

Interview with **John Seigenthaler**

November 3, 1985

Production Team: B

Camera Rolls: 320, 326-328

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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*.

00:00:32:00

[camera roll 320]

[sound roll 1313]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

INTERVIEWER: OK. THE CONTEXT OF THE NEXT FEW QUESTIONS IS MAY '61 AND THE FREEDOM RIDES HAVE JUST BEGUN. BEGINNING WITH TELLING US YOUR JOB IN THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION JUST WHAT YOU WERE. WHY WERE YOU SENT DOWN TO ALABAMA TO SPEAK TO GOVERNOR PATTERSON?

Seigenthaler: I was the Administrative Assistant to the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, and that first wave of Freedom Riders went into Alabama and they were thrown in jail. We'd better start over.

INTERVIEWER: OK. GO AHEAD.

Seigenthaler: Yeah. That first wave of Freedom Riders went down through the South, came to Anniston, Alabama. The bus was bombed. They were brutalized. They were taken back to Birmingham given hospitalization and then had difficulty getting out of Birmingham. They were stymied in the airport surrounded by an angry mob. There were bomb threats every time

an airplane would take off. The, the Attorney General heard from some of them by telephone. Simeon Booker, the reporter who was with them, called in and you could tell from his voice that things were desperate. I think he had doubts that they would ever get out of there. And so, the Attorney General, after talking to the President, decided to send me down to try to negotiate to get them from Birmingham by air onto New Orleans. And that's why I was sent down. When I arrived in Birmingham, I don't ever, I don't ever remember being more—felt more welcomed by a group of people than, than I was made to feel by those people. I mean it was—I mean almost reaching out to touch me. It was a simple matter to work out with the airlines. A procedure whereby we got 'em on the airplane got 'em out, we simply cut off telephone calls for period of several minutes prior to the announcement of the flight. And managed to get 'em on and get 'em out of there and get 'em to New Orleans where they were met by friends who took them into their care and, and then I went to, went to sleep that night. Woke up about two o'clock in the morning, the Attorney General was calling and said another wave is coming down. Can you get back to Birmingham? And so, I went back to Birmingham and, by the time, I got there the next day the new grou—group of Freedom Riders had been put in jail. Bull Connor had arrested 'em and thrown them into the slammer and then the efforts began to negotiate for their release. Governor Patterson had been incommunicado from the outset. The Attorney General couldn't get him. The President couldn't get him. And, certainly, I couldn't get him. Finally it was worked out for me to talk to the Governor. And, and I did that.

INTERVIEWER: OK. LET'S CUT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: LET'S CUT.

[cut]

00:04:00:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: AND MARK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: SO, WHAT, WHAT WAS DISCUSSED WHEN YOU AND GOVERNOR PATTERSON WERE—MET ALL THOSE PEOPLE—

Seigenthaler: Well, looking, looking back on it right now, it would seem a simple matter for the Federal Government to simply march in and say to the FBI make sure these people get on the bus and make sure the bus gets through and we'll reinforce that with Marshals or troops or whatever. It was not quite that simple. I mean states rights were still asserted and all sorts of legal theories were being suggested. A theory called interposition which seemed to put the state government between the Constitution and, and, and the Federal Government. But, but Patterson simply was not available, was holding out, didn't want to meet with us. That was our impression. One report was that he was in a boat off the Gulf Coast and couldn't get back

