big grin on his face. Do you have her number? Shriver had her number, dialed her. The President talked to her. Then later in the morning he started telling his strategists, because Shriver knew that if it had ever been brought up when all the other people were in the room, there'd be a strategy discussion, and it would never happen. There'd be too many arguments against it. He told them, by the way, this morning I called Mrs. Martin Luther King. And Robert Kennedy's first reaction was, you've lost the election. We had three southern governors tell us that if you support Khrushchev, Castro, or Martin Luther King we're gonna throw our votes to Nixon. And, and Robert Kennedy called my black colleague in the civil rights movements, Louis Martin and me in, and he gave us hell. He said, close down your civil rights section. You've, you've shot your bolt. You've probably lost the election. And I've never been, I've, I've never been chewed out by anybody as angrily as I was by Robert Kennedy. ***And then that very night, Robert Kennedy called the judge in Georgia, and called him to get that judge to get King out of jail.*** And, and we asked, Bob Kennedy, you know, after you were so angry why did you do that? And he said, well, as I went up to New York on the plane and thought about it and King in jail with that sentence and, and screwing up our politics in this country and maybe losing the election for my—you know, for my brother-in-law—my brother. I got so mad that I got that judge on the phone. And I, and I said, I—you know—it's partly, I think, Bob Kennedy was a man of action too and he wanted to get in the action or partly because he felt that once the issue had been drawn that way you might as well go all the way and do it well. And, and, of course, this—in, in those last weeks of the campaign had an enormous impact on black voters and lots of other people. For a time people were, were, right up till election night, worried that there were more white people who had been turned away from Kennedy by it than black people who were drawn to him. But it didn't turn out that way as far as anybody can tell. The enormous turnout of black votes in critical states were, were said to have been the margin of victory in, I think, six states. And there's, there's no sign that he lost any state, state because of, of a backlash as to what he did with King.

00:22:58:00

INTERVIEWER 1: WHAT ABOUT THAT SENTENCE ON THAT PAMPHLET? THE NO COMMENT PAMPHLET. IT'S—

Wofford: Now, now, you know, it wasn't just the action, that, that had the impact. Because the press didn't pay an enormous amount of attention to it initially, but Louis Martin said, we've got to get this out to the whole black constituency in this country. And, and so a little pamphlet was printed that featured Nixon's remark on the whole thing which was, no comment. And so, the pamphlet said, no comment Nixon versus a candidate with a heart. And all the pamphlet had were the remarks by Coretta King, by Martin King Jr., by his father, by Ralph Abernathy, the Head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, King's number two colleague. Wonderful strong statements such as the father saying, I had—doctor—daddy King saying, as a Baptist I was gonna vote against John Kennedy, because he was a Catholic, but if he had the courage to wipe the tears from my daughter-in-law's eyes then I have the courage to vote for him, Catholic or not. And I've got a whole suitcase full of votes that I'm taking up and put in the lap of John Kennedy. And probably, a million and a half, two million pamphlets were of—that pamphlet were distributed at black churches all across—in the key cities of the country on the Sunday before election. And, in some cases, whole congregations marched to the election booths to—in, in parts of Chicago, for example, to vote for Kennedy.

INTERVIEWER 1: GREAT. GOOD STUFF.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SURE.

INTERVIEWER 1: YEAH.

00:24:49:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER 1: GREAT JOB OF EDITING IN YOUR HEAD. FEEL VERY LUCKY.

[sync tone]

00:24:53:00

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: HIT IT.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: TEN

INTERVIEWER 1: OK, COULD YOU TELL US, REPEAT THE STORY THAT YOU TOLD ABOUT THE—ALL THESE PENS THAT APPEARED AT THE WHITE HOUSE AS A RESULT OF KENNEDY'S PROMISE JUST—WITH THE STROKE OF THE PEN TO SOLVE THE HOUSING—TO SIGN A HOUSING BILL?

Wofford: One of Kennedy's strong moves in the election in the Nixon-Kennedy debate was, was to promise that with one stroke of a pen, he would sign the executive order against racial discrimination in federal housing. And Eisenhower had had this executive order on his desk for nine months and had done nothing. And Kennedy in the debate with Nixon said, with one stroke of a pen we can take action to see that in federally assisted housing discrimination is ended. And he repeated that in the election and it was in the democratic platform. And then when the, when the administration began, each time he was about to sign the executive order, major political reasons were given to him by Lyndon Johnson or by southern senators that you won't get this bill through or that this Congressman is gonna lose the election if you sign it now. Wait a little while. So three times when he was about to sign it, he delayed. And the civil rights movement decided that they would stick it to him, stick the pen to him. And so, they started sending pens that said, "one stroke of a pen," to remind him. And Kennedy who attributed that first promise to, to me and to the civil rights section said, send ‘em to Wofford. So the pens piled up. Thousands and thousands of pens in my office and they goaded me. I had to keep reminding the President that pile was getting higher and higher. He finally signed the order. Whereas on balance, John Kennedy, by the time he finished, did everything he had promised to do in the campaign and had taken the, you know, all the major great decisions that I had hoped he would, before he was killed. On that one matter, I think he—his timing, usually good, but on that one matter, his timing was probably wrong because he—the delays caused more frustration. Diminished the good and made the, made the issue even more controversial than if he had just signed it as he had promised in the beginning.

