

Roy Wilkins Oral History Interview – 8/13/1964
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Wilkins, executive secretary (1955-1964) and executive director (1965-1977) of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), discusses civil rights legislation, John F. Kennedy's (JFK) use of executive orders and other executive authorities to expand civil rights, and Wilkins' efforts to get JFK to do more on civil rights, among other issues.

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Roy Wilkins

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Oral History Interview

with

Roy Wilkins,
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

August 13, 1964

By Mr. Berl Bernhard

For the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library

BERNHARD: Mr. Wilkins, could you tell me—when did you first come into contact with the late President Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

WILKINS: During the Civil Rights Bill debate in 1957. The Senator and I ran into each other in the Senate restaurant on the late lunch hour. It was the day when the senators were jockeying and debating and lining up and arranging the vote on Part 3, which was the part to grant the Attorney General initiative powers for actions in civil rights cases, and in the so-called jury trial amendment. The Senator divided with the other senator from Massachusetts, Senator Saltonstall [Leverett Saltonstall], the Republican, and one voted for jury trial amendment and the other against the provision to give the Attorney General these added powers. I think the Senator took the opportunity to talk at some length in general about the whole matter. His vote had already been determined by himself and he was pledged to vote a certain way on this matter. I am not sure, because I didn't know him very well at that time and I'm not in hindsight able to judge his mood or his Kennedy determination, but it appeared to me at that time that the Senator might have been inclined to vote otherwise had someone talked to him beforehand and with some of the background material that I was able to give him. I'm not sure that this was true.

BERNHARD: Do you know, Mr. Wilkins—did he vote, as you recall it, against the jury trial amendment or against Part 3? Do you remember how he paired on

that?

WILKINS: I think he voted for Part 3, and against the jury trial amendment. I'm not certain now. Of course, I have it here in our records, but I'm just giving this as my recollection. Because I remember that later when—but the Part 3 business continued to be discussed for added powers for the Attorney General and one of the arguments used by civil rights groups was that President Kennedy, when he was a Senator, had favored this. That's all I can say about my recollection of it. I know he was divided, and it seemed to me at that time that he felt that he might have voted differently, or at least that he was beginning to get a glimpse into this very complex civil rights picture that he hadn't had before.

BERNHARD: Did you feel that he was knowledgeable about the civil rights issue then?

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WILKINS: No, I didn't. But I did feel that he had a very keen sense of the morality of the whole question. I don't think I ever had any doubt as to how his personal convictions stood. He, of course, was not as experienced in the procedures and in political maneuvering as some of the other senators, and so he might have had some hesitancy at that point about charting a direct course politically, and in parliamentary language, but there was never any doubt as to his moral commitment. I never had any of that either the first time I met him or up until the time he died.

BERNHARD: When was the next time that you saw him or discussed any matters with him?

WILKINS: I'm not sure. The next time I actually saw him to stop and have a discussion was during the 1960 campaign. I had some correspondence with him in-between times. I saw him momentarily at this affair or that affair, but to actually sit down and talk with him again—it was 1960, in September, I believe.

After the Senate had come back and gone to work and after the nominating conventions were over, the Senator made an appointment for Robert C. Weaver, who was at that time chairman of the board of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], and myself to come down to Washington and have dinner with him at his home in Georgetown. I remember distinctly that since the Senate was in session and they had so much business to transact—and a vote was on that evening and a couple of roll calls—the Senator was an hour or an hour and twenty minutes late for dinner but the people at the house said they were used to this and they cooked meals that could be prepared to take care of the Senator's tardiness. But he didn't let his tardiness cut down the length of the talk. It was a dinner at which we went over the general civil rights picture and for a small part of the time the specific housing picture because Weaver is and was a housing man, a housing expert. But, in general, the Senator simply wanted to inform himself a little bit more about our particular approach to the civil rights problem, our philosophy, and our dealings with the

national legislature, and he took his time, he didn't rush us, he didn't say—"Well, I'm sorry, I'm late and I'm behind schedule, and I'll have to cut this short"—he went on.

When we came out from the dining room the Mayor of the city of New York [Robert Ferdinand Wagner, Jr.] was there as his next caller—who was also late as we were. I don't know what they say about the Kennedy schedule, but they say it was never ahead of time. I don't know whether anybody said it was ever on time or not, but I'm not going to be one to say it was always late. My experience on that occasion was that it was late.

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BERNHARD: Did you at that time, Mr. Wilkins, ever discuss with him specific programs that you would like to see him carry out were he to be elected?

WILKINS: We did urge civil rights legislation upon him. We talked in some detail about the filibuster and about the necessity of reforming the rules of the Senate. We had, of course, gone through the '57 Civil Rights Bill campaign, and then the '60 Bill had just been enacted which expanded somewhat the '57 Bill. The '57 Bill, of course, embodied the establishment of the United States Civil Rights Commission. And we were pressing for a still further expansion of congressional activity and legislation to cover the civil rights field on several points.

He made no commitments, as I remember it, in September except to assure us by word and attitude of his very warm sympathy and the fact that he was trying to get information. Now we did say that the Civil Rights Conference was being held shortly. I think it was in October. And he said he would listen very carefully to recommendations of that conference but he made no specific commitments at that time. But here again he gave me, as he did in 1957, a distinct impression of his deep personal interest.

BERNHARD: If you recall in October right before that conference—it was actually October 10—you said that if we were giving out marks for civil rights voting, the score of Kennedy would have to be above ninety. I don't know if you recall making that particular statement. That was right before the two-day conference, if you recall.

WILKINS: Yes, I do recall that very well, and I meant it then and I still mean it.

BERNHARD: Subsequently—by the end of that year, about December 29 or so, you stated that you deplored really the atmosphere of super-caution, I think you said, on civil rights that had pervaded Kennedy's discussions and strategies since mid-November. Do you recall what may have led to that point?

WILKINS: I recall the period very well because I remember my own keen disappointment. You see President Kennedy had captured the hearts and minds of Americans because he advocated bold attack on the problems facing the nation. He advocated in essence innovations, daring, and disregard for unnecessary

protocol and precedent and tradition, and he indicated that we needed to take a fresh look at this question.

One of the things that had buoyed my expectations was his first television debate with Mr. Nixon [Richard M. Nixon]. It happened that Mrs. Wilkins [Aminda B. Wilkins] and I were in Quebec City in September—I think it was the 26th or thereabouts—but it was late September. It was the first

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debate. And we both felt that we wanted to see and hear this man in actual combat with his opponent. Mrs. Wilkins, because she had strong feelings against Mr. Nixon and his position, and she was also very curious about John Fitzgerald Kennedy because she is a Catholic also and she wanted to see what one of her communicants had to say. I was only mildly curious because I felt that television debates were just nothing. But the man simply captivated both of us with his fresh formulation of the position of the Negro in the United States and his low horizon of expectations, his health problems, his employment problems, and his education problems. This was a new formulation in entirely new language—it caught the ear right away—in the way he delivered it. “Well,” I said to myself—and we both said—“this man is what we’ve been looking for”—and I say that only to indicate the expectations I had.