from Mobile to see us. During that period, Bull Connor, late one night, simply took ‘em out of jail. Had a motorcade, took ‘em back to the Tennessee line, dumped ‘em on the other side of the Tennessee line. The movement had a network of, of information that was so heavy that by the time Bull Connor got ‘em over the Tennessee line, the movement had cars waiting for ‘em. They almost beat him back to Birmingham. By the time the next morning rolled around they were once again trying to get on a bus they were back in, into jail. ***Finally, Governor Patterson did agree to a meeting and I went down from Birmingham to Montgomery to meet with him. Went into that antebellum building, that is, the State Capitol there. He had me into his office. Had his whole cabinet seated around this great conference table.*** The Commissioner of Safety was a man named Floyd Mann, he was a bright, articulate, tough minded police officer and Governor Patterson lectured me for better part of half an hour. At times pounding the table telling me how these outside agitators had to get out of that state. That this state was not about to permit the federal establishment to move in and to assert the rights of those people. That this was an Alabama matter. That I, in fact, was an intruder. And he made it clear that, that we thought we were going to use the federal power against the state power. That blood would flow in the streets. He made that statement, at one point, during the conversation. The cabinet sat there in silence and listened to the lecture a few of them smiling, a few nodding encouragement to him, but Floyd Mann stoic and solid and reserved. At one point, the Governor gave me an opportunity to respond and I said that ***my duty as a federal officer was to inform him that if the state could not protect citizens of the United States, either in the cities or on the highways, that it was a federal responsibility and that we were prepared to assert it, but that we hoped we would not have to. He said he was not sure that safety-, safe conduct could be given to these agitators, as he called them. Floyd Mann then broke in and said, Governor, as your chief law enforcement officer, I assure you if you give me the responsibility, I can protect them. That was the first breakthrough.*** Patterson and Mann and I then had a little colloquy about how that protection could be worked out. It seemed to me to be a break and I moved in on it. In retrospect, I'm sure Patterson expected that it would come. At any rate, he gave Mann orders to protect them—

00:08:04:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Seigenthaler: —from city limits to city limits.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: STOP.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: [coughs] JUST ROLLED OUT. LETS—

00:08:09:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 326]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND ROLL SOUND.

[sync tone]

Seigenthaler: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: LET ME JUST GET SETTLED IN. ONE SECOND TO TAKE MY FOCUS. AND WE ARE IN FOCUS AND IT IS ALL YOURS.

Seigenthaler: Well, Governor Patterson said—attitude was that the Federal Government absolutely no business in that matter, that it was a matter of states rights. That the federal establishment should stay outside of it. It was none of my business. None of the President's business. None of the Attorney General's business. At one point, he pounded on the table, told me how much more popular he was than Jack Kennedy. Said he was sorry that he ever supported Kennedy for President. He had a stack of letters from people all over the country who were telling him how popular he was and how he should be President of the United States. It was really a, a shocking demonstration. Floyd Mann, his Commissioner of Safety, at one point, interjected that he was certain that as the chief law enforcement officer of that state that he could provide protection to those citizens if the Governor told him to do it. And, at that point, I, I found myself looking to Floyd Mann, first of all, with some skepticism. He was part of this monolithic silent cabinet until that moment. At the same time, he was the one voice of reason in that room and so I leaned to him and we engaged in this colloquy. Quickly worked out an arrangement whereby the Attorney General would be notified that the Governor of Alabama said I can protect all the citizens, all the travelers in the state of Alabama. Those who are citizens of this state and those from outside. And Mann was told that the state police would protect those travelers from city limits to city limits and the city police would protect them inside the city limits. I called the Attorney General from Patterson's desk which was a few feet away from the conference table. Patterson would not speak to him personally. So I was sitting on the telephone with the Attorney General in Washington talking to me, talking to Patterson through me, and Patterson talking to the Attorney General through me. It was a strange position to be in. The Attorney General was saying, in effect, can we trust 'em? Can we believe them? And my answer to that was that I felt we had to. That we needed to move these people on their way and that I thought that, and my feeling was and, of course, I was talking in front of John Patterson. I had to convey the idea that I thought that Patterson somewhere in his heart of hearts really wanted to get this thing over. Get the problem moved on to another state. And so, through that device, we worked out an arrangement, worked out a statement, agreed on the language, I walked out, read that statement to the press within two hours Governor Patterson had given his own version in which he referred again to outside agitators and troublemakers and rabble rousers and attacked the Federal Government, but said that protection would be provided.

INTERVIEWER: GOOD. OK, CUT.

[cut]

00:11:23:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARK IT.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: IT'S ALL YOURS, PRU.

