

Interview with **Gov. John Patterson**

February 17, 1986

Montgomery, Alabama

Production Team: B

Camera Rolls: 387-390

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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 387]

[sound roll 1338]

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: MY FIRST QUESTION IS JUST GONNA BE YOUR VERY FIRST FEELINGS ABOUT—WHEN YOU HEARD THAT FREEDOM RIDERS WERE COMING INTO THE STATE. NOW, THIS IS BACK IN MAY OF '61. WHAT WAS YOUR INITIAL REACTION? YOU CAN START NOW.

PATTERSON: Well, when we first heard about the Freedom Riders, I believe they had just left Washington DC and were headed south. And ahead of them was a constant stream of publicity, newspaper articles, radio, television that they were coming. And there were statements about what they were going to do, that is, they were going to integrate facilities that had either predominantly or, or traditionally been segregated facilities. Lunch counters, waiting rooms in bus stations, things of that kind or, in some cases, facilities that actually were at that time were required to be segregated by law. And we heard they were coming and, and began to get concerned about it.

00:01:00:00

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU MAKE ANY PREPARATIONS OF ANY KIND, AS A—

PATTERSON: Yes, Floyd Mann, who was my Director of Public Safety at that time, and I got together and talked about it and Floyd sent in plain clothes investigator from the Department of Public Safety of Alabama, Mr. E.L. Cowling was his name. Sent him to Atlanta and he caught the bus out of Atlanta with the Freedom Riders. And he was on the bus when the bus got to Anniston. And he was on the bus when the bus was stopped just outside of Anniston on the way to Birmingham where it was set afire. And Mr. Cowling drew his pistol and made the crowd back away from the bus and made them let the passengers off of the bus. And no one was injured, but the bus was burned just outside of Anniston. But we had an investigator on the bus, his name was E.L. Cowling.

00:01:55:00

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME SOMETHING, WHAT—WERE YOU ANTICIPATING THIS LEVEL OF VIOLENCE OR [coughs] WHAT DID YOU EX—WHAT WERE THE PEOPLE OF ALABAMA MOST WORRIED ABOUT WHEN THEY HEARD ABOUT THE FREEDOM RIDES?

PATTERSON: Well, I don't think at first anybody paid much attention to it. After all, I mean, we, we paid—really didn't think it was a very serious matter and I believe there was something like ten or twelve or maybe fifteen of them.

INTERVIEWER: I'M SORRY, LET'S START AGAIN, MENTION FREEDOM RIDERS, I CAN'T USE PRONOUNS. SO IF YOU CAN JUST SAY—JUST START AGAIN, WHERE YOU TALKING ABOUT WHAT THE PEOPLE OF ALABAMA WERE—

PATTERSON: Well, I, I don't believe that the people of Alabama, at first, really paid much attention to this. And we certainly didn't consider it a, a very serious matter or didn't figure that it would cause a great deal of difficulty. But just as a precaution Floyd Mann and I agreed that we ought to send somebody over there to take a look just, just in case. Now, we had no earthly idea that there would be any trouble in Anniston. Anniston was a very quiet peaceful place. And there was a demonstration of some type there at the bus station when the bus got to Anniston. And then when it left, this crowd apparently followed the bus, stopped it outside of town and somebody set it on fire. Now we would never have dreamed that anybody would stop a bus and, and, and set it on fire like that. And so we just didn't anticipate, really, that this type of thing was going to happen.

INTERVIEWER: OK. LET'S CUT RIGHT THERE.

[cut]

00:03:29:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: OK AND MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: HE'S JUST TRYING TO FOCUS ON YOU FOR A SECOND.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK. WE'RE ALL SET HERE.

INTERVIEWER: OK. WHY DON'T YOU START RIGHT WHERE YOU WERE.

PATTERSON: The Freedom Riders was a group of about, I guess, fifteen people. They were, they were mixed. There was boys and girls, of course, some of them were much older, some of them were in their thirties or maybe early forties and they were mixed racially. And, of course, at this particular time in Alabama due to the various things that had been going on in the civil rights fight the—there was a polarization of this racial feeling between the races in Alabama. And there was a great deal of public interest in everything going on in regard to efforts to integrate public facilities and particularly schools. So the publicity that preceded the Freedom Riders, I think, had a considerable effect upon the thinking of the average Alabamian.

00:04:29:00

INTERVIEWER: BUT WHAT WAS THAT? PUBLIC INTEREST IS SORT OF A MILD DESCRIPTION I WOULD THINK.

PATTERSON: Well, I, I think that, that actually they, they saw these people being sent into Alabama for the purpose of stirring up difficulty and trouble for the people of Alabama, who were trying to solve their problems themselves. And they saw this as outside interference and planned agitation simply to embarrass the people of Alabama.

00:04:57:00

INTERVIEWER: IS THAT HOW YOU SAW IT AS GOVERNOR?

PATTERSON: Well, I didn't perceive that at first, but a little later on when the Justice Department got involved in it, I came to that conclusion myself.

INTERVIEWER: OK, WHAT DID YOU THINK AT THAT TIME OF THE WHOLE METHODS OF THE FREEDOM RIDERS? THEY SAID THEY WERE JUST TESTING THE LAW, BUT THEY KNEW THEY'D BE CREATING A CRISIS—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: COULD I INTERJECT FOR ONE MOMENT, I'M SORRY. I HAVE TO REMIND YOU, GOVERNOR, TO TRY TO KEEP YOUR EYES ON—

Patterson: On her.