But when he was elected, the first thing that leaked out of the White House—and you know some leaks in the White House are deliberately turned on and openings made for them to get out and some leaks just leak—I don’t know what kind of a leak this was but within ten days of his election, even while the debate was going on furiously about whether he won by a hundred thousand or whether he won by fifty thousand and so forth, came this word that he positively was not going to advocate any civil rights legislation in the new Congress; was not going to put such legislation before the Congress; would not officially endorse such legislation; would not press it because he did not want to split the Party and didn’t want to split the Congress when he had so much new legislation on major issues that he wanted to get through. He felt that he ought to keep the Congress whole so they could attack these major problems.

Well, this simply floored me because it amounted to telling the opposition, for example—in football analogy—that you weren’t going to use the forward pass. We may hit the tackles and go around end but one thing you could be sure of, we aren’t going to use the forward pass. I felt that this was a tactical error although I tried to understand the President’s reasoning. So we were disappointed and I thought it was super-caution. I thought he should have kept riding his horse that he was riding in September and October and charge the opposition.

BERNHARD: What was your reaction during this period as to what was an apparent determination to resort to executive action and to some accelerated appointments to qualified Negroes to high positions as opposed to legislation? Did you think this was significant?

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WILKINS: Well, I thought it was a change, at least in the degree that it was announced as a line of procedure rather than being followed as a line of procedure. But we expressed to the President our skepticism over the effectiveness of this approach at a conference we had with him early in January 1961 before the Inauguration. He was on one of his rather frequent trips to New York City and we talked to him at the Hotel Carlyle—Mr. Arnold Aaronson, the secretary of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, and myself.

BERNHARD: That was on January 6, as I recall.

WILKINS: January 6, 1961—yes. We saw him in the Carlyle. I recall—I don't know how symbolic it is—as a backdrop they had an impressionistic painting by Romare Bearden. Now Romare Bearden is a well-known New York Negro artist and the gallery across the street, the Parke-Bernet, used to furnish artwork for the Carlyle for the President's suite. The owners of the Carlyle had this impressionistic painting—I couldn't tell a thing about Romare's painting—I've known him since he was a little boy—it just looked to me like a big blob or something there, and I wondered if this painting had any significance insofar as the Kennedy policies were concerned on the Negro. Was it impressionistic or what was it?

Well, we talked and he explained his objections to legislation and the fact that he felt he could proceed by executive order and we pounced upon that immediately and said—well, we agreed, he could, proceed by executive order. But we felt that an executive order here and an executive order there and an executive order over there dealing with a variety of topics was not the way to go about it and that if the federal impact were to have its full effect you ought to issue a sweeping, executive order taking in the whole business. We told him that we thought in our opinion and in the opinion of the lawyers who talked to us that he had such authority and we urged him to use it.

BERNHARD: What was his reaction?

WILKINS: Well—skeptical, to say the least. He didn't deride it at all. He was much too courteous for that. He didn't assail it with arguments against it, but he did say that he didn't know whether he had the authority, or whether it would be wise even if he had the authority, to issue a sweeping executive order covering housing and employment and education and travel and public accommodations and so on and so forth. But he did finally wind up saying “Why don't you get in touch with Ted Sorensen [Theodore C. Sorensen] and maybe prepare a memorandum on this, and let him talk it over with some of the staff members and we'll see what comes out of it”—and that's what we did.

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BERNHARD: Right, I've noticed that you had said after the meeting that you were satisfied that the President understood the importance of the place of civil rights and that you also said, and I'm quoting, “His administration will support all the pledges of the platform.”

WILKINS: Yes, I did say that, and he embarked upon a personal and highly successful and inspiring effort to carry out part of that program on the Executive level. He announced honestly and in front that he wasn't going to proceed with the legislation at the time but—you take for example his inauguration day—I won't forget that incident. This illustrates his type of mind and the way he tackled it. Along about 6:15 in the evening as the sun was going down and it was getting dusk, he noticed that in a Coast Guard contingent going by there were no Negroes and he made a note of it. And this is the most important day in a man's life—the day he is inaugurated President of the United States; there can't be any other more important day—yet he took time out of that day to notice there were no Negroes in the Coast Guard unit and had the White House call up the next day and ask the Coast Guard commander did they have a policy to exclude Negroes. And upon being hastily assured they did not, of course, he said, "Well, I didn't see any yesterday in the parade." Well, who else would do that except John Fitzgerald Kennedy? Who else would have bothered?

Well, this illustrates that he intended—it seemed to me—had in his mind the intention to utilize every opportunity on executive levels to do what he could in this program because he believed that tactically he could not afford to sponsor legislation, even though a lot of people disagreed with him, including ourselves.

BERNHARD: Early in that year—actually on March 6, 1961—the President issued the executive order on employment by the government and its contractors and he created the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunities. How did you view this? Did you think this was a significant advance or was this just one spot effort?

WILKINS: We viewed it as a spot effort and we also viewed it as not a new approach. The Truman administration [Harry S. Truman] and the Eisenhower administration [Dwight D. Eisenhower] had made some efforts toward doing away with discrimination in employment and they had President's committees. As a matter of fact, they had two committees—one was on employment within the government and one was on employment by contractors doing business with the government—and I never could understand—I'd hear that the FEPC Committee was having a meeting—I never knew which one was

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having the meeting or what they were doing and I think it fell on rather hard days during the latter part of the second Eisenhower term. It began to be a pro forma business and then Mr. Nixon, recognizing its political potentialities, attempted some sort of a rejuvenation of it in the latter eighteen months of the Eisenhower administration but not with much success. So when the new President issued this executive order and set up a new committee, combined this time to deal with all types of discrimination in federally-financed programs, it was not new—it was not fresh—but very quickly he got over the point that the Kennedy approach

was going to be much more vigorous and much more thorough than the approaches heretofore.

BERNHARD: Would this be as a result—at least your conclusion—a result of the various comments he made subsequent to the establishment of that order when he issued the memorandum to all the executive departments and agencies to cease sponsorship of any discriminatory employee recreational activity? And then he met, if you recall, later in May with executives of 48 business concerns in job discrimination.

WILKINS: Yes. It was partly inspired by that action of his and those pronouncements, but it was inspired by constant reports we were getting from elsewhere than the White House or White House sources, or suspect political sources—constant reports that the White House was insisting on this in depth and it was not merely a formulation. It was not merely a memorandum sent out and consigned to the files but there was a follow-up on it and every department head and every agency head felt the White House prodding them on this. We got this from below, from the people who were being prodded, as a matter of fact. And it got to be a kind of *sub rosa* joke around Washington even among the Negroes that Kennedy was so hot on the department heads, the cabinet officers, and agency heads that everyone was scrambling around trying to find himself a Negro in order to keep the President off his neck.

Well, this is only testifying to the fact that he did do—attempts to do—a very good job. We pointed out to him in January, for example, that there were limitations to this business of what he could do by executive order and that he needed legislation to back up his intentions. But, of course, in working in employment he was active in a very sensitive area and an area that gave rewards quickly—if you could get results quickly, because there was no substitute for ten thousand new jobs or for twenty thousand new jobs and, in certain circumstances, in certain showcase situations, there was no substitute for maybe two jobs, or three jobs.