00:27:31:00

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. MOVING AHEAD TO THE PERIOD OF '61 WITH THE FREEDOM RIDERS. THERE HAVE BEEN CHARGES LEVELLED AT THE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT THAT THE FREEDOM RIDERS WERE, WERE MORE OR LESS LEFT ON THEIR OWN AT CRUCIAL POINTS, PARTICULARLY, IN THE BEGINNING AND GOT AMBUSHED AND BEATEN. AND THAT IN RELATION TO, TO THIS CHARGE THERE WAS A SPEECH THAT BURKE MARSHALL MADE SAYING THERE, THERE'S NO SUBSTITUTE OUT OF THE FEDERAL SYSTEM FOR THE FAILURE OF LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSIBILITY. THAT THERE'S SIMPLY A VACUUM AND THAT THERE ARE—WERE SPECIFIC LIMITS BEYOND WHICH THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, PARTICULARLY, IN THE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT COULDN'T GO. I KNOW YOU WERE ONLY HERE DURING—FOR EARLY PART OF THE RIDES, BUT—

Wofford: Oh no. I was here till for a—for a year and a half later.

INTERVIEWER 1: OH, I THOUGHT YOU LEFT IN ’60, '61?

Wofford: No, I left in late '62.

INTERVIEWER 1: OH, OK. SO WHAT WAS THE WHOLE DILEMMA THAT—OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, THE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT, WITH ACTUALLY ENFORCING NOT JUST THE SAFETY OF THE FREEDOM RIDERS, BUT THE—THEIR RIGHT TO COMM—INTERSTATE COMMERCE—I MEAN TO INTERSTATE TRAVEL?

Wofford: Looking back I think there's no question, but that the administration and the Justice Department was, initially, slow in moving to protect the Freedom Riders. I think they underestimated the likelihood of violence. They overestimated the likelihood of the local police protecting the Riders. They accepted promises from the local police that were not fulfilled. They didn't have the information that J. Edgar Hoover had that he kept from the Attorney General that violence was being planned which J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI knew. And the first days were, they were slow. Thereafter as, as the, as, as films of—as films of the, of the events show, the Justice Department moved in to the point where the Attorney General in the end was calling the Greyhound Company and insisting that Mr. Greyhound get the bus and get these Riders through. And full federal force was used to protect them in the end. But the beginning was slow. In the same way, I think, the administration initially talked about the inability of the Federal Government to carry out police powers in local areas. Partly in order to make the local police accept their—

00:30:08:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Wofford: —primary responsibility.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK.

00:30:12:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 308]

[change to sound roll 1305]

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ELEVEN.

INTERVIEWER 2: WELL, WE COULD JUST GO RIGHT INTO THE—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ROLL EIGHT. CAMERA ROLL EIGHT, TAPE ROLL FIVE.

INTERVIEWER 1: OK.

Wofford: When, when, when thinking about delays in the use of federal power and the argument that Robert Kennedy and Burke Marshall made that there isn't federal police power that policing, in this country, is really left—the first responsibility to local police forces. I think, you've got to note that it was a real problem to get police enforcement of civil rights going throughout the South so that you didn't always have to send in federal marshals or federal troops. But it's also a fact that though the Kennedy stressed that need for local enforcement, in the end, time and time again they used federal power. Maybe in some cases they, they waited a little too long. But in Mississippi and Alabama in places all over the South federal power, including federal troops, got sent in.

00:31:17:00

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. TERRIFIES IT. OK. LET'S JUST MOVE RIGHT ON TO THE NEXT ONE. THE, THE SUMMARIZING.

Wofford: When, when you appraise John Kennedy's role in civil rights or the Kennedys' role, you've got to remember that the government of the United States is propelled by three engines; the legislative, the executive and the judicial branch. And when Kennedy came along we were flying on one engine. Only the judiciary, only the courts had taken action for civil rights. And with Kennedy, for the first time, you got the whole executive branch trying its best to use its power to achieve civil rights. And before he ended, he had asked for the legislation and the Congress was moving on the legislation. It had gone through the final critical committee and with his death the legislation came. So by the end of this period, you had the government of the United States flying on all three engines in civil rights.

00:32:14:00

INTERVIEWER 1: OK. GOOD. AND THE, AND THE LAST ONE. YOU CAN TAKE TIME.

Wofford: The last, the last was the—oh yeah. The, the—

INTERVIEWER 1: ACTUAL CONCRETE GAINS—

Wofford: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER 1: —NOT ERASED TODAY.

Wofford: Right. You, you know, with Kennedy you got this extraordinary meeting of public

power and the popular protest. And, and the results in terms of what had, had been the state when it all began were, were just enormous. And it's because we s—we can always look ahead and see the problems that weren't met, we may forget that when the civil rights movement began, when King came on the stage, which was not the beginning of civil rights, the, the—one-third of our country didn't really have a democracy. People weren't voting and there was segregation in all parts of public life. Ten years later, that civil rights cause round one, if you want, or round two or three, but that great battle, that was won. Many things were still to be done, maybe even more difficult things, but the right to vote was established. Public segregation was ended throughout a third of our country.

INTERVIEWER 1: GREAT. I THINK THAT'S GOOD.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: CUT.

INTERVIEWER 1: GREAT. THANK YOU. THAT WAS VERY NICE.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:33:35:00