

INTERVIEWEE: ROY WILKINS

INTERVIEWER: THOMAS H. BAKER

April 1, 1969

B: This is the interview with Roy Wilkins. Sir, when were you first acquainted with Mr. Johnson, either directly or indirectly?

W: I can't remember the exact date or even the exact year, but it was long before Mr. Johnson became a presidential candidate, that is in 1960 in Los Angeles. It was, I recall very clearly, during 1957 when the Senate was considering the Civil Rights Bill, which became the first bill enacted in 82 years--a bill incidentally for which Mr. Johnson voted. He was then, of course the Majority Leader of the Senate. But I had some fleeting contacts with him before that, before 1957--during the perennial debates on the Civil Rights Bill and especially on the bill to change Rule 22. But I didn't come to know him for more than just passing acquaintance until 1957.

B: Did you classify him in those days in regard to his stand on civil rights? Did you, as the NAACP man, consider him a friend, foe, neutral?

W: We didn't consider him a friend. We considered him more dedicated to his concept of the role of a Majority Leader of the Senate than he was to the civil rights cause. That allegiance, of course, involved his relationship to the Senate via his election from Texas. So, Mr. Johnson's attitude towards civil rights legislation faithfully reflected, up until voted for the civil rights bill in 1957, it became a reflection of his concern, and the concern of all persons elected under that system, for their reelection and continuance in office. I think that Mr. Johnson felt rather fairly, although he never expressed it in so many words, that it would be better for him to be reelected from Texas and be Majority Leader than it would be for him to come out flatly for civil rights, be defeated in Texas, and thus not be in a position of influence at all. Now he didn't say this, but this is what I gather.

B: Your talks with him on Rule 22, did he give you any hope for possible changes in that in those days?

W: No. He said he would go with what the Senate voted. He didn't concede that Rule 22, as then constituted, was a major obstacle to civil rights legislation. We did. We differed on that point very sharply and very cleanly. Mr. Johnson's position was that the Senate ought not to be bound by this kind of rule, the kind we suggested, and that legislation could be passed even with that rule in effect if we exercised the proper lobbying procedure on the Senators. This was a vain hope in our estimation.

B: Mr. Johnson is often given a good deal of credit for the passage of the '57 Act. Does the NAACP share that view?

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- W: Yes, we do. We feel that Mr. Johnson became convinced that the '57 Act which laid heavy emphasis on the right to vote, was being consistent with his basic American position that every American ought to have access to the ballot box and we ought to make decisions by a majority of the vote. He believed basically in this. I feel that the '57 Act, he believed, with its emphasis on voting had the best chance of enactment and also was the kind of civil rights act for which he could vote without having to apologize for it in his home district.
- B: Did you accept his reasoning on the changes that he presided over--the leaving out of the bill the Part III and certain other aspects?
- W: No. We disagreed on that. There was considerable debate on leaving out Part III. There was a split between the then-senators from Massachusetts, Senator John F. Kennedy and Senator Leverett Saltonstall, a Republican. There was heated debate and sharp difference of opinion on Section III. Mr. Johnson with his well-known predilection for consensus and for "possibility of what you could get through" felt that Section III was a stumbling block on which the whole bill would founder. We differ with him and we went our separate ways. He won; we didn't win.
- B: Did you consider Mr. Kennedy, John Kennedy, to be a civil rights advocate in those days?
- W: It seems to me, and my recollection is, that Senator Kennedy although intellectually in sympathy with the civil rights movement and fully understanding of its objectives, with which he agreed, promised his vote for the elimination of Section III, if I recall. This was the Johnson position. There was some horse trading there between Section --I'm not clear on that detail.
- B: It's perhaps on the record.
- W: Yes, It's on the record. But Senator Kennedy was--I talked to him in the Senate restaurant for about an hour after lunch that day, after he had pledged his vote. I think he was coming to realize over the cold coffee and the numerous cigarettes that he probably had made a mistake as far as our side was concerned. But I don't think he was convinced that he had made a mistake so far as the power of the Senate was concerned and, considering the fact that he had ambitions to go farther than the Senate, it was very important for him that Lyndon Johnson not be a foe. These are all things that he didn't say in so many words; I don't assert that he said them. I'm making a purely subjective interpretation of his attitude. But having given his word to Lyndon Johnson, he voted in the way he promised to vote.
- B: In 1960 after Mr. Kennedy was nominated by the Democratic Party and chose Mr. Johnson as his running mate, was there a certain amount of dismay among civil rights advocates at Mr. Johnson being on the ticket:

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W: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I think this too was a matter of history. Their attitude was one of dismay. They believed that probably Mr. Kennedy had gone too far just as a great many other Americans who were not Negroes felt that he might have overstepped the bounds.

I don't believe that Mr. Johnson's attitude was well understood. His record was understood. His attitude was assumed in the light of his record. There were some canny politicians among them--one or two people from the New York state delegation--who voted for him in Los Angeles on the first ballot. I remember giving a newspaper an interview at the time which said that we shouldn't discount the effectiveness of Lyndon Johnson on the ticket because he brought enormous knowledge of government and workings of government to the post of Vice President if he should be elected. I didn't go any farther than that.

B: Did either Mr. Kennedy or Mr. Johnson or anyone from their staffs get in touch with you immediately after that act to try to get your support or to reassure you?

W: No.

B: I understand that formally the NAACP is a non-partisan organization.

W: It's a non-partisan organization, but I wouldn't expect normally that they would put their best foot forward even with a non-partisan organization, because even though we didn't advocate voting for or against a candidate we could disseminate and create the kind of climate in which certain candidates would find it difficult to maneuver. But neither Mr. Johnson--although Mr. Johnson's camp didn't, it wasn't cool and distant but they were not warm in making overtures either. This was a political angle involved here. In many parts of the country, the approval of the NAACP is the kiss of death, and it's understandable. Mr. Kennedy--prior to the nomination and afterwards--Mr. Kennedy made vigorous efforts to set himself straight on the race question and to deny allegations drawn from certain of his acts that he was not friendly.

B: Then, during Mr. Kennedy's presidency, so far as you could tell, was Mr. Johnson active in the administration's programs, particularly in Congress, particularly the civil rights proposals?

W: Mr. Johnson began to emerge during the Kennedy Administration wholly unexpectedly and to the delight of the civil rights forces in areas that we didn't expect him to be active as a Vice President. For example, he took a very personal concern on the fair employment business. He used the inevitable telephone, without which he is never seen or heard, and he called all manner of people--unions and employers and all over the country on the matter of increasing their employment of Negroes. Now, for a Vice President of the United States to do this, and especially a man who knew his way around and where the bodies were buried, so to speak, in Washington, this was very effective.

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B: Could you tell if he was doing this on his own or at the instigation of Mr. Kennedy?

W: It's hard to say.

B: I realize that may be a impossible question.

W: There's no way of answering that except that his subsequent behavior, from then until throughout his term in 1968, leads one to believe that Mr. Johnson personally had chosen this. He did several things, for example, that had to have the approval of the Administration but weren't necessarily initiated by the Administration.

His trip to Senegal, in which he brought greetings from the President to the President of Senegal and circulated over there and his return. I had an occasion to see him right, immediately--pretty soon after his return and one of the souvenirs given him of the trip was by photographers who accompanied him, a portfolio of 8 x 10 pictures of his travels through Senegal. They were lying there on the coffee table while you were waiting to see the Vice President and I leafed through them and they were very striking photographs. I remember remarking to Mr. Johnson when we went in on the photographs and on his trip to Senegal, and he said something that I haven't yet been able to forget. It seemed to me to attach to the man himself and not to the Administration. He said, "You know, in Senegal, when I looked in the eyes of the mothers there they had the same look as the people in Texas, the mothers in Texas." He said, "All mothers want the best for their children. And the mothers in Senegal were no different from the white mothers in Texas."

Now, he didn't have to make this observation. It came, I think, from his impression there. He was very much impressed with the President of Senegal and he turned to me somewhat in jest and said, "You know your organization ought to do something for that man when he comes here. You ought to do him honor because he's one of the great people of the world in this period." He was quite impressed with him there.