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BERNHARD: Were you surprised at the approach or the vigor with which he met this challenge of the NAACP to the award of government contract to the Lockheed people in Marietta, Georgia?

WILKINS: I was—a little bit. But then I must confess that when I looked at the situation—and we looked at it very carefully, we estimated it before we made our move—it was loaded with political dynamite, of course, but it was also loaded with one billion dollars. Now, any time a policy, announced policy or political practice, backed up by an active and vocal minority which feels itself aggrieved and which has a demonstrable case—any time that comes between contractors and one billion dollars and between the government and all the product of one billion dollars, not only airplanes but all the other side products and emoluments that accrue to the government from such contracts—we knew, in the political realities of the situation and more especially in the economic realities, that we were due to get prompt and decisive action—which we got.

BERNHARD: Yes—I notice that on April 6 the NAACP called the award “a shameful mockery” and by May 25 Lockheed agreed to total desegregation and accepted nondiscrimination. During this early part of the Kennedy period it has often been said that the main effort really was in the area of voting—that it was felt this was the area in which long-range permanent results could be effectuated, and the criticism was made that this was really being done almost to the exclusion of a concerted effort in other fields. Do you share that view at all?

WILKINS: I tell you I feel a little sympathy for an officeholder who’s called upon to grapple with this civil rights question because on Monday he meets someone who tells him, “Employment is the key. Solve employment and you’ll solve the Negro question;” on Tuesday he meets a man who says, “Education is the key. Give them schools and teach them to act right and you’ll solve the Negro problem;” and on Wednesday he meets somebody who tells him, “Housing is the key. They are all frustrated and packed up six or eight or ten in a room. Spread them out and give them some air and light and trees and you’ll solve the Negro question.”

Well, I don’t know. I think the President did pretty well in approaching this problem. He made some natural mistakes but he made them not in an effort to duck the issue but in an effort to find the most feasible and workable plan that could be instituted at the moment, recognizing at the same time that the problem had many other ramifications. Some people have said I take too much the view of the other fellow and sympathize too much with his difficulties. That may be so, but I think I can understand the President’s troubles along through here in trying to get hold of this issue and in trying to do something about it.

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BERNHARD: As he was going along early in these first few months, you may recall that there was a bit of a problem that arose out of the—some of the celebrations of the Civil War Centennial Commission, and particularly with the problem of the segregated housing facilities in Charleston, South Carolina. Were you surprised when the President, on March 17, 1961, protested the segregated housing facilities for a meeting of this Civil War Centennial Commission? Do you think that was easy for him to do and why do you think he did it? It actually achieved desegregation down there.

WILKINS: I think it was both easy and hard for him to do. It was easy because he believed in it himself. He had no compunction about where he stood. It was not a case of pure political necessity apart from his personal convictions. And a good many officeholders, you must admit, do act out of political considerations even when they don’t believe this—but Kennedy believed this. So in that sense it was easy. I think it was easy in another sense—he had an issue on which the entire Negro population was a unit and in which, I believe, the majority of the white population felt—say—“It’s a damn shame—celebrating the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation and these people have to be segregated just as they were in 1863, a hundred years before.”

And so I believe that President Kennedy understood not only how the Negro minority felt but how the vast majority of Americans felt so he felt then that he could take whatever political risk was involved in flat-footedly calling for the ending of segregation. Incidentally, today that same hotel in Charleston, South Carolina, that refused to accommodate the New Jersey delegation because they had a colored woman, Mrs. Samuel Williams, is now desegregated and Negroes are able to stay at the Francis Marion Hotel in Charleston, South Carolina.

BERNHARD: That's under the Act?

WILKINS: Yes, that's under the Act, but it desegregated before the Act was passed. I must give them credit.

BERNHARD: During this whole period, maybe from the period of Inauguration up through the beginning of May, the President did not appear to be under unusual public pressure for swifter action. While the NAACP and others attacked his failure to push for civil rights legislation, there didn't seem to be any outpouring of great support. But I'd like to talk to you a minute about what may have changed some of that and get your reaction as to whether you think it really did.

As you're fully aware, the Freedom Rides took place sometime in May. The first group actually left in the beginning of May. They left Washington and they were going down to New Orleans.

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First there were two riders beaten in Rock Hill, South Carolina, and then on May 10, two riders were arrested in Minnsboro, South Carolina, and then on May 14, if you recall, one of the buses was burned at Anniston, Alabama, and then a second bus arrived in Birmingham and met with violence and so on. And, as you recall, the Governor of Alabama, John Patterson [John Malcolm Patterson], called out the National Guard after there were threats down in Montgomery. I guess you remember. Then the President finally—this went on and on and on after they had had marshals in there—the President said in a news conference finally on July 19th that he endorsed the rights of citizens to move in interstate commerce for whatever reasons they traveled, and ultimately they got out these new ICC [Interstate Commerce Commission] orders.

Do you see this whole period—the Freedom Ride thing—as being anything more than enlisting vast public support? Do you think it changed fundamentally the approach of the administration—or is that an overstatement?

WILKINS: I don't think it changed the administration at that point. I think it began to bend the administration or at least it began to convince the administration that perhaps the attack agreed upon was not as adequate as the President had thought at the outset.

BERNHARD: Now you're talking about the attack of executive action really?

WILKINS: Yes. He must have become convinced during this time—maybe not convinced, but at least beginning to listen to the voices that said “your course is not going to fill the bill.” Now, I was in the Attorney General’s [Robert F. Kennedy] office on May 15th, the day after the bus was burned, and we talked at some length about that and also about the voting assault. The Kennedys were very much intrigued with the voting—the disfranchisement of Negroes—even as Eisenhower had been before them. Eisenhower’s special advisors talked about voting but they hadn’t gone into it with the thoroughness and energy of Robert Kennedy or of John F. and their advisors. But I think in this period the President was beginning to be assaulted by some doubts as to whether this very complex question could be resolved in the way he thought. But he hadn’t given up yet.

In July of 1961 the NAACP held its convention in Philadelphia and we set aside one day to close down the convention and send delegates down to Washington on a special train to confer with our senators and congressmen on civil rights legislation; Since we had around two thousand delegates from all over the country and this was the closest they could get to Washington. The President

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agreed to see our board of directors members, our president, chairman of the board, and the vice presidents, of course, and our state presidents—those who were present at the convention. All in all, there were about 65 of us who sent to the White House.

And, incidentally, there was one of those little personal touches here that you don’t run across very often. Before the meeting with the 65, the President asked Bishop Stephen Gill Spottswood, the chairman of our board, Arthur Spingarn [Arthur Barnett Spingarn], our president, and me if we would come upstairs to his study. We did and chatted for a little while before we went down to meet with the big group. On the way down we met Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy] in the corridor and she had a smudge on one cheek, as I remember, and a smudge on her nose and a smudge on her chin. I don’t remember what she called him, but I heard her say, “I’ve found the Lincoln [Abraham Lincoln] china.” And the President kept saying, “I’d like to introduce you to Bishop Spottswood and Mr. Spingarn and Mr. Wilkins.” And she said, “How do you do—how do you do—hello—Jack, I’ve found the Lincoln china.” And he reached over and brushed the smudge off her cheek and we went on down to the meeting and I thought this was quite something.