INTERVIEWER: OH, I'M SORRY RIGHT. NOT ON THE CAMERA.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AVOID, AVOID LOOKING AT THE CAMERA.

Patterson: I, I was looking at the camera, excuse me.

INTERVIEWER: OK. AT THE TIME, WHAT DID YOU THINK ABOUT THIS WHOLE METHOD OF THIS FREEDOM RIDE—RIDER ACTION? I MEAN HERE THEY ARE, THEY, THEY ARE NOT—THEY ARE TESTING A FEDERAL LAW, BUT THEY'RE PUSHING IT TO ITS LIMITS IN A SITUATION THAT'S—CAUSE OUR CRISIS.

PATTERSON: Well, this, this was the beginning of, of demonstrations in an effort to try to change law by simply getting out in the street and deliberately violating the law. And, and this, of course—

INTERVIEWER: HOW WERE THEY VIOLATING THE LAW?

PATTERSON: Well, if, if they went into public places which were actually required to be segregated by law and there were some at that time that they were going into. Then they were, they were, of course, deliberately violating the, violating the law to try to test it and to dramatize this. And, I, I think, that's very clear as, as to what they were doing, there's no question, no question about that. Now it's hard to justify going out and deliberately violating the law in such a manner when you can take your case to court and, and litigate the question in a peaceful atmosphere without violence.

00:06:38:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT, WHAT ABOUT THE FACT THAT THEY SAID THEY WERE TESTING THE BOYNTON DECISION THAT THEY HAD THE RIGHT TO TRAVEL INTERSTATE BUSES.

PATTERSON: Well, now, these were not bona fide interstate travelers by any means. These people were buying tickets from town to town within states. And they were getting off the bus at term—at various terminals and they were going into restaurants and waiting rooms and cafeterias and places, at that time, that had been traditionally segregated and they were deliberately going in there and, and rubbing up against people and pushing in, in the places and deliberately trying to create trouble and cause fights to get the publicity. And, of course, you can start a fight anywhere that way. In New York or anywhere you want to go. If you start that kind of conduct in a public place, you're going to have a fight. And that's what these people were doing. They were deliberately doing this in order to create trouble, violence, if necessary, to bring publicity to what they were doing.

00:07:44:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS YOUR REACTION AS GOVERNOR TO ALL THIS? I MEAN—

PATTERSON: Well, I—my personal feeling was that I thought that they, that they should, you know, stay at home and mind their own business and, and let us try to work out our own problems down here in some legal way. But, I even asked, I even asked the Attorney General and the President to just simply say, in Washington, ask these people to mind their own business and obey the law. And the whole thing would have been over if they, you know, would have done that. But of course they didn't want to do that.

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET'S CUT THERE. THAT'S GREAT.

[cut]

00:08:25:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU FEEL AT THAT TIME, AS GOVERNOR, THAT THE STATE HAD ANY RESPONSIBILITY TOWARD THE FREEDOM RIDES IN THE SENSE THAT THERE WAS A FEDERAL LAW DEFENDING INTERSTATE TRAVEL AND THEY, THEY WERE TESTING THAT LAW.

PATTERSON: No, at that particular time we were primarily concerned with, with the state law and, and, in fact, no one had really, to my knowledge at that time, brought to our attention, specifically, violations of any federal laws. But, you see, our responsibility was to enforce the state law as long as it was constitutional.

INTERVIEWER: SO WHEN THE FREEDOM RIDERS FIRST CAME INTO ALABAMA WHAT WERE YOU PREPARED TO DO AS A GOVERNOR IN—EITHER—HOW WERE YOU—

Patterson: As far as, as, as far as I can remember interstate, interstate travelers could sit on the buses anywhere they wanted to at that time. In fact, even in intrastate travel, at that time, you could sit on the bus anywhere you wanted to. So that was not really what they were after. What they were after were waiting rooms, restaurants, and lunch counters that's what they were, they were trying to force themselves into.

00:09:38:00

INTERVIEWER: BUT NOW ONCE THEY'VE ENTERED THE STATE, YOU'RE FACED WITH DEALING WITH A CRISIS—ALSO—

PATTERSON: Well, once—yes. Once they entered the state we were faced with a law

enforcement problem and, basically, that's what it was. We wanted to make sure that the, the law was enforced and that nobody got hurt or nobody's property got destroyed. That was basically our problem. And this entire Freedom Rider thing became essentially a law enforcement problem as far as we were concerned.

00:10:05:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, WHAT DID THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION, TO YOUR UNDERSTANDING, FEEL YOUR OBLIGATION WAS TO THE FREEDOM RIDERS.

PATTERSON: I never did really understand Robert's position entirely.

INTERVIEWER: I'M SORRY, LET'S START THE BEGINNING. WE HAVE TO MENTION ROBERT KENNEDY. SO WE'LL KNOW THE WHOLE THING. SO, SAY THAT AGAIN, JUST BEGIN RIGHT THERE.

PATTERSON: I never did really thoroughly understand Robert's position in the matter. I know that when the—

00:10:30:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: EXCUSE ME. WE JUST RAN OUT OF FILM. I'M SORRY.

Patterson: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: LET'S CUT THERE.

00:10:34:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 388]

[change to sound roll 1339]

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME A LITTLE BIT WHAT—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: SPEED.