B: Did you feel that the Kennedy Administration was moving as fast as it could or should on civil rights legislation?

W: No, no indeed. No, I expressed myself on this very shortly after Mr. Kennedy was elected--before November had expired, as a matter of fact, before November 1960. I think the election was finally settled about the week after the election was over. They got through counting the stray votes. I think it was before November 30 that I made a talk in Washington, D.C. at a conference, in which I chastised, rebuked, or otherwise commented unfavorably on the announcement by the new President-elect that he would not introduce civil rights legislation into the Congress after his inauguration because, he, he did not want to endanger his major legislative program.

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Now, this was in my view, still is, not the way to proceed. In the first place, any history would show that the opponents of civil rights legislation didn't give a hoot whether you introduced it or didn't introduce it as far as their attitude toward the major legislative proposals are concerned. They weren't going to let the major legislative proposals go through because the President did not introduce civil rights legislation out of their great gratitude and compassion and so forth, nor, were they going to attack the proposals just because he introduced civil rights legislation. So I thought Mr. Kennedy was exceedingly naive and mistaken here.

I don't think naive is probably the word. You can't say that a man who successfully campaigned for Senator for the United States, who went through World War II and what he went through physically, and then who won the nomination at Los Angeles and capped the climax by inviting Lyndon Johnson to be his running mate, you can't say he's naive, no. So, I have to take that back. But I think he was badly advised or at least he hadn't been as close a student of Senate and Congressional procedure as he might have been.

B: Was it your impression that the Kennedy Administration was in fact pushed by activities and the Southern towns and so on into introducing the legislation?

W: I'm not prepared to say that and I don't want this commentary to be principally a comment or an estimation of the Kennedy Administration. I would say what I have said repeatedly that John Fitzgerald Kennedy, had a complete comprehension and an identity with the goals of the civil rights movement. Intellectually he was for it. He understood all the motivations of the Negro community and he felt for the humanity that he wanted to see exhibited by the government of the United States for this segment of the population. But, I think precisely the qualities that Lyndon Johnson later exhibited, and which only Lyndon Johnson could have, by reason of his experience and his study and the use of materials of government--precisely that lack in Senator Kennedy forced him to hesitate and weigh and consider what he should do in the civil rights field. I don't think it was from an inner non-conviction. I think he was convinced that this ought to be done. He just didn't know how to manipulate the government to bring it about. Events did push him, true, but they didn't push him toward a conviction. They pushed him toward action. He was convinced already, when he was elected--of that I am firmly convinced.

For example, during the campaign much was made of his remark to General Eisenhower that "You could have ended housing discrimination with the stroke of the pen." And he lived to regret that flip phrase, you see. What he meant was that Eisenhower could have signed an executive order abolishing racial discrimination in housing. Well, Mr. Eisenhower knew that it wasn't that simple. President Kennedy upon his election found out, too, that it wasn't that simple. As a result he didn't sign a housing order until November of '62, I think, and then only after balancing all the forces and then with the housing order--most of its teeth drawn and applying only to certain areas of

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housing. It was a weak order when finally he signed it. The New York Times carried a story saying that the Kennedy advisors were weighing the weight of the Negro vote in the North as against the possible dissident White vote in the South if he should sign a strong order--which meant, unlike Lyndon Johnson who in 1968 was told that if you insist in this housing bill it'll kill the whole civil rights effort that you are trying to make in the Congress. And in effect he said, "Damn the torpedoes. Full steam ahead," because he knew that he either had the votes or he didn't have the votes and that he could do something about the situation but he wasn't going to retreat on it.

B: Were either Mr. Johnson or Mr. Kennedy involved in anyway in the planning for the march on Washington in 1963?

W: I don't recall that Mr. Johnson was involved at all, and the President was involved only in the tug of war between his advisors who said, "You ought to A) condemn it or B) stay clear of it and have nothing to do with it." He was caught in that kind of tug of war and with our side who was saying--we were saying to him, "you ought to endorse it and you ought to welcome it and so forth." He finally welcomed it. He finally gave it endorsement--no assistance from the government, of course--no assistance, but merely the Presidential approval.