When he got to the meeting, he was his usual charming and courteous self. The first thing he did was to see that all the women there got seats and he was getting chairs himself for them—not clapping hands and having somebody bring in chairs. But, anyway, he listened very intently to Bishop Spottswood’s message—it was about four and a half or five minutes—which was pointed precisely and directly to the need for civil rights legislation to supplement what the President was doing on the executive level—saying that the question could not be solved only through executive action—we needed legislation. And he listened intently. He didn’t gaze out the window. He didn’t fiddle around. He listened. He got up and was gracious, jocular, serious and in a stubborn manner possibly, he said, in effect, “No, I ainta gonna do it.” But everyone went out of there absolutely charmed by the manner in

which they had been turned down. He didn't say, "You've sold me." He said, "We remain convinced that legislation is not the way. At least, it's inadvisable at this time."

And we pointed out that his experience with the Congress from January until that July when all of his so-called major bills had been clobbered to death—that he didn't gain anything by refusing to put a civil rights bill before them because he didn't want to stir up controversy. They stirred up a lot of controversy over what he had put before them and if he thought he was going

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to buy time and votes and consideration for his pet measures by refraining from civil rights, he had had a demonstration that they would walk over everything. Well, he acknowledged this. He listened to all this outline but he still said "No." You know, he wasn't a man to give up easily.

BERNHARD: I doubt it. Did you have the feeling then that he was surprised at what had happened or didn't this come up on the Freedom Ride and whether or not a Negro in this country could travel freely from state to state. Do you think this was an education?

WILKINS: I think it was part of his education. He was constantly adding to his education in the race relations, civil rights, Negro field. After all, John Kennedy lived in a different world. He lived first of all in Boston and in Cape Cod, where such questions did not intrude themselves in everyday happenings at least. And then, of course, he moved in a different economic level altogether and he just didn't come into contact with this. And in political life he was a representative from Massachusetts; he was a senator from Massachusetts. On weekends he went sailing and that sort of thing. He moved with entirely different people. So I think it was inconceivable to him. It really was a shock to find the petty, humiliating, annoying restrictions on Negroes in their personal comings and goings and then, of course, he was appalled and I use the word advisedly—I think he was appalled at the subversion of the Constitution with respect to their rights as citizens.

I think he was still learning about this matter up to the day he died. Because I think in the last six months of his life the lashing he was getting from the south on the civil rights issue finally awakened him to the poison and venom that had been the daily lot of the Negro and he, the President of the United States, was getting it simply because he exhibited a compassion and an understanding and a desire to do something about this. I think he was still learning about this issue until he died.

BERNHARD: During the last part of 1961 I recall that Martin Luther King [Martin Luther King, Jr.] said on November 26th that the Kennedy administration's record in promoting civil rights for Negroes was better than Eisenhower's. He said, "because President Kennedy has a greater understanding of the depths and the dimensions of the problem" and then he went on to say, however, that the Kennedy administration has not done all that could be done or all that it promised to do. Did

you feel that there was a qualitative significant difference in the approach during the first years of the Kennedy Administration to what had preceded him?

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WILKINS: I don't know. I was fond of saying during that period that the Kennedys had the correct attitude; that the President and his brother had personal convictions and the correct attitude and they had the very quick and comprehensive intelligence to tackle and find out whatever there was about this problem that they didn't understand. For example, if the President didn't understand West Virginia, he studied about West Virginia right away quick to find out about West Virginia, and if he didn't know all there was to know about a certain aspect of nuclear warfare, he found out about it right away. He read about it and had somebody tell him about it and he understood. And they used this period to find out about the Negro question, about his practicalities—but to begin with they had the attitude; they had the right roots, you might say. That was my position.

Now, I don't believe that in order to evaluate one man at his true word, you need to forget what another man has done, and Martin King has made a direct comparison here. Mr. Eisenhower did not have the comprehension of this problem that the Kennedys had. He did not understand it. Especially, he didn't feel it either intellectually or personally, I think. He was outraged by some of the things—the crass, crude things that he knew about—and Eisenhower did do something about this problem. He did erase segregation and discrimination in the military and naval institutions in the United States. The first thing, specifically, he did was to do away with segregated schools on bases, and then he did away with discrimination between employees on the bases—cafeterias and that sort of thing. So that he, Eisenhower, did do something. I just feel that the Kennedys had a comprehension and an intelligence on this question that Eisenhower did not have.

BERNHARD: Well, Roy, during this discussion we've been having here, you mentioned on a number of occasions "the Kennedys." Did you draw a distinction in approach at all between the Attorney General and the President, or did you think they were really in concert and that when you spoke with the Attorney General you were really in a sense speaking with someone who had the full authority of the President?

WILKINS: I don't know that I ever analyzed it that way. I've said "the Kennedys" a good deal because generally speaking they are a family—or were a family team—but I think there was a difference between the two.

BERNHARD: What was the difference?

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WILKINS: I don't know. It's hard to put your finger on. Robert Kennedy is a hard, clear-thinking, determined public servant who has, in addition to a

conviction, a moral concern. But the President had, while not excessive warmth as you measure it with other warm people, he had a grace and a charm and above all an intelligence on this thing that immediately invited you into commune with him on it, so to speak. I never got the impression you're communing with Robert Kennedy. You're talking to him; you're arguing with him; and you're dealing with a brain that's clear and determined and a brain of a man who can be, I imagine, a very spirited and resourceful antagonist. I'd want him on my side in any scrap we were having.

I can't put into words exactly the difference. But in the overall issues, in the overall objectives of the Kennedy administration, and in the general way in which the President intended his administration to go, I think we were able to say "the Kennedys" because I don't think there was any difference between Robert and Jack in that respect.

BERNHARD: Earlier in the administration—say when they first came in—do you think it would have been possible, as the President did later in September of '61, to have issued that personal plea, if you recall, for an end of segregation in restaurants and other places of public service, or even to consider, as he did in October to appoint Thurgood Marshall to the United States Court of Appeals? And then later, I remember, when he said at a news conference that he personally approved of Robert Kennedy's resignation from the segregated Metropolitan Club in Washington. These were all things that seemed to indicate a definite commitment in a number of specific, almost personal acts. Do you think these are things that he might have done earlier, or was this a later educational development?

WILKINS: No, I don't think he might have done them earlier. I don't think they would have had the ring of authenticity that they had when he did do them. If he had done them earlier they would have been subject to the interpretation that they were political moves or politically dictated, and John Fitzgerald Kennedy was not that kind of a man. Once he became convinced and once he saw the picture, he did not hesitate to act and I think his pronouncement in this area was a result of this continuing flowering of his education on this issue and as he began to see the really devastating spread of the thing. Furthermore, there is this—he had a concept of the presidency as more than an administrative office. His concept extended to the use of the moral force of the president's office, his prestige, his powers—named and unnamed—and I think this persuaded him as he went along to make these pronouncements and take the actions he did.

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BERNHARD: During this first year there were a number of occasions on which you and others active in the civil rights movement called for an issuance of a federal order banning discrimination in federally-assisted housing, and during that year there wasn't very much receptivity on the part of the President to these requests. To what do you attribute this?