INTERVIEWER: SO, YOU WERE BEGINNING—WHY YOU WERE IN BIRMINGHAM—

Seigenthaler: John Doar and I left Birmingham immediately behind the bus. The Freedom Riders had insisted that they weren't going to ride this bus unless it was a local. They wanted to stop at every station. They wanted to test the bathroom facilities, the dining facilities at every little out of the way bus stop. Well, the driver was scared out of his wits. He knew what had happened in Anniston the week before and he drove an express bus. Doar and I went ahead of that bus made a couple of stops for gas, I guess, maybe for a cup of coffee. We arrived at the Federal Building, which adjoins the bus station, about two or three minutes after the bus arrived. As John got out of the car, you could hear the shouts from across the way, the screams. I looked across the way and baggage was being hurled into the air above the bus station shed. Doar ran for the federal building and I drove up the street and quickly through an alleyway on the backside of the bus station and as I came down the far side I saw this, almost, anthill of activity. The Freedom Riders on—emerging from the bus were attacked, were being mauled. It looked like two—three hundred people just all over them. There were screams, shouts. *As I drove along, I saw two young women who were Freedom Riders being pummeled to one side. There was a woman who was walking behind one of these young women. She had a purse on a, on a strap and she was beating her over the head. And a young, skinny, blonde teenager in a t-shirt was sort of dancing her backward in front of her, punching her in the face. Instinctively, I just bumped up onto the sidewalk, blew the horn, jumped out of the car, came around, grabbed the one who was being hit, took her back to the car. The other young woman got into the backseat of the car and I opened the door, pushed this young woman, whose name I think was Susan Wilbur, and said, get in the car. And she said, mister, this is not your fight. I'm non-violent. Don't get hurt because of me. I almost got away with it. If she had gotten into the car, I think, I could have gotten away, but that moment of hesitation gave the mob a chance to collect their wits and one grabbed me by the arm, wheeled me around and said, what the hell are you doing? And I said, get back, I'm a federal man. Turned back to her and the lights went out. I was hit with a pipe over this ear* and, literally, don't remember anything that happened. They kicked me up under the car. I woke up half hour later. I was wearing John Doar's shirt. I'd been on the road for a long time and I had borrowed his shirt from him. I remember waking up looking my—the shirt was drenched with blood and my first thought was poor John. I've, I've ruined his shirt. The officer who was beside me was a lieutenant. He had my

notebook which had all sorts of phone numbers in it like Fred Shuttlesworth, the black leader, Bull Connor, the White House, the Justice Department, John Patterson and he told me, he said, well, you've had some trouble buddy. Is there anybody I can call for you? And I said, I had enough wits about me to say, yes, if, if you would call Mr. Kennedy. And he said, well, which Mr. Kennedy would that be? And I said, either the President or the Attorney General. And he said, well, who the hell are you buddy? And I said, well, I'm the Attorney General's Administrative Assistant. He said, we've got to get you to a hospital. Got me out and I passed out again. And the next thing I knew I was in the hospital on the operating table and the doctor was talking on the telephone to Byron White who was deputy Attorney General and a few minutes later I woke up again in the room and the Attorney General was calling.

INTERVIEWER: GREAT. CUT.

[cut]

00:15:48:00

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: OK. I'M GONNA GO BACK TO SOMETHING THAT YEAR YOU'VE BEEN BEATEN UNCONSCIOUS AND ARE BADLY HURT. AND YOU SAID, AT ONE POINT, YOU FELT AS IF YOU'D FAILED IN YOUR MISSION. THAT YOU'D BEEN SENT TO DO SOMETHING AND VIOLENCE HAD ERUPTED AS IT HAD ERUPTED THE, THE WEEK BEFORE. WHY DID YOU FEEL THAT IT WAS A FAILURE?