B: You and the other leaders met with the President and Vice President after the speeches that day, didn't you?

W: Yes. We met immediately after the gathering at the Lincoln Memorial. The President was bubbling over with the success of the event; the way it had gone off; the content of the speeches; and when he found that we hadn't had an opportunity to get luncheon between our conferences on the Hill that morning and the beginning of the exercises that afternoon, he sent downstairs in the dining room, which is in the White House, and brought up sandwiches and milk and tea and coffee for us. Then he was talking about our desire for civil rights legislation and the necessity of getting the votes in the Congress and of the registration and voting procedure back home. In other words, he was looking at it from a long range, perfect legal, perfectly American point of view without lobbying for either side.

It was a very rewarding session and the President you could see was very relieved after all these predictions locally of the Washington merchants and the Washington people that the capital was going to be invaded by a hord of rowdies and vigilantes and that sort of thing. Some of the people who ran businesses closed their businesses and sent their employees home, gave them the day off and told them not only to go home but to lock themselves in their homes because the Negroes would be here tomorrow and would tear up the town. Of course nothing like that happened. And the President and some hundred and fifty members of Congress and the Senate who came over and were guests of honor for a brief time there, were all mightily pleased at the way the thing went off.

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B: Then not long after that occurred the tragic events of the assassination and Mr. Johnson's succession to the Presidency. Were not you one of the people he called that weekend on the phone?

W: I was the first person of the civil rights groups with whom he conferred.

B: What did he say to you on the phone then?

W: Well he--

B: This was a phone call.

W: It either was a phone call from him--now I'm sorry I don't keep notes; I don't keep memorandums; I hardly make any notations. It is difficult for me to recall whether Mr. Johnson himself made the telephone call or whether it was made by a member of his staff. I imagine in that time of stress, when he had so much to look after that it was probably made by a member of his staff simply saying that he would like to hold a series of conferences on the civil rights situation beginning Friday morning. Thanksgiving was Thursday. He addressed a joint session of Congress on Wednesday. The funeral was on Monday.

Five days after President Kennedy was murdered, he addressed a joint session of the Congress and he only asked for two measures. One was the pending tax bill and one was the civil rights law. The day after Thanksgiving he began his conferences on the civil rights bill with a conference with me.

B: What did you talk about at that conference?

W: We talked about the civil rights situation and the necessity for a law and Mr. Johnson's belief that such a law could be enacted if the people really wanted it. This was an echo of his Senate days--if the votes and support are there. He was asking us if we wanted it, if we would do the things required to be done to get it enacted. He said he could not enact it himself; he was the President of the United States; he would give it his blessing; he would aid it in any way in which he could lawfully under the constitution; but that he could not lobby for the bill; and nobody expected him to lobby for the bill; and he didn't think we expected him to lobby for the bill. But in effect he said--he didn't use these words--"You have the ball; now run with it." He gave unmistakable notice that you had a friend and not an enemy in the White House for this legislation.

Over it all hung the enormous tragedy of the killing of Preside Kennedy. And it was on this note that he felt the federal government had to take a stand to halt this schism between people--violence, bloodshed and that sort of thing.

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B: Did he ask or hint at a moratorium on demonstrations while the bill was pending?

W: No, he did not. No, he did not. I recall that conversation. He did not ask for Negroes to behave in a certain way or for the civil rights forces to refrain from doing this, that and the other. As a matter of fact, as I look hastily back, I don't think Mr. Johnson ever directly requested this--any such moratorium. He might have had his own private thoughts on the effects it would have, but he never reached over into possible constitutional freedom of speech restriction and said, "Well, now, it would be a good thing if the Negroes kept quiet, or if you could keep them quiet." He never did say that to me.

B: Did you also assist the following year in the Voting Rights Bill?

W: Yes. Of all the civil rights organizations, we have the only one that is active in fifty states and in some 1,500 communities. That is, we have organized bodies there, and we have about 40 or 42 state organizations. In other words, we have the machinery for getting word to our people and getting them into action. We have state conventions of our states. We have regional conventions in the spring and we have an annual convention each summer. So we get our people together and they understand what the situation is. So we did help with the Voting Rights Bill because we have felt all along in our history--our organization shows our devotion to free access to the ballot for all people as the best way of expressing the democratic process.