WILKINS: Here, again, I attribute this to John Fitzgerald Kennedy's general lack of

knowledge in the field and his lack of comprehension of the complexities and, more especially perhaps, his lack of information on the extent, the virulence, and persistence of the organized opposition to such a movement by the President. During the campaign, as all of us now recall, he very blithely got off that wisecrack about getting rid of segregated housing with the stroke of a pen, and that Mr. Eisenhower could have done it and should have done it, and so on and so forth. Then when he got into the White House, people began handing him pens now and then. He could appreciate the joke at first, but I think he got a little tired soon afterwards.

I think he began to discover that in the housing field where billions of dollars are invested and where banks and mortgage companies and savings and loan associations are all tied in, and where the emotions of people and their personal prejudices, whether it involves economic status, or race, or nationality—some people don't like immigrants around and some people don't like South Europeans, but they take North Europeans, and some of them don't mind this one, but they don't want Negroes, and others will take Negroes but they don't want Latins or this or that or the other. He found himself in a morass of all this—besides bankers telling him it won't do and real estate dealers telling him it won't do and you'll hurt property values—and so I think he decided to sit this one out for a while and he did.

BERNHARD: That's right—he did. And I recall that when you were really taking a look at the first year of the Kennedy administration you made a number of comments dealing with housing and the failure to get legislation and essentially you both praised and at the same time condemned the first year of the Kennedy Administration. Do you recall those times?

WILKINS: I recall very well. We recalled then after one year that the Democratic platform had asked for civil rights legislation or it had named objectives that required legislation, and we noted that the President for one year had felt that he could get by without legislation and we pointed out that his excuse had fallen through because Congress had been just as hostile to him without civil rights

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legislation as it would have been with civil rights legislation. And we criticized the idea that you could solve this question only with executive action and we particularly singled out the housing thing because it was beginning to fester at that time and people began noticing and talking about it. His friends were needling him on it and his political enemies were not needling him, but jabbing him, and he was reacting with characteristic Kennedy—call it what you will—if you're a friend of his you call it coolness, and if you're not a friend, you call it stubbornness.

But it was this debate over the housing—and the delay over it—that brought out something, insofar as my recollection is concerned—the first time in American history—and it marks one of those little milestones that nobody had yet paid much attention to. You know, the Negro did not become, or start to become, politically significant in the North until about 1930-35—along in there. It took him a long time to build up his political significance—migrations, the adjustments, and getting used to voting, and finding out about his political

influence and power. But in this housing business one of the newspaper correspondents commented that the White House delay on the housing executive order was occasioned by the weighing of the Southern white vote as against the Northern Negro vote. Now, this is very significant. This is the first time it's ever been publicly acknowledged that the influence of the northern Negro vote in the Democratic Party—because that's what it had to mean with a Democratic President—was of such significance that an executive action waited upon the weighing of whether you could afford to take a step that might lose the white vote or refrain from taking a step that might offend the northern Negro vote. That meant they were somewhere near in balance, maybe not exactly. This was a very significant paragraph and a very significant marker for this era in the Kennedy career.

BERNHARD: The one aspect of the first year that we haven't talked about and one of the things that you commented on really in January of 1962 was that you felt that school desegregation was proceeding in a very slow and painful pace and you indicated how few Negro students in the south were actually going to desegregated schools and you were critical of the administration for not trying to do more. What do you believe the President's reaction was to the process—the quantity of school desegregation?

WILKINS: I think the President felt that it was too slow. But the President, like many millions of other Americans, white and Negro—some Negroes, I'm confident—simply was not able to appreciate the gravity of the question to the Negro's future. I feel very strongly

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about it. I have always felt strongly about it. I still feel strongly about it. I feel that we just don't know how extensively we're crippling the Negro population for the next twenty-five years by the lack of speed on school desegregation—the lack of speed in bringing the best possible public education within the reach of the greatest number of Negro kids. Now, when they come out in 1980 and 1985 they're going to be under-equipped to deal with the civilization in which they find themselves simply because in 1960 and '61, and '62, and '63, and '64, we sat back in our chairs or in our committees and said, "Well, it's gone up three percentage points. This is pretty good," or, "It's gone too slowly but these things take time." Every school year we waste we are sending scores of thousands of Negro kids backwards and not forwards.

I think the President understood some of this and he was shocked rather at the slow pace but I think—we finally used the word in connection with him and I don't know whether it's fairly used or not but it's the only one that occurs to me now—I think he was timorous at the political problem presented as well as the physical problem presented. I don't know whether he wanted to take the all-out action that was called for in order to speed up this process. I can appreciate fully that a President of the United States must have a Congress that's going to go along part-way with him most of the time or else he isn't going to get anywhere. Now, if you make one-third of that Congress, or one-fourth of it, or two-thirds of it angry or distrustful over a matter like school desegregation, what are they going to do to appropriation bills? What are they going to do to water power? What are they going to do to

foreign aid? What are they going to do—period? And I think a President probably has to think about these things between 6:00 PM and 6:00 AM at some time, and he has to make choices. Now, I hate like hell for him to make the choice that ten thousand of my kids aren't going to get in school this year, but I think that's what President Kennedy was up against.

BERNHARD: Did you have much of an opportunity or any opportunity at all during the first year to personally talk to him about any of these matters?

WILKINS: No, I never had a chance to talk to him about school desegregation, personally, at any length. He mentioned it a time or two, but I didn't have much opportunity to see the President. I was welcome at the White House. In fact, it was made known to me that if I had a pressing matter and wanted to talk to the President, I could do so and it could be arranged—and one or two audiences were arranged.

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But I didn't feel that I wanted to go running to the White House with every single little upsurge that happened to come along.

I can't tell you how I feel about education. I get outraged by lynchings, killings, riots, bombs, burning of homes and churches, and that sort of thing, but this is something that you can understand. It's tangible and you get angry at insults and misrepresentations by people in public life—I mean of Negroes generally. But it's difficult to get around anger over the deprivation of Negro kids in the school system. Every day I find the results of it. I talk to people—just the other day about Negro youngsters in medicine. We aren't training as many Negro doctors as there are dropping out or dying and I was told, "Well, some of the biggest medical schools in the country are open and some of the best-known hospitals have internships freely available to Negro graduates." But we don't have the graduates with the requisite chemistry and biology, mathematics and all the things you need for premedical of the standard necessary. Now, these kids are being killed on the elementary and secondary levels. Our doctors are being killed off—our engineers.

Even the Kennedy administration people themselves, with all their fine intentions, came to me in 1962—one of them, not the President—and said, "Well, you know, Mr. Wilkins, this is a matter of not so much of prejudice but of preparation." He said, "Now the President is anxious to appoint Negroes to the Foreign Service. He'd like to get some Negro Ambassadors. We can't find any." And I said, "Well, do you think we have Ambassadors walking around the streets of New York and Chicago and Detroit just waiting for President Kennedy to come along to name them?" When you want somebody in the Foreign Service, he has to get the word along at least in high school so he can begin to take the subjects that he needs to take—put stress on language and history and on political science, something on world trade, international trade. I said, "In ten years we'll have some boys who expect to go into Foreign Service now that the doors are open." Well, all I'm saying is that the longer we delay this school desegregation—forthright action on it, more than just a few token places here and there—the longer we're going to keep the Negroes back.