Seigenthaler: I felt I had failed in the mission because of—it seemed to me that what happened didn't have to happen. That, that I had somehow not convinced Governor Patterson that the Federal Government was absolutely serious in its determination to get these people on their way and to provide them security. And when the Attorney General called me in the hospital and told me that he had sent the marshals in, I, I, I really—my first statement to him was I was—that I was sorry. I was sorry that I had not succeeded in my mission. I was sorry that he had to send those marshals in. In a, in, in a sense, I guess, it was part of being Southern. I didn't, I didn't like to think that, that citizens couldn't travel through my part of the country simply because of race. As an official in government, I'd been given a job to do and that job was to get them through and that had failed. And then, on top of all that, here was an inevitable invasion of federal officers, the first time in the Kennedy Administration, and I just felt, I just, I just felt distraught and distressed that I'd, I'd let him down, them down, and myself down. And, and he knew I felt terrible about it. The end of the conversation he said, how's my popularity down there? And I said, if you're planning on running for a public office don't do it in Alabama. And we ended sort of on that light note. By that time, the marshals were on the way. By nightfall, they replaced Floyd Mann's state police in surrounding that hospital. And I stayed in that hospital until Martin Luther King came in a few days later. I took the plane out that he came in on to make that, that speech that night in the church made under great duress and tension, because that church was surrounded by a mob.

00:18:22:00

INTERVIEWER: LET ME JUST GO BACK A LITTLE BIT. PICKING UP THE STORY EARLIER FROM THE TIME YOU WENT TO BED AND, AND—

Seigenthaler: Uh huh.

INTERVIEWER: BOBBY KENNEDY CALLS YOU IN THE MORNING—

Seigenthaler: Yeah. Right.

INTERVIEWER: —HIS ATTEMPTS TO—

Seigenthaler: Right. Right. Yeah. Sure.

INTERVIEWER: —CALL OFF THE FREEDOM RIDERS, SPECIFICALLY MENTIONING WHERE.

Seigenthaler: When the phone rang, two o'clock, I was in a motel, was awakened. It was the Attorney General. Told me the Freedom Riders were coming down and he said they were coming from Nashville. He asked me if I, if I knew them. Of course, I recognized the names. They were people who were active in, in civil rights activities not only in Nashville, but across the South. He specifically mentioned Diane Nash. I didn't feel that I really knew her well enough to have any influence with her, but I told him that I would call. I, I remember specifically calling a lawyer named George Barrett who knew her quite well. He, in effect, said—

00:19:20:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Seigenthaler: —John, ain't nobody gonna turn this around. And that—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I'M SORRY. MY MISTAKE. WE'LL JUST TURN IT OFF.

00:19:27:00

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 327]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SPEED.

INTERVIEWER: RIGHT WHERE YOU CALLED DIANE NASH—

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: —I MEAN YOU ACTUALLY CALLED GEORGE BARRETT. AND GEORGE BARRETT SAYS—

Seigenthaler: George Barrett. So, I, yeah.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: HANG ON ONE SECOND.

INTERVIEWER: GOTTA GET YOUR FOCUS.

Seigenthaler: Should I go back and pick up the Attorney General's call?

INTERVIEWER: YEAH. YEAH THAT'D BE GOOD.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK YOU CAN—IT'S ALL YOURS.

Seigenthaler: During that call, the Attorney General said, you know, that wave, second wave begins there'll be violence. Is, is there any way you can contact any of those people and tell them that it's a mistake? And I called, first of all, I remember distinctly calling George Barrett and—who was close to the movement, knew Diane Nash, and talked to him about it and said, George, you know it's a mistake for them to come down. It's real possibility of violence, bloodshed, death even. And he said, John, ain't no way to turn them around. And sure enough I, I think that while I made some additional calls from the moment I talked to him on I knew that before morning I'd be on my way back to Birmingham to take care of the next wave of Freedom Riders as best I could.

00:20:41:00

INTERVIEWER: AS A SOUTHERNER, DID YOU THINK THIS ATTEMPT TO PREVENT VIOLENCE WAS GONNA DO ANY GOOD? I MEAN, YOU KNEW BETTER THAN THE KENNEDEYS AS FAR AS WHAT THE OPPOSITION WAS LIKE DOWN THERE.