B: It is about that time that there began to occur the urban disturbances --the rioting in the Northern cities, which was in many cases related to the racial problem. Did Mr. Johnson call on you for advice say at the time of the Watts riot in Los Angeles?

W: I don't think that Mr. Johnson did personally. I think his cabinet members and the concerned people in his Administration who, it must be assumed since we know the man very well, reflected his views or else they wouldn't have been there very long. They did express concern. They expressed it in this way. They wanted to know how the Federal Government could help in this situation.

They did not say, "You ought to stop it." or "It ought not to occur." A great many of them realized that forces were at work which could not be stopped by simply saying, "Don't do that," either by the White House saying or by us saying it.

But they did transmit their concern and asked ways in which they could help and took advantage of our own attitudes because all of us--Martin Luther King, the National Urban League, and the NAACP, the three principal organizations and the National Council of Negro Women, the fourth one--were all committed against violence. CORE was *comme ci, comme ca*; and Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee at that time, despite its name, leaned a little more toward, let us call it, determined, aggressive action--if we don't call it violence. I don't want to do them any injustice, even in this

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period. Certainly they had a very stern attitude toward it. But the principal organizations were against violence. So therefore President, or the White House, or his Administration were not asking us for anything extraordinary when they asked our cooperation and help in how they could help in stopping violence.

B: You know, it's at about that time, I think, many in the Administration began to realize in a way the civil rights problem in the South was comparatively simple compared to the enormous complexity of the problem in the northern cities. Did you ever sit down with Johnson or with any of his immediate advisors and discuss what could be done in the cities?

W: Mr. Johnson, of course, and his congressional supporters introduced OEO, the anti-poverty program. He had many investigators and feelers out, and he had many bureaus established all over the country--regional offices of various federal agencies and departments--and these were constantly funneling information to Washington. So he had a good idea of what was wrong in the cities, not precisely the idea.

I don't think anyone even now pretends to know precisely what to do. But he knew that the federal government had to become more involved. He knew that opportunity had to be provided for some of the people who had never had opportunity in their lives. And he knew also that the traditional political machinery, the traditional civil rights machinery and the traditional social work machinery had not worked to prevent these outbreaks or to prevent the frustration and state of mind that eventually led to outbreaks.

So he conceived the federal government's role to be that to provide an opportunity for the inner-cities, the crowded urban centers, to express themselves and to try to harness there won energy through corporations and agencies that would be financed by the government to ameliorate the situation in the center cities. I think it was a daring assault by a man of Mr. Johnson's background to come to that conclusion and to actually authorize the machinery.

Now, it was jeered at by the ultra-extremists as being insufficient and "What, only a billion dollars?", and so on. But before that there had not even been a billion dollars. While, if you compared it to the space program or to some other programs, a billion dollars might seem a small amount for this monumental and very complex problem; nevertheless, a billion dollars was a start. I think Mr. Johnson with his Voting Rights Act and with the Poverty Act and with his commitment following the 1964 enactment of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which had ten sections and which was the most comprehensive ever passed by Congress--I think Mr. Johnson gave a pretty clear indication of his own personal attitude toward this, because as a President he could have cold-watered the whole thing.

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I can't vouch for what would have happened if he had done so. I think the country was teetering on the edge of something very dangerous, very sinister, and very damaging. But it's a tribute to him that his capacity for leadership and his experience in government was able to overcome--all these were able to overcome his beginnings as a Texas politician and enabled him to rise to what some people have always said, that when you get into the office of the Presidency of the United States then you rise above your beginnings; you become a different man. He certainly did.

B: Did you and he ever discuss the black militants? If this isn't impertinent to say, you have received just about as much criticism from the black militants as he has. You might have had a bond of sympathy there.

W: Yes, I guess so. We both have taken it on the chin. This vituperation, of course, is par for the course with the militants or with any group that seeks change by sudden and violent or a discarding of the old. The first target is the entrenched machinery and the people who direct it--or influence it if they don't direct it. Therefore, the President of the United States has to be no good in this area and all those who believe in the United States system have to be dethroned.