BERNHARD: Well, if you look back over the entire Kennedy period in the area of

education, how do you see it? Do you see it as one in which the President appreciated the depth of the problem as you've expressed it and meant to resolve it, or didn't?

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WILKINS: I don't think you can put it in that fashion. I think the President had a very fair grasp of the significance of it. It was just one of sixty-two problems that had to take its place. That's all. He didn't say in effect, "Here, Wilkins," or, "Here, King," or, "Here, Colored Citizens, I understand what you're up against but I can't do anything about it at this time," or, "I don't think it's feasible." He didn't say that. It's just one of those things he didn't get around to.

Now, his brother as Attorney General, finally went into the Prince Edward County, Virginia, case with a little—as I understand—I'm no lawyer—with a little novel approach or at least a little exploration of stretching the federal interpretation here because it was such a shameful situation in Prince Edward County. And I think this mirrored the Kennedy administration's concern and realization of the seriousness of it but it didn't bring them to the point of putting their foot down and saying, "We want legislation that will empower the Attorney General to go in and open up these school districts and have the federal courts hand down orders."

BERNHARD: Well, let me go into this for just a second now. You're fully aware of the Meredith [James Howard Meredith] situation and the University of Mississippi problem that came up on September 10 of '62 when the Supreme Court ruled the University of Mississippi had to admit Mr. Meredith and then there was the rioting and the final resolution, and by October of that year the Army withdrew a number of its troops, and, I think, left still forty-five hundred or so. When you look back at the Meredith case and the fact of the world impact it had and the wide publicity it received in this country, how do you view this in terms of the impact it had on the administration policy in the area maybe not only of education, but of Civil Rights generally?

WILKINS: I think this was one more fact of the education of JFK on the race question in this country. Because I think that while he was fully prepared to understand the normal political implications, drawbacks and hesitations, and reasons for action or non-action, I don't think he was prepared for the type of resistance, the type of 'reasoning' that met him on the level of the University of Mississippi case. It happens that I was out of the country at the time. I was in Europe and I was thus able to get a reaction far away from home. The English papers, the Swiss papers, the French papers, and the Italian papers all played this very heavily with photographs and with banner headlines, and the television and radio people were anxious to get some interpretation of the Kennedy action. Now, the only criticism

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that I found was in an impatient young circle in Paris inclined toward the Left, I learned later, in which I remember one young woman saying at dinner, “President Kennedy finally called out the troops, I see,” and in just about that tone. Well, before we could have a hair-pulling match—because Mrs. Wilkins is 160% American and this stuff just got under her nerves more and more—I could see an explosion building up—I simply said, “Well, in our country our President believes that the time to call out the troops is finally here and we don’t believe in calling them out first.” Well, so much for the Left Wing wisdom of the Left Bank in Paris.

I think this contributed to Kennedy’s education. He did everything possible not to use troops in Mississippi and it might be remarked that Mr. Eisenhower did everything possible not to use troops in Little Rock, and this is as it should be.

BERNHARD: Let me try to ask you one or two short questions and then some overall reaction. Finally, as you know, the executive order was issued in November of 1962 and then in early 1963—on February 28—the President came out with his first proposal on civil rights legislation which you will recall dealt almost exclusively really with the voting area—very little else—and what was your reaction to this?

WILKINS: Well, partly satisfaction at the final recognition by the Kennedy administration that legislation was required. This had to do with our personal satisfaction on the matter and part regret that it had taken so long for this to get over and further regret that it covered only voting.

BERNHARD: I notice that you said on March 23 of ‘63 that, “the Kennedy administration has been smart on several counts in the civil rights field but it has missed the boat completely on school desegregation,” and you were also quoted as commenting on certain serious omissions that weakened the impact that Civil Rights legislation proposed.

WILKINS: That’s right. They were putting a toe in the water but they didn’t dive in at all and we felt that this was not the way to go about it. Of course, we were grateful for any assistance on the White House level before legislation. The most helpful thing about that action in February ‘63 was that it finally signaled that the administration recognized the necessity and efficacy of legislation. This was its chief value.

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BERNHARD: All right—during the same period you may recall the Civil Rights Commission issued a special report on Mississippi in which it called for the withholding of funds, and the President said that he wasn’t empowered to deny funds in Mississippi nor did he want such power. This raises a general question of the President’s approach in using executive action. Up to the point when this particular issue was raised, do you think that the President had given much attention to the use of economic sanction or economic leverage in trying to resolve some of these civil rights problems?

WILKINS: I don't know how much attention he had given to it but to go back to our conversation in the Hotel Carlyle and his suggestion that we see Ted Sorensen and draw up a memorandum—we did. We drew up a very comprehensive document dealing first with his authority and then with all of the points practically that were included in the legislation that just emerged from the Congress, including the withholding of federal funds. So that in August of 1961 he had before him a formal memorandum setting forth his powers to do this and with the strong recommendation that funds be withheld from states which used them in a racially discriminatory manner. We pointed out—I forget what the figures were in 1961—but in 1962, the fiscal year of 1962, the states altogether received ten billion dollars in grants from the federal government, of which some two billion dollars went to the southern states. Now, these were used, as you well know, in a great variety of activities. They covered all sorts of things from feeding of cattle and building of highways to the underwriting of research grants and to land grant college payments and school lunches, and a whole host of other things, including the subsidization of the National Guard and, yet, in all these areas there was a great racial discrimination.

Well, your recommendation—or the recommendation of the United States Civil Rights Commission with respect to Mississippi followed naturally after the receipt of the report of the Mississippi Advisory Committee which used the language, and I shan't forget it as long as I live: "Terror stalks the Negro in Mississippi from birth to death. Terror is his life." And the report went on to say that "Terror has no place in representative democratic government." Well, there was nothing for the Commission to do with that sort of testimony from concerned white Mississippians than to recommend the ultimate step of cutting off funds that sustained this kind of treatment; but we had been urging it. And when I say 'we' I mean the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights.

BERNHARD: Had you ever had a chance to talk about this technique of economic leverage with the President or his advisors?

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WILKINS: It came up once or twice, but they ran away from it like it was a rattlesnake. You know a politician—and the President of the United States should be the most skillful politician we have, among other things. He should be, of course, a man of great honor, integrity, ability, knowledge, education, skill, personal charm, and all the other things he should be, but he must also be a good politician because this is a political state and a political animal has to run it. But the President, like all practitioners in politics, didn't want to subscribe to, and I don't know whether he ever fully subscribed to the idea that funds ought to be cut off.

You see, there is so much quid pro quo in politics and if you cut off a dam for this senator, he cuts off a barge for your district; and if you cut off a memorial for Texas, Texas will cut off a wheat subsidy for North Dakota. Now this is the way it works. And if it works that way between senators and congressmen, it certainly works that way between Congress and the White House, or between the legislative and executive branches of government. And both branches have to be careful as to whether they're going to blow up all their bridges behind them or not.

BERNHARD: And it's your feeling that the President was rather acutely aware of this process?