INTERVIEWER: TELL ME A LITTLE BIT WHAT HAPPENED IN BIRMINGHAM

VERY BRIEFLY. THE, THE OTHER, START WITH THE OTHER BUS WENT TO BIRMINGHAM AND JUST TELL US BRIEFLY WHAT HAPPENED.

PATTERSON: All right.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: FIRST TAKE YOUR GLASSES OFF.

INTERVIEWER: OH THAT'S RIGHT. DIDN'T MENTION.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK, SO WHY DON'T YOU BEGIN WITH THE FREEDOM RIDERS HEADING ON TOWARD BIRMINGHAM NOW. JUST, JUST DESCRIBE WHAT HAPPENED.

Patterson: After the bus was burned, they sent another bus out and brought the Freedom Riders into the city of Birmingham to the bus station there, where there was some type of controversy there. And the city of Birmingham police were involved in the handling of that situation there. The police commissioner was, was Mr. Bull Connor at that time. We were watching the situation, but, of course, we felt that Birmingham was capable of handling it and indeed they had sufficient personnel to handle it. And, of course, you—when you're the governor of the state you have to give the municipalities, the cities, an opportunity to perform their duties and functions and, and we felt like Birmingham could handle it. And they were ultimately put in jail in Birmingham. After a few days in jail there they were, they were fasting and, and causing difficulties in the jail, the Freedom Riders were. And so Mr. Connor took 'em out of jail carried 'em up to the Tennessee line and put them out over the Tennessee line. And they beat him back to Birmingham and things started all over again. Well, ultimately, the—they were got on, got on a bus and started toward the [sic] Montgomery. This was several days later. And then we got really interested in the Riders because it was obvious then that there was great trouble brewing here.

INTERVIEWER: OK. LET'S STOP RIGHT THERE. I WANT TO DRAW YOUR ATTENTION TO A MEETING—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: THAT'S GREAT.

Patterson: Yeah.

[cut]

00:12:27:00

[slate]

INTERVIEWER: FINE. THE FIRST QUESTION IS YOU WERE ONE OF THE FIRST SOUTHERN GOVERNORS TO COME OUT IN SUPPORT OF JOHN KENNEDY IN HIS

CAMPAIGN, HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN ATTORNEY GENERAL, ROBERT KENNEDY, GOT INVOLVED IN THE STATE'S AFFAIRS THE DAY AFTER ANNISTON AND BIRMINGHAM?

PATTERSON: Well, of course, I—as I said, I, I couldn't understand Robert's position very well, but anyway he started calling me on the telephone.

INTERVIEWER: I'M SORRY, SAY—TELL ME WHO'S CALLING YOU ON THE TELEPHONE. ROBERT KENNEDY?

PATTERSON: *Rob-, Robert Kennedy started calling me on the telephone. Robert started calling the president of the Greyhound bus company making demands on them. They had trouble getting drivers to drive the buses, because they were concerned about their buses and themselves, I guess. But, finally, every time I would talk to Robert, I would immediately read in the paper or hear on the, on the wire service, quotes from his office and from the White House saying that I said certain things. And many times it would be things that I did not say.* And so I told Robert that I would—that I thought the best thing would be for the President to send a personal representative down to Montgomery to be on the spot here with us, so that he would know what was going on and that we could confer directly with him and there would be no more, there would be no danger of talking over the telephone and misunderstanding each other and saying that each other said things that we didn't say. What was happening, his, his calls down here and then him saying that I said certain things that I didn't say was hurting me tremendously down here.

00:14:10:00

INTERVIEWER: I THOUGHT HE—I'M SORRY, I THOUGHT YOU WEREN'T TALKING TO ROBERT KENNEDY FOR A PERIOD OF TIME AT ALL DIRECTLY.

PATTERSON: Oh yeah. We, we, we talked. He called me several times during this period of time, we finally, we finally cut it off. But after, after the last call from him, as the bus was coming down from Birmingham, I asked them to send a personal representative down here to be here on the spot and that we would talk with him and we would stop this calling over the telephone and talking over the telephone. Well a day or two later, I found this out later, a day or two later, John Seigenthaler and John Doar who later became head of the civil rights division and Justice Department came into Montgomery unannounced. We had no idea they were coming or even who was coming for that matter. Checked in a, checked in a motel here in town, got up early the next morning, went downtown here and rented a, a U-drive-it automobile with a Montgomery County, Alabama license plate on it, and went down to the bus station and got involved in the riot. And the story I, I, I, I got from that was that when the, when the Freedom Riders got off the bus some of them were being pursued by some people including some women with pocketbooks, that were beating on 'em with pocketbooks. And Seigenthaler was driving the car pulled up next to these fleeing people on the curb and tried to get some of 'em into his car, ostensibly, to save them, I guess, from the crowd. Of course, nobody knew who these people were. They were in a Montgomery Alabama car and somebody hit him in the head and, and left him lying in the street. They

picked him up carried him to the hospital and when he got to the hospital here he had no identification on him. He had left his identification at the motel that morning and he had work clothes on. No tie, just work clothes. He was posing as a local person, I guess, and went down and got in the difficulty. And he did not identify himself at the hospital, until they let him make a phone call to the White House and that was the first time he identified who he, who he was. And, of course, I was absolutely flabbergasted that the representative of the President would come down here and not come to see us as we had requested, but would disguise himself and then go down and get into the riot himself. And, and, and I just could not understand them doing that.