In the '30's I went through this with the communists. Today the black militants are by no means communists. Some few of them may be, but they are not motivated by communism. But in the '30's it was openly the Communist Party and their tactic was precisely the same, to attack the NAACP and its secretary at that time as bourgeois, as misleaders, as deceivers of the Negro people, as people were pied-pipers leading us down the wrong road to freedom and so forth and so on. And the real believers were the Communist, of course.

So Mr. Johnson and I, sharing the condemnation of the black militants--which in his case was complicated also by the fact that he had the Viet Nam dissenters--we had something in common. I don't know that we ever commiserated about it especially. Both of us had jobs to do and we didn't spend a lot of time bemoaning the fact that the black militants were jumping on us.

The President of the United States has everybody jumping on him. Everybody--there is no--you can name an issue or any kind of a situation and they'll interpret it that if the President did something about this why then it wouldn't be so; it wouldn't be like it is. And "I would be better off," or "I would have more money," or "I'd have a better job" or "my child would have a better school" and that sort of thing. So I tend to have sympathy with presidents--almost as much sympathy as I have for Mayors. Mayors, in my estimation, have a totally thankless job.

B: Particularly here in this city of New York.

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W: Yes, yes, here in New York, and in Chicago and in any other sizeable city, the Mayor is not a loved and appreciated person.

B: You were one of Mr. Johnson's appointees to what's generally called the Kerner Commission. When that report was published, Mr. Johnson's reaction, or lack of reaction to it, was interpreted by many as being a sort of tacit condemnation of the report and perhaps particularly of its emphasis on white racism. Did you share the disappointment in Mr. Johnson's reaction?

W: I was disappointed. I felt that Mr. Johnson should have received the commission and received its report and thanked the commission in person. He's a very courteous person and a very close observer of official protocol, so that his thanks would not necessarily convey entire approval, or approval of the entire report.

I recall that in 1947, Harry Truman received a report from similar commission. The only other national commission I know that has been named. Robert Carr, who was then secretary of Dartmouth College and since has become President of Oberlin College, was the executive director and acknowledged to be the chief author of the report. Now, that report contained an extraordinary sentence that had never appeared before in any national report and that was that racial segregation must be eliminated from American life--not American employment, not American education, but American life. Now this was, whether we recognized it at the time or not, this was a commitment of the national government to the abolition of racial segregation from American life--all phases of it. And in 1947, it was just as revolutionary or shocking as the Kerner's Commission's assertion that white racism was at the basis of the racial difficulties in this country.

But Mr. Truman received the report--and not only received it and didn't put it on the shelf but took its legislative recommendations and sent them in a special message to the Congress in February, 1948. This was before his nominating convention met. It was to meet that July. And in so sensitive an emotional area as race relations, Mr. Truman would accept this and send it on to the Congress in a special message and say that, "I think these eight points ought to be enacted."

When I contrasted that with Mr. Johnson's hands-off attitude, I rather got the impression that he had made one of his rare mistakes in his estimation of public opinion and in his courageous, daring, outlook, considering his background, on the whole racial situation. Because I think it's indubitably true that basically--now the report did not say that white racism, like the militants are saying today, is behind every single act that's committed--or every single Machiavellian scheme that's hatched, that white racism is here in Dakota and over here in Maryland and up here in Massachusetts, and it's behind a swimming pool here, a housing situation there, an employment situation over there or an education--. It didn't say that. It simply said that the creation of the climate, which has brought about our present tension, has been because, to use the words of the report, "of

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the attitude of white Americans towards black Americans."

Now, Mr. Johnson of all the presidents in the United States, could have accepted that very gracefully because his record on government action on racial tensions is the best of any president in the United States that we have ever had. Of all of our presidents, his Administration is outstanding. Whereas one president might boast of one piece of legislation, or another president might boast as our beloved Dwight Eisenhower did, of the 1957 Civil Rights Bill. Well, the 1957 Civil Rights Bill compared to 1964 Civil Rights Bill was merely a sliver and yet Mr. Johnson created, or helped Kennedy to create and saw to the enactment of the 1964 Act. And it was Mr. Johnson who conceived the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, with its attendant business about juries and selections and so forth. Mr. Johnson's emphasis on the right of an American to vote and his acceptance of the idea that federal registrars ought to be sent into counties which have demonstrated since Reconstruction days as they had practically--they had done everything to discourage Negroes from registering to vote.