Seigenthaler: Yeah, I knew that, I knew that we were playing with, with, with fire. I mean the prospect of violence was real. Every minute of every day. What had happened at Anniston, at, at Anniston was, was typical of what, what could have happened. And, and those people—when I got on the plane that night going—with that first wave, taking them from, from Birmingham to New Orleans when that plane took off the level of relief among them was enormous. I think if you—Simeon Booker said it best. He said, brother, I never thought we were gonna get outta there. I never thought we were gonna get outta there. And, and my sense of it was that this second wave of dedicated young people just walking right into the

jaws of, of violence. And I don't think the Attorney General knew or sensed the absolute determination on the part of, of, of the Freedom Riders. Maybe he did, but at any rate, he felt and I felt that it was worthwhile to, at least, try to alert them to the problems that existed. But their position was quite clear. That Ride had been interrupted. It was gonna take up where it left off and it was gonna be completed. And as George said, nobody gonna turn them around.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: I THINK I BETTER—QUICK REVIEW OF—

[cut]

00:22:27:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND MARK.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: OK. I GUESS THIS IS SORT OF A GENERAL QUESTION. NOW JUST AS A, AS A SOUTHERN, AGAIN, YOU KNEW—THERE YOU GO. NICE. YOU KNEW WHAT THE STAKES WERE THAT THE FREEDOM RIDERS WERE, WERE, WERE RISKING. WHY DO YOU THINK DURING THIS PERIOD, EARLY 60'S, THE, THE SOUTH WAS SO RESISTANT TO THIS SORT OF CHANGE?

Seigenthaler: Well, the South was resistant because it, it was change that represented revolutionary upheaval of standards and practices and, and mores. I mean, you know, I grew up in Nashville in a totally segregated society. I mean, I never had a second thought about it throughout my entire youth. I mean it never occurred to me as a, as a child that the world should be different. Inevitably though, it begins to sink in on you that, that not only that the separation is there, but also that the total inequity is there. The wrong is there. And with that realization comes a sense of guilt that thinking Southerners were carrying with 'em throughout their lives. And those people who were involved in that Klan violence had no sense of guilt. They only had a fanaticized sense of self-righteousness. Protect the old way whatever the cost. And they controlled the Police establishment—they clo—they, they controlled the political establishment and, in a very real sense, they were saying the same thing: nobody gonna turn us around. Nobody's gonna stop us. Nobody, nobody cares whether we do violence to these people. And it was the first time [pause] black America had ever challenged that directly in my lifetime. And looking back on it, it's hard to realize that such a short time later, a quarter of a century later, but it was, it was an ultimate test of wills. And, and I think as a Southerner I, I, I sensed that with a sense of foreboding for what might happen, in terms of violence, but with a sense of relief that finally the confrontation had come and that we were gonna be able to cleanse ourselves of this guilt. Purge our region of the wrong. And so that was, I think, in the background of my mind even though I was going through motions every day that were so fast paced that I had no reas—reason or opportunity to reflect on, on the culture that produced it.

00:25:49:00

INTERVIEWER: GOING BACK, YOU JUST MENTIONED SOMETHING DURING THE BREAK, JUST TELL, BRIEFLY IN A COUPLE OF SENTENCES, WHEN YOU CAME BACK AFTER THE BEATING THE MEMO YOU SAW FROM THE FBI.

Seigenthaler: On returning to the Justice Department after spending some time at home recuperating from, from the skull fracture I found, on the first day, a memorandum from J. Edgar Hoover to the Attorney General. He had read it and placed it on my desk. And it identified the thugs who had beaten me, by name, said that sources close to the, to the violence had identified these people by name. I've kept that memorandum, and I haven't read it in a long time, but, but I'd like for my children and grandchildren to take it out occasionally and read it. It might help 'em understand not just how the South was but also how the FBI was.