WILKINS: I think he was aware of it and I think he felt that it was a dangerous instrument to use—a dangerous weapon. Our position, of course is—as was the position of the Civil Rights Commission—that we've now reached the point where you have to employ all weapons and you can't hesitate on whether it's dangerous or not, because the evil that we're trying to get rid of is more dangerous than the dangerous use of a dangerous weapon, you see.

BERNHARD: As we move along to some of the other problems that came up during President Kennedy's administration we, of course, would have to focus on Birmingham and the Birmingham riots in 1963, in the Spring of 1963. In that regard I'd like to ask you—did you ever have an opportunity to talk to the President about these riots, about what led up to them, about the concept of demonstrations, civil disobedience and what the President's role should be in this kind of thing?

WILKINS: Not what the President's role should be—no. But I believe—isn't that funny, my recollection is better of 1960 than it is of 1963. But I believe that we touched upon the Birmingham

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upheaval in conversation—even if just in passing. We never got to the President's role but I got the impression, and I may be in error, but I got the impression that the President fully understood the position of the Negroes, that he was in great sympathy with their plight and with the measures they felt forced to take.

He made it clear on a number of occasions that as an American he could not condemn demonstrations, peaceful demonstrations, which are thoroughly in the tradition of American history. His own Boston was the scene of the first demonstration in our history—the Boston Tea Party—so the President was not like some senators, congressmen, and governors, horrified at the idea of Negroes demonstrating, and he did not seek to condemn it or to say “Why don't they stop that?” or “Why do they embarrass me by doing that?” He conceded that to be their right.

BERNHARD: But do you think the Birmingham crises was a major factor—if a factor at all—in leading him to come out with the proposal for the new civil rights bill?

WILKINS: Indeed I do. Indeed I do feel that it was. I think it was a factor. I don't believe, like some people, that it was the principal factor. I think as we've come along we've talked about the piling up of information and the expansion of the knowledge of the Kennedys—to go back to the two of them—on the race question. I think both Robert F. and JFK learned from the Freedom Rides, from the contests

in courts over the right of Negroes to vote, from the detailed discovery by the Department of Justice of the devious, ingenious, and crude ways in which Negroes were prevented from voting. I think the University of Mississippi episode in which two men were killed, in which troops had to be kept there to guard a man who was only going to college to learn something; the Birmingham demonstrations, the cruelty and stubbornness of the resistance, the bombings, the burnings, the insults, the Freedom Ride bus burnings, the beating of John Seigenthaler, Robert Kennedy's assistant, in Birmingham—all these things piled up the education of the Kennedy's on this issue until finally I see the Birmingham episodes as clinching the business, so to speak, and as convincing the President at long last that we had to have legislation. This we knew in November 1960 when we disagreed with him right after election. We knew then but it took him two and a half years, you see, to come to where we were in 1960.

BERNHARD: Over the period of this administration there were a number of criticisms made about a few things. One was the question of the caliber of the judicial appointments that the President was making in the south in the federal courts; another was the question of why the President was not more willing to use the federal so-called presence in the South where there was voter intimidation, brutality of one sort or another. What's your reaction to these two criticisms?

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WILKINS: I think the first is legitimate. I think it had basis. I think the Kennedy administration was wide open to this criticism. I think it was inevitable that here and there a so-called hostile judge to civil rights would be named, but there were too many named in the Kennedy administration. There was too much obeisance paid to the sponsors of judges who were not going to carry out the Kennedy policies.

BERNHARD: Did you ever talk to the President or the Attorney General or any of their representatives about this?

WILKINS: Yes, we made some representations to them. I don't know whether it was in a conversation or a memorandum or a letter. But we voiced on several occasions our extreme apprehension over the naming of some judges. We once did a compilation, sort of a White and Black List as it were, and there were far too many names on the Black List.

BERNHARD: Did you ever get an explanation for what was behind it?

WILKINS: The only explanation we got was through third or fourth parties and that was that a lot of this was political and was necessary in the operation of Party politics. There was never any confession that because Senator James O. Eastland of Mississippi was chairman of the Judiciary Committee, you either had to arrive at an understanding with him or you had to risk your nominations being either delayed or

thrown out. There was also the notorious case of Judge Skelly Wright [James Skelly Wright] from Louisiana in which both senators declared him to be *persona non grata*—therefore making it impossible for the President to appoint him to serve in Louisiana, and all the clumsy business that had to be done to transfer Skelly Wright to the District of Columbia once there was an opening there and putting him on an appellate court there.

I think the Kennedys were vulnerable on this point and I think they should have exercised a little bit more of what Robert certainly has in him and that is the hard-fisted ward politician's knowledge of the necessities of political life however unpleasant they might be. They should have said, "We want judges that are going to carry out the Constitution of the United States as it is interpreted by the Supreme Court and by most of the people of this country, and we want people who are going to do that, and those who aren't, we don't want." They didn't say this.

BERNHARD: And the second criticism?

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WILKINS: And the second criticism was, of course, that...

BERNHARD: The question about when there were all these reports of intimidation, economic reprisals, physical mistreatment of individuals who sought to register and to vote and to do other things.

WILKINS: That he didn't bring in the federal presence.

BERNHARD: Right.

WILKINS: I sympathize with that criticism although I am not as convinced that it is as valid as the one on judges. The one on judges I think is absolutely valid because the judges are for life, and nine million Negroes live in the South and they're going to have to live under these judges. Every time they want to test the constitutionality of their citizenship or their right to do something, they've got to get by one of these judges. They've got to get up to a higher court. They've got to spend more money. They've got to do all sort of things. So by these injudicious judicial appointments the Kennedys threw a lot of roadblocks in the way of Negroes that ought not to have been there and they threw a roadblock in the way of Americanism.

Now, as for displaying the federal presence, while I sympathize with that criticism, I don't know that it has as much validity. I think by all means that we have had demonstrated to us, and certainly the Kennedys should have had demonstrated to them, that by and large they are not dealing with reasonable people in the south. A reasonable regime, the politicians, the seats of power in the South are not reasonable, and were not reasonable, and in many areas are still not reasonable, and therefore a display of federal presence is necessary. You can't talk morality to a man who doesn't consider it immoral to mistreat Negroes.

BERNHARD: Did you ever bring this to the attention of the President?

WILKINS: We got an opportunity to talk about it, I think, only once or twice. We met with the President after the March on Washington in August of 1963 and we talked then about the general picture of civil rights and we talked about the necessity of the Federal presence in the south. We also talked about the judges. We were talking generally about the things that were blocking the civil rights advances. And the President was very shrewd and remarkably well-informed in this area. You got the same impression

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on civil rights questions that other people got when they went to see him about the Export-Import Bank—he knew his homework, but he just wasn't convinced.

You see, I can understand a little even though I'm over here on the suffering side, you might say. I can understand that a man who has to look out for the welfare of fifty states might well feel that he cannot afford to take certain steps that will alienate twelve or fifteen states. Now, we all say what we would do if we were president and if I were president I would free every Negro in the United States. That's what I would promise and if I got to the White House by any kind of a twentieth century miracle, that would probably be what I would try to do. But before I could do it I would have to do a hell of a lot of other things and make a whole lot of other adjustments and clear away a lot of the underbrush and build up a lot of other allies for what I wanted to do. So that I couldn't march in there with the declared intention of doing this, that and the other about the Negro population although I might want to do it more sincerely than anybody that had ever been in the White House.