INTERVIEWER: OK. LET'S CUT RIGHT THERE. THAT'S GOOD. NOW THIS IS A—

[cut]

00:16:51:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK.

IMPORTANT. OK, I'LL JUST ASK YOU, JUST REMIND YOU SOMETHING YOU SAID, AT THE TIME. NOW YOU WERE DESCRIBED IN AN INTERVIEW AS SAYING THAT YOU WANTED QUOTE, "THOSE OUTSIDE AGITATORS TO GET OUT OF THE STATE" AND THAT YOU THOUGHT IF FEDERAL POWER WERE USED AGAINST STATE POWER, THAT BLOOD WOULD FLOW IN THE STREETS. IN OTHER WORDS IF TROOPS WERE BROUGHT FROM THE GOVERNMENT, THAT THERE WOULD BE A DISASTER. CAN YOU REMEMBER THAT AND CAN YOU REACT TO THAT? YOU SAID THIS IN A NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS AND MONTGOMERY ADVERTISEMENT, I REMEMBER SEEING.

PATTERSON: Well, I, I think that if I said something like that and, I possibly could have something like that at the time, it must have come after the riot at the bus station here in Montgomery when it was a very touch and go situation down there as to whether somebody would be seriously hurt or not. And, I think, we were very fortunate to have come out of that bus station riot without more people being hurt than were. Now, at, at that time, I think it, it was obviously a serious situation and people were gathering in here from all over the United States. There were people we didn't even know who they were coming in here from everywhere, all over Montgomery, obviously looking to get into some type of difficulty. Rockwell's Nazis from New Jersey came down several van loads of them. And they were here and, and spoiling for, for trouble. And it was quite obvious that we were faced with a very volatile situation and, and a potential riot on our hands. And, and it was a time, in my judgment, when the Justice Department and the White House ought to have, ought to have taken a stand to support our efforts to maintain law and order rather than to encourage the thing like they were doing.

00:18:48:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT—DESCRIBE, DESCRIBE THAT FOR ME A LITTLE. HOW DO YOU MEAN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT WAS ENCOURAGING THE WHOLE THING?

PATTERSON: Well, they were insisting, of course, that these people be permitted to go anywhere they wanted, wanted to and do anything they wanted to do without being bothered. And they were insisting, *Robert was insisting on a guarantee from us that none of 'em would be bothered or none of them would be injured. And, of course, you couldn't give a guarantee like that for people who are not going to do what you say; are not going to obey the police; who are out looking for difficulty and trouble.*

00:19:22:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT ABOUT YOUR PREPARATIONS YOU COULD HAVE MADE AFTER THE ANNISTON AND BIRMINGHAM INCIDENT AND PRIOR TO GOING IN MONTGOMERY. WHAT WAS THE SPECIFIC AGREEMENT YOU HAD IN RELATION TO THE FREEDOM RIDERS BEFORE THEY WENT INTO MONTGOMERY? I'M BACKTRACKING A LITTLE NOW. WHAT WAS YOUR, WHAT WAS YOUR GAME PLAN?

PATTERSON: What we were doing, what we were doing was, was doing everything that we could to see that nothing happened to these people, short of just taking charge of 'em and escorting 'em where they wanted to go. I mean nobody really wanted to do that.

INTERVIEWER: COLONEL MANN GOT, GOT THE—ESCORTED THE BUSES FROM—TO THE MONTGOMERY CITY LINE AND THEN—CAN YOU JUST TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED AT THAT POINT ON FROM COLONEL MANN'S ESCORT?

PATTERSON: When the, when the buses left Birmingham, we had helicopters overhead, we had state troopers behind and in front of the bus, we had people, posted on all of the overpasses and bridges to see that no—side roads, to see that nobody bothered the bus. We had an assurance from the city of Montgomery that they could handle the situation in Montgomery and they would do so and that they didn't need our help. And indeed they had the forces to do it. Now we didn't depend entirely on that. Mann had brought in quite a number of our state people and had them placed around the town just in case the city of Montgomery couldn't do it. And very fortunately for us that we did that. When the bus arrived in Montgomery, just out of nowhere a tremendous mob materialized at the bus station—thousands of people. After the Freedom Riders and lo and behold, no Montgomery city police. And it was obvious, there for a little bit, that they weren't real—they weren't protected. Now when they got off the bus the crowd descended on the Freedom Rider and they got some of them down and started beating on them. And Floyd Mann, my Director of Public Safety, Bill Jones, his assistant, and several others were there. And they waded into the crowd—

00:21:34:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Patterson: —and straddled these people. One of ‘em was Mr. Peck—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: WE HAVE JUST RUN OUT OF FILM.

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET’S STOP HERE.

00:21:41:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 389]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: TURN. MARKER.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: THANK YOU.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: PRU, IT’S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER: OK. SO WHY DON'T YOU BEGIN WITH COLONEL MANN AND ALL THIS MELEE.

PATTERSON: Colonel Mann, the Director of Public Safety, and his assistant, Bill Jones, waded into the crowd and straddled these people and pulled their pistols and, I think, Floyd might have fired into the air one time and told ‘em to get back or he'd shoot them. And the crowd got back and he saved these people and it was a very courageous, courageous act. Of course, by this time, our people were coming in, they'd got the word and they were coming in and the city began to come in then, and the mob broke up very quickly.

00:22:19:00

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU FEEL BETRAYED AT THE FACT THAT THERE WERE NO CITY POLICE REALLY IN MONTGOMERY DEALING WITH THESE—AT THE BUS STATION. THERE’S NOBODY THERE.