00:26:54:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS THE ATTITUDE OF THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION TOWARD THE FBI? INCLUDING—

Seigenthaler: Well, the FBI was an institution that [coughs] primarily, in those days, was interested in enforcing laws that involved bank robbery, kidnapping, automobile theft, white slavery and, and Communist sub—subversion. Those were the five areas. And in, at least, four of those areas, everything but Communist subversion, they relied on local police. And so, the relationship between the FBI and the local police establishment in all these Southern cities was just interwoven, tight knit. FBI agents didn't belong to the Klan, but they didn't question the political involvements of local police officers, many of whom did belong to the Klan. And so we viewed them, in the area of civil rights as not active not effective and, for a long time, not reliable.

00:27:57:00

INTERVIEWER: OK. ONE MORE QUESTION. GOING BACK, NOW, TO THE CAN—KENNEDY CAMPAIGN IN 1960. CAN YOU TELL US, BRIEFLY, AS SOMEBODY WHO WAS ASSISTANT TO BOBBY KENNEDY, THEN, THE TELEPHONE CALLS THAT TOOK PLACE?

Seigenthaler: Of course, the first call from the President to the King family really shook the country. It's amazing, looking back on it, that a telephone call from President Kennedy from Sen—then Senator Kennedy to the family of, of Martin Luther King would have been controversial, but it was. And I was working in the headquarters and immediately we began to get feedback from campaign managers in Southern states saying this was a major mistake. You're blowing the South with, with this sort of activity. Stop it or advise us. I think the one exception was Griffin Bell of Georgia who asked for a little advance notice on those calls, but, in effect, said, I think you're doing what's right and we're gonna carry Georgia. And, of course, we did. A few days later, the Attorney General, maybe a day later, the Attorney

General was still concerned because King was still held in jail without bail. As a lawyer it rankled him. As a citizen it upset him. And as a person involved in the political process he worried about whether he shouldn't do any—some—something in addition to what the President had done. I remember, the morning driving him to the airport, talking to him about whether he should call the judge. By the time he got on the airplane, I was convinced he was not gonna call the judge. The middle of the afternoon a report came through on, on the Asso—from the Associated Press saying that the judge reported that Robert Kennedy had made this call to him. Knowing what I thought I knew, I told the Press Secretary, Roger Tubby, to deny it. Within a few minutes, Robert Kennedy called in and said, yes, I called him. To tell you the truth, the more I thought about it the angrier I got. And finally, I just felt that I had to call him and tell him what I thought. And I did it. So I rushed in and told Ro— Roger to cancel the, the denial. He felt passionately about, about the wrong misdemeanor offense, no bail being granted. I mean, Martin Luther King was, was no, no threat to, to anyone. It was clearly, he was a political prisoner in every sense of the word. And the Attorney General felt—then the campaign manager—felt that.

00:30:31:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: AND BRIEFLY, WHAT DO YOU THINK THE EFFECT WAS ON THE CAMPAIGN?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: AND—

INTERVIEWER: OK. THAT'LL BE MY LAST QUESTION.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ROLL OUT.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

00:30:37:00

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: MARKER.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

Seigenthaler: Yeah. Well, you have to ask what was—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: STOP THERE. I'M GONNA HAVE YOU DO START

THAT AGAIN. I BLEW IT.

Seigenthaler: All right.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK.

Seigenthaler: Well, everyone asked what will the effect of that call be on the campaign? Suddenly it, it sort of changed the focus of the campaign from things like Quemoy and Matsu, which nobody knew anything about anyway, to—which was a major issue in that campaign, to the question of Kennedy's identification with this civil rights movement. It put pressure on Nixon to join in a statement which he decided, I think mistakenly, not to do. It gave many people in the country who were identifying with that movement strong positive feelings about John Kennedy. In the South, the white establishment, suddenly, came to despise him. I'm sure John Patterson, who'd been the first governor in the land to endorse him, couldn't believe his, his ears. I think that call changed the whole tone and tenor of that campaign. And, and, and I think it moved—the debates were the deciding factor, but, I think, that telephone call was a strong contributing factor to making John Kennedy President of the United States.

INTERVIEWER: OK. CUT. GREAT.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:32:07:00

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