So I can understand what Mr. Kennedy was up against. And I think he came closer to understanding it as he neared, what he did not know and none of us knew, would be the end of his life because he saw this thing rising up in the south. Here he had been a remarkably restrained president. He had not been a wild-eyed pro-Negro president. He had been properly outraged at treatment. He had been outraged at the inhumanity of it on one level and the unconstitutionality and un-Americanism of it on the other level, and he had often discreetly—we thought too discreetly—brought his powers to bear. As we've traced his history, he increased it more and more—the tempo and the nature of the action increased. But even at its peak—his television talk to the country on June 11, 1963, was a compassionate appeal, man-to-man, heart-to-heart. It was not a club over the head of the south. It was not berating anybody. That was his peak. That was perhaps his greatest pronouncement in this field.

There was no rational basis for the fierce hatred against the Kennedys on account of the civil rights issue because they had been different, but they had not been anathema. They had not been that to the South. And I think this startled him in the last months. I think, not that he was drawing in his horns in the sense that he was changing his opinion, but I think he was changing the emphasis, or I think he was about to change the emphasis, or about to try to change the emphasis. He was about to attempt to do that very difficult business of maintaining his principles, his beliefs, sustaining his record with such additional acts as might be called upon, maintaining his integrity with the civil rights groups, black and white,

and at the same time not losing completely his support in the South. Now, this is a very difficult proposition.

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BERNHARD: Overall, what do you see as the Kennedy contribution to the advancement of civil rights? What did he achieve? A change—or did he institute a climate for change? What did he do?

WILKINS: I think he did both. This is the sort of thing I'd rather think about than talk about now, but off the top of my head I would say he did both. He created a climate in which change could take place, in which change was not regarded necessarily as a revolution, in which change was regarded as a step forward in the moral, economic, and political growth of the American ideal; a climate in which change could take place because America was assuming more and more her leadership of the nations of the free democratic world.

He made these things understandable and plausible. He gave them a flair they hadn't had before. And it became, in the circles in which he moved socially, himself personally, and in the circles in which he did not move but in which he inspired great admiration and personal affection, this became the American thing to do. It lost its opprobrium. It didn't, I point out, lose all the resistance. There were still people who didn't like it, didn't want it but they were now on the defensive and a good many of them were underground. Well, that probably isn't the word. They weren't really underground in the sense of the French underground but they were not as open and it was not—as we're fond of saying here in the NAACP—it's no longer fashionable to be prejudiced, to exercise discrimination, even though you have it, and even though you practice it. There used to be a time when it was talked about, bragged about, it was "the thing."

The measure of the Kennedy creation of a climate, it seems to me, was found tragically enough in his assassination because then we discovered the wide expanse of affection and esteem not only for the man personally but for the ideals that he expressed and exemplified among hidden millions in the population that nobody ever thought. This means that he had created the climate. Now, did he do anything about it? Did he accomplish anything? I think he did. I think, as President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson] said naturally and not startlingly, that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is a memorial to John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Now, if he has no other memorial—and the Lord knows he has many a memorial—this stands as a monument to outshine all other monuments because it is the embodiment in legislation at long last, after a hundred years, of the kind of Americanism that the Constitution is supposed to be translated into.

[-27-]

BERNHARD: What you're saying in a sense is interesting because it raises the possibility that despite the President's initial determination to try to

resolve these problems through executive action, whether or not he was successful in this course—perhaps his greatest contribution may have been in the creation of a climate that would lead to the passage of the Act.

WILKINS: Yes, that is, in a sense, what I'm saying. He did in a very real sense create the setting in which this Bill could be enacted and could become a law. I don't think anybody begrudges the fact that in its critical stages through the House and the Senate it had the support of President Johnson, but it's essentially a creature of Kennedy.

BERNHARD: When you look back on the specifics of executive action—executive action in employment, executive action in housing, the executive action that was taken by other departments—in the Defense Department and others—do you see concrete results, concrete advances coming out of that, or more in terms of just a willingness to try to do these things through executive action? Have we gotten anywhere during the period of the Kennedy administration in housing or in employment?

WILKINS: I don't know that we've gotten anywhere in housing—to be frank with you, I don't know that we have. This is one of the great unexplored areas or at least areas that can mark up the least progress. I think we have got somewhere in employment although not in terms of total jobs now held or in the diversity of the jobs held. Here again JFK's stamp is visible. He, by not just making this a top performance by the administration, a pro forma thing, by making it a depth operation that went to corporations and to the man down below, the sergeant, the corporal as it were, he got over the philosophy of this, the necessity of employment opportunities for Negroes.

I refuse to be optimistic about this. I can't be optimistic when I reflect that the unemployment rate among Negroes is two and a half times that among whites at the present time—the national rate. Some of this is contributed to by automation and displacement from the land, and so on and so forth and by the lack of specific skills, but a great deal of it is due to just downright prejudice. So I can't be optimistic in the face of these realisms. But I think it's fair to Kennedy to say that—as against housing, we certainly made more progress in employment and certainly in developing the type of mind that recognizes the necessity for no discrimination in employment.

[-28-]

BERNHARD: Some of President Kennedy's bitterest critics have said that his approach was one of mollicoddling, of bowing to force and pressure and street demonstrations, which in fact he created by continuing to give into them. What is your reaction to this? Were these things—demonstrations—result of a feeling that they would receive presidential support? Would they have existed if there hadn't been this support? Do you feel that there's anything to this type of criticism?

WILKINS: I think it's sheer nonsense. Moreover, I think it's dishonest nonsense, and nobody who accuses either Mr. Kennedy or any other president of being a

mollycoddler on this can point to any example of forthright action in behalf of these causes.

They can point to forthright refusal to act. If they choose, they can point to a man like Mr. Hoover [Herbert Hoover], for example, who never even saw a Negro spokesman or delegation until two weeks before the nominating convention in 1928; or they could point to a man like Wilson [Woodrow Wilson] who said, “Yes, we’re going to have segregated toilets in the federal establishment—period—that’s all there is to it.” “No, I’m not going to consider lynching, even though we’re fighting the Germans to save the world for democracy.” They can call that, if they want, being non-mollycoddlers. But I think it’s sheer nonsense to say that President Kennedy who exhibited strength, but consideration, and who proceeded as he saw it in a constitutional way with due consideration for what should have been their attitude as American citizens and only when he found out that it was not their attitude and they were not going to measure up to their responsibilities, did then he go forward in the conviction that he had to act regardless of what they did.

As for bowing to demonstrations, people don’t demonstrate just for exercise. They don’t demonstrate because they want to intimidate a President. They demonstrate because they have deep-seated grievances that they feel cannot be advertised or dramatized in any other way. They’ve tried all other ways: petitioning, they can’t vote the people out of office who hold and enthrall them because they can’t get to the ballot box, and they have no money, they can’t get jobs because they’re black, and they have no economic standing. So what do they do? In desperation they’re forced out into the street to cry aloud and it’s not for the purpose of intimidating and the man who listens to them is not thereby being intimidated. He’s being intelligent. He’s being humane. He’s being what an American president should be—responding to the wishes of the people.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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