PATTERSON: Well, I, I—feeling betrayed. I, I felt like at the time that there was something wrong. And, of course, later on I found out that possibly there was.

INTERVIEWER: CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THAT?

PATTERSON: Well, I—later on I found out there was poss—possibly an understanding by

the Director of Public Safety, at that time, by the police commissioner or, or the Director of Public Safety of the city of Montgomery, Mr. Sullivan. That there was possibly some understanding that they be slow getting there.

INTERVIEWER: AND HOW DID YOU FIND THAT OUT?

PATTERSON: Well, I found that out years later, but at that particular time I, I had—I suspected that there might be some problem here as to why more policemen weren't down there because, obviously, there was a need for them. And, and, and—but I didn't say anything about it. I just at that particular time we went ahead and did what we had to do, and we just didn't get involved in recriminations with the city.

00:23:22:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW GOING BACK TO WHAT YOU WERE SAYING EARLIER, ABOUT MR. SEIGENTHALER, HE'S BEING SENT DOWN, ACCORDING TO HIS ACCOUNT AND ACCORDING TO ATTORNEY GENERAL'S ACCOUNT, HE'S SENT DOWN AS AN EMISSARY. AND HE IS AT A MEETING, OSTENSIBLY, WITH YOU AND YOUR CABINET AS TO WHAT THIS—TO DETERMINE HOW THIS RIDE COULD CONTINUE AND HOW IT WOULD CONTINUE WITHOUT VIOLENCE. AND HE CLAIMS THEN HE, TWELVE HOURS LATER, HE'S LYING IN THE STREETS IN A SITUATION WHERE HE WENT IN BECAUSE HE, HE HAD HEARD THAT YOU HAD GUARANTEED LAW AND ORDER OR THAT COLONEL MANN HAD GUARANTEED LAW AND ORDER.

PATTERSON: Well, I don't remember that meeting with Mr. Seigenthaler. However, it could have happened. And if it did happen it must have happened the day before the bus arrived at the Montgomery bus station. If, if a meeting like that took place and later on one did, did take place with Mr. White, who is now on the United States Supreme Court, we—at every time we met with anybody, connected with the federal people, we assured them that we believed in law and order, that we had ample forces to maintain law and order, that we intended to do so, and that they didn't have to be down here with their forces or be in—or be interfering with what we were doing down here. Never, at any time, did we ever get to the position where we were the least bit concerned that we were not able to maintain law and order. We had ample forces, we had the will to do it and we intended to do it.

00:24:52:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT ABOUT PEOPLE WHO THEN CAME BACK AND SAID, LOOK AT ANNISTON, LOOK AT BIRMINGHAM. ISN'T THAT WHAT ROBERT KENNEDY SAID AT THAT POINT, YOU—TWO INCIDENTS HAD ALREADY TAKEN PLACE.

PATTERSON: Well, when somebody suddenly stops a bus out on an isolated highway between Anniston and Birmingham and sets it on fire, just suddenly like that, you're not prepared for anything like that. And, of course, in Birmingham, the city of Birmingham, was,

was well able to handle the situation in, in Birmingham. And, of course, we got in there till the bus left Birmingham. And, of course, we relied on the city of Montgomery and it didn't quite turn out like we, like we had hoped it would. But after the ride at the bus station, we brought in sufficient forces in Montgomery of state people, and even national guardsmen. Placed them around town and got ready for whatever might occur.

00:25:42:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DID OCCUR, THEN, THAT NIGHT AND THE FOLLOWING DAY AFTER?

PATTERSON: Well, I think that, I'm not sure of that night, but shortly thereafter, Reverend Martin Luther King decided to come to town and get involved in it. And, of course, that increased the tempo of it when he, when he came.

INTERVIEWER: WE'LL STOP RIGHT THERE. THAT'S FINE. LET'S CUT.

[cut]

00:26:02:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: OK. JUST VERY BRIEFLY, IN YOUR OWN WORDS, WHAT—HOW DID YOU FEEL ABOUT ROBERT KENNEDY'S INTERVENTION IN THIS WHOLE FREEDOM RIDE INCIDENT THROUGHOUT THE STATE OF ALABAMA?

PATTERSON: Well, I think, that, that Robert Kennedy was interested in assisting the Freedom Riders in their efforts to create difficulty and trouble down here for whatever their motive [sic] might have been. And, and he didn't cooperate with us really in any way. And he made it very difficult and it's, it's remarkable that more people—it's remarkable that somebody didn't get killed in the thing. Twenty years later we find out that Robert Kennedy had actually sent a person in here who worked with this group of Klansmen and he had specific instructions from the Justice Department to knock heads together and beat up Freedom Riders and create trouble. Gary Thomas Rowe, who later on was involved in the Liuzzo killing in 1963. So we know today that Robert's intentions were to cause us difficulty and trouble and to create violence in Alabama to embarrass us.

00:27:22:00

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU FEEL EMBARRASSED AS GOVERNOR IN THAT POSITION THAT YOU WERE, AFTER MONTGOMERY?

PATTERSON: Well, naturally we were embarrassed that this happening [sic] to us down

here and it was a situation that could have been avoided and to have the Justice Department of the United States doing what they did, sending in six hundred Federal Marshals, flying in a company of infantry from Fort Benning, and hiding 'em in a hanger out here at Maxwell Field near Montgomery. All of this was designed to embarrass us and we were embarrassed by it.

00:27:58:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT ABOUT THE SITUATION IN THE CHURCH THOUGH. THAT APPARENTLY THERE WERE SOME THOUSAND, FIFTEEN HUNDRED PEOPLE INSIDE THE CHURCH—

PATTERSON: Well, I think—sorry. I think it was the—either a couple nights later or it could've been the—no I think—

INTERVIEWER: THE NEXT NIGHT.

Patterson: —the next night, Mr. King came to town. He was met out at the airport by the, by the marshals, Federal Marshals and was escorted to the church. And, of course, we were concerned about this situation because people had begun to gather from all over the country into town here, and it was a very volatile thing. And so the marshals, about five or six hundred of 'em, and these were process servers. These were not trained people in riot control like the, like the Justice Department tried to make out. But anyway, they showed up at the church and they ring the church, apparently, intending to protect the church. And, of course, no, no legal authority for marshals to do that kind of thing, you know, under the Constitution, but anyway they were doing it. And the city had sort of backed off and let them do it and we brought in our people and watched it from two or three hundred yards away. And when darkness came a tremendous mob gathered down there about ten thousand people. And they got their courage up when night came and began to cat-call the marshals and throw bottles. And when they started throwing bottles, the marshals began to cover up and when they took their eyes off the mob the crowd ran over them just ran over the marshals and burned the car and it took about ten or fifteen minutes for us to free our people in there real quick and restored order. And then we protected the people all night in the church and then next morning escorted them, escorted them home. Now the thing appeared to be very bad there that night and almost got out of hand. And that's the night, I was up in the Governor's office about three or four blocks away, staying in touch with Mr. Mann as to what was going on, and we decided to call—to declare martial law. So that evening, as this riot began to get started, I issued a decree of martial law and we called out about a regiment of national guardsman, who were trained in riot control, and, we already had a good many of them here anyway, and we immediately just clamped the whole city here under martial law and just broke up everything and that just stopped it. And we never had any more difficulty or trouble after that. And the marshals just disappeared that night.

00:30:24:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS THE ONE SINGLE THING THAT MADE YOU, JUST IN

A COUPLE OF SENTENCES, THAT, THAT MADE YOU MAKE THAT DECISION TO CALL MARTIAL LAW? SOME PEOPLE SAID, SOME PEOPLE SAID IT WAS THE PRESSURE OF THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION THAT LED—

Patterson: No.

INTERVIEWER: —YOU TO MAKE THAT DECISION.

PATTERSON: No, no. No I had sent Mr. Tom Posey, who was my aid, he was a state trooper and he was my aid in the Governor's office, and I couldn't get information back fast enough from down at the church. So I sent Tom Posey down there. And I told him go down there and find out what's going on and get to a telephone booth and get to a telephone booth and call me and tell me what the situation is and he called me back in a little bit and he said this thing is fixing to get out of hand and you ought to do something about it. And at that moment, I had the National Guard liaison officer sitting in my office just in case and, at that moment, I said, all right, it's, it's martial law. Issue the order. And the orders went out and it was just all over in a matter of fifteen, twenty minutes.

00:31:17:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DID PEOPLE OF ALABAMA THINK ABOUT THE FREEDOM RIDERS? WHAT WAS THEIR SENTIMENT?

PATTERSON: Well, I think the general feeling in, in Alabama, at that time, of the Freedom Riders was that these were people who were sent down here to create difficulty and trouble for us and they were not welcome.

INTERVIEWER: OK. LET'S CUT RIGHT THERE.

[cut]

00:31:34:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARKER.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WAIT ONE SECOND. ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER: OK. ALL RIGHT GO.

PATTERSON: When President Kennedy called me during this time and I didn't take the call and it was a very bad mistake, on my part, and I'm very sorry I didn't do it and in retrospect, if I had to do it over again, I'd take the call. But I was concerned because I thought—I figured

he would ask me can you guarantee the safety of these people? Can you guarantee that nothing is going to happen to them? And that had been a pretty hard thing to do because they wouldn't obey what we wanted them to do. They, they wouldn't go where we said go or they wouldn't stay put. And if I'd have said no I can't, he'd have said the Governor of Alabama has admitted to me he can't maintain order in his own state and he'd have sent the federal troops in here which would have been a terrible thing for us. On the other hand, if I'd have said, why yes I can guarantee it, then I probably could not have lived up to it, possibly, or, or he would then say that the Governor has capitulated and has agreed to go along with what these people are trying to do down here to test the Alabama laws. And so, politically, that would have been a very bad thing for me to do there, see. So I was put in that dilemma and, I'd already thought this out, and I figured I might get this call and I didn't take it. And it was a mistake and if I had it to do over again, I'd most certainly take it.

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET'S CUT. THAT'S GREAT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I THINK WE'RE

INTERVIEWER: THAT'S FINE.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: YEAH. GOOD TIMING.

[cut]

00:32:54:00

[slate]

[change to camera roll 390]

[change to sound roll 1140]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SPEED.

INTERVIEWER: IN A COUPLE SENTENCES, IF YOU CAN TELL ME WHAT SPECIFIC, WHAT SPECIFIC CIRCUMSTANCES OR EVENTS CAUSED YOU TO MAKE, TO MAKE THE DECISION TO CALL OUT THE NATIONAL GUARD THERE IN MONTGOMERY? JUST IN, MAYBE A FEW SENTENCES, WHAT MADE YOU CALL OUT THE GUARD?

PATTERSON: I had sent an aid, Mr. Tom Posey, down to the church where the mob was gathered, because I was having difficulty getting, getting information back from Floyd Mann about what was going on down there. I guess Floyd was mighty busy. And I told Tom to go down there, get to a phone booth and call me and, and tell me what the situation was. And so he called me in a little bit and told me, says, this thing is getting out of hand. And it looks like some—somebody's going to get hurt unless something's done about it. So, at that time, I made the decision to declare martial law and call out the National Guard.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Patterson: I'd already made plans and had the, and had the—one of the colonels there with me in the, in the office and I told him, all right, let's go.

INTERVIEWER: OK. LET'S CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: GOOD.

[cut]

00:33:59:00

[slate]

INTERVIEWER: IF YOU CAN COVER THAT BRIEFLY. WHAT AFFECT DID YOU THINK THEY HAD? THAT WHOLE EPISODE HAD ON THE STATE OF ALABAMA?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: IT'S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER: GO AHEAD.

PATTERSON: Well, I, I think the Freedom Riders did accomplish what they probably set out to do and that was to bring attention to the segregated policies and segregated laws dealing with waiting rooms and bus stations and restaurants and things of that kind, public accommodations. And, I think, it had a tremendous affect and I think it set in motion, nationally, efforts to, to end that. And so, I, I think, that probably the end result of the Freedom Riders was the ending of segregation in public accommodations.

00:34:37:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WERE THE NEGATIVE SIDE EFFECTS OF THE FREEDOM RIDERS?

PATTERSON: I think the negative effects was the hostility that was generated and created between the Justice Department, particularly, and the United States Government and the people of Alabama and, particularly, the state government of Alabama. I think it demonstrated, at that time, that we couldn't, couldn't necessarily trust these people and I guess they probably felt like they couldn't trust us.

00:35:11:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DID YOU THINK, PERSONALLY, OF THE RIGHT THESE PEOPLE HAVE TO RIDE THE BUS THOUGH?

PATTERSON: Well, I think they had, I think that, that they had the right to ride the bus, of course, anywhere they wanted to go, but as far as getting off the bus at any particular location and going and deliberately trying to create some type of public controversy in order to dramatize their situation, I think that's wrong. I think that people should take their grievance to the courts and, and not to the streets.

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET'S CUT.

00:35:43:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: IN A LITTLE WE'LL GO BACK INTO—

00:35:44:00

[cut]

[slate]

INTERVIEWER: WHAT YOU JUST TALKED ABOUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: SPEED.

INTERVIEWER: IN OTHER WORDS, TWO QUESTIONS. WHAT, WHAT WAS THE RANGE OF OPINION IN THE WHITE COMMUNITY OF MONTGOMERY ABOUT THE BOYCOTT?

PATTERSON: Well, the white community was not particularly involved in the Montgomery bus boycott. Of course, the black community was wholly involved in it. The bus boycott was a tremendous success as far as the black community was concerned. Of course, very shortly after the boycott commenced, the United States Supreme Court came down with a decision that ended segregation on intrastate and interstate transportation and you could sit, sit anywhere on the bus you wanted to after that. But what the bus boycott did do, it created a tremendous interest in the black community to improve its position and it brought about voter registration drives and tremendous efforts to organize and to pursue other goals. And, I think, you can truthfully say that the Montgomery bus boycott was the thing that started the modern civil rights movement in the South.

00:36:50:00

INTERVIEWER: OK, AND HOW MUCH DID THAT BOYCOTT IMPACT THE CITY

FINANCIALLY? WERE THE DOWNTOWN MERCHANTS AFFECTED?

PATTERSON: I, I just don't know, I—not a great deal I don't think. I think, of course, it hurt the city bus line. And a lot of people didn't ever—didn't go back to the bus after the boycott was over.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT ABOUT PEOPLE'S HELP NOT BEING ABLE TO COME IN? I KNOW YOU MENTIONED THAT EARLIER.

PATTERSON: Well, of course, when the boycott started a lot of the blacks rode the bus and the majority of people who rode the bus were blacks, they worked at—for white people in various parts of town. And, of course, the white businessman the—and the white housewife would go get their employee and bring them to work in their car and take them home at night. And, of course, this, of course, helped the boycott tremendously and there wasn't anything the city could do about it.

00:37:50:00

INTERVIEWER: [laughs] HOW CONCERNED WERE YOU, AS ATTORNEY GENERAL, ABOUT THE BAD PUB—PUBLICITY THAT WAS GENERATED BY THE BOYCOTT ABOUT MONTGOMERY?

PATTERSON: Well, of course, it, it, it—the boycott in Montgomery did not effect—at least I don't remember it affecting my job as Attorney General. I was not directly involved in the boycott.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT ABOUT AS A PRIVATE CITIZEN THOUGH. DID YOU THINK IT HAD A BAD AFFECT ON MONTGOMERY?

PATTERSON: Yes, I think probably it did. Nationwide, that it, it probably had a bad affect on the image of Montgomery and the state.

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET'S CUT FOR A SECOND.

[cut]

00:38:26:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND MARK.

INTERVIEWER: OK. ONE QUESTION. WAS THERE ANY KIND OF PRESSURE FROM THE STATE LEVEL TO THE CITY IN MONTGOMERY TO GET THIS WHOLE BUS BOYCOTT RESOLVED BEFORE IT DID ANY FURTHER DAMAGE TO THE CITY?

PATTERSON: Not that I know of. I—of course, I speak only from the Attorney General's office. Governor Folsom was governor at that time, and whether or not he was involved in any matter in the boycott I do not know.

INTERVIEWER: OK. WHAT WAS YOUR REACTION WHEN THE SUPREME COURT RULED THE BUSES HAD TO BE DESEGREGATED IN MONTGOMERY? THE, THE DECISION THAT CAME OUT OF THE BUS BOYCOTT ITSELF.

PATTERSON: My best recollection is that we had no real reaction at all except one of being glad that the thing was over. This brought an end to the matter and the people of Alabama adjusted to it very quickly without any difficulty.

INTERVIEWER: OK, LET'S CUT THERE FOR—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK. A, A FOLLOW UP TO THAT—

[cut]

00:39:16:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: FOURTEEN.

INTERVIEWER: GOING, GOING BACK TO MONTGOMERY. PRIOR TO MONTGOMERY YOU HAD MADE A STATEMENT THAT, AND THIS IS A QUOTE NOW, "THAT THE STATE OF ALABAMA HAD THE MEANS, ABILITY, AND THE WILL TO KEEP THE PEACE WITH OUTSIDE HELP—WITHOUT OUTSIDE HELP." AND YET—AND WE HAD THE EXPERIENCE OF BIRMINGHAM AND ANNISTON. HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN YOU HEARD THAT A FEDERAL MAN, THAT SIEGENTHALER WAS, YOU KNOW, UNCONSCIOUS IN THE STREET AND YET YOU HAD MADE THAT CLAIM.

PATTERSON: Well, now nobody got hurt in the Anniston incident. The bus got burned. Nobody got hurt at the station in Birmingham that I recall. Somebody did get beat up here. Two or three of them got roughed up here in Montgomery, but our people saved these—saved them from further, further harm. So I, I, I think that we were demonstrated that we were perfectly capable of maintaining order. We had unlimited forces to do so and, and I would have filled the jails full of people if it became necessary to do so to maintain order. No question about it. Now, I can't explain Mr. Seigenthaler. If he came, if he came down here to represent the Attorney General of the United States, he, he was forced to be with us as a liaison person, he shouldn't have gone down and got in the mob himself. You need experienced people to send into mobs and things like that. And he had no experience at all

other, than possibly, a newspaper man. And he just should not have gone down there. And when he went down there, he made it possible for this incident to happen which was not a good thing for any of us and it reflected, it reflected on all of us, him included.

INTERVIEWER: OK AND JUST—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I'M SORRY. I HAVE TO CHANGE MY BATTERY.

INTERVIEWER: I'M SORRY.

[cut]

00:41:07:00

[slate]

[change to sound roll 1141]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARKER.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: MARKER.

INTERVIEWER: OK, JUST GIVE ME A GENERAL FEELING, IN A FEW SENTENCES, OF WHY ALABAMANS, I'M NOT TALKING ABOUT THE EXTREME ELEMENTS ON BOTH SIDES, WHY THE AVERAGE ALABAMAN IN 1961 GOT LIVID AT THE THOUGHT OF THE FREEDOM RIDERS COMING IN TO THIS STATE. BECAUSE I THINK IT WAS JUST THE AVERAGE PERSON, WHY DO YOU THINK THEY WERE—

PATTERSON: Well, again, I, I think that the polarization of the races, due to what was going on in the civil rights movement at that time, beginning with the Montgomery bus boycott, had created a, a feeling in which the white community was incensed at people like the Freedom Riders, who were coming into the state, to intentionally violate our customs and, in some cases, violate local law. And they were just incensed at this. As far as getting out and getting in a riot or, or beating up Freedom Riders, the average Alabaman would not do that. The people who were actually doing this were very small group of people. Some of them were known members of the Ku Klux Klan and they were not representative of the average Alabama person.

00:42:15:00

INTERVIEWER: BUT SOME PEOPLE THOUGHT THAT YOU OPENED THE DOOR TO THIS KIND OF—THIS ELEMENT IN THE POPULATION BY ALLOWING BULL CONNOR TO TAKE THESE PEOPLE OUT AND DROP THEM AT THE STATE LINE AND, AND NOT CLAMPING DOWN ON THE SITUATION EARLIER. HOW WOULD YOU REACT TO THAT?

PATTERSON: Course, you see, that the, the Governor of the state would feel very reluctant to interfere with the city officials of Birmingham in their way of handling the situation. Now, of course, I thought—I think, when he carried them to the Missi—to the Tennessee line, he made a very bad mistake and I wouldn't have done anything like that—

INTERVIEWER: OK. THAT'S, THAT'S FINE. AND—LET'S CUT. THIS, THIS ONE—

[cut]

00:42:57:00

[slate]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: SECOND STICKS MARKER.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 3: SIXTEEN.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK IT'S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER: OK. WHY DON'T YOU GO AHEAD.

Patterson: The polarization of the races made it impossible for the political leaders to bring about change. It was je—it was just political suicide to undertake change, at that time, because of the situation. The Federal Court became the valve by which change could be brought about without violence. And then the political leader could survive. He could blame the Federal Courts for the problems and he could survive politically.

INTERVIEWER: GREAT. LET'S CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: GREAT.

INTERVIEWER: YOU JUST SUMMARIZED THE WHOLE—

[cut]

[end interview]

00:43:36:00

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