So Mr. Johnson need not have balked at the acceptance of this report. It is perfectly in line with his actions as President and with the accomplishments of his Administration. I think probably, maybe the word racism, white racism, frightened him. He didn't want to go down in history as the President who had pointed his finger at his own people. This I think is understandable.

B: When the Commission was working on the report, did they consider that that phrase might have such a reaction? Not only from the President but from--

W: I think it did. As I recall from our discussion, and we discussed this again and again over the last five or six weeks, we did realize that the phrase might have some reaction--the Commission felt that they had to be honest, as honest as the facts that it was dealing with made necessary. It didn't feel that it could compile a history of pervasive--and that was the word they used--pervasive discrimination in employment and housing and in policy-community relations and in education, especially in education--compile these deadly statistics pointing even toward the futility of the actions to alleviate conditions and then fail to say that white racism was the underlying cause. The Commission debated this at length and everyone had an opportunity to express themselves, not once but two or three times on it. I think there was general agreement on the facts and what they pointed to. I don't believe there was complete one hundred percent agreement within each commissioner of how far he would go in stating this but there was an overwhelming majority that favored the use of this term. And those that didn't favor use of it still were influenced by the facts and where they pointed and they simply, probably would have characterized it in another way.

I feel that Mr. Johnson should have taken the same position that his commission took, that honesty compelled--the whole 670 pages--compelled the conclusion that it was

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the attitude of white Americans toward black Americans that have brought us to this place. And I think the President might well have said that, although he is the best judge of all the forces that were at work on him and that he had to consider in his position as President of the United States.

It's one thing for a commission to say this; it's another thing for the President of the United States to join in it and clap hands "Here comes Charlie." It may be that he considered all these things as he considered everything. And I'm not one to condemn him for it. I simply express regret that he did not welcome the Commission and go through the motions of accepting the report--with understandable lack of agreement on every single phrase, every single paragraph, every chapter.

B: Sir, it's 12:30, have you got just a minute more?

W: I have about ten minutes more.

B: I wanted to ask one question that really sounds a little unfair. I was wondering if you could describe the relationship between Mr. Johnson and Martin Luther King? Tragically we will not be able to talk to Dr. King himself.

W: I'm sorry I do not know anything about Mr. Johnson's attitudes toward Dr. King personally that differs from the universal esteem in which Dr. King was regarded by the vast majority of the American people. I got the impression that President Johnson, too, added his words.

Now, he might have had some reservations about Dr. King's timing and procedures. Anybody is entitled to that. The NAACP, which didn't see eye to eye with Dr. King's timing, procedures at all times, nevertheless felt that this was a great human being and a great American, one calculated--to use his own words--of stimulating, creative dissent in order to push toward his goals. For Dr. King, I can say only that he had, more than any man perhaps since Booker T. Washington. But I'm not sure that Washington belongs in this category.

I think King was unique. He had the adulation, the affection and the personal allegiance of more black Americans than anybody else in the civil rights movement. This is partly explained by the fact that he was a clergyman and the Negro population of this country tends to give clergyman a little extra edge of adulation and support. But mostly it's attributable to the fact that Dr. King was eloquent in voicing their aspirations and that he gave them a sense of pride in themselves.

All of his projects might not have been a success and even had he not been so tragically slain about a year ago, there is no guarantee that Resurrection City and the March of the Poor People would have been a successful project. But, nevertheless, it

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would have been a significant project, much more significant than it turned out to be because of his presence, his charisma, his dedication, his oneness with the people and their ideals.

I don't think a person as astute as Mr. Johnson missed this. I don't mean by that that he was a friend of Dr. King's simply because Dr. King was a powerful, personal factor in the Negro community. I think the President probably had some reservations also about some of the things Dr. King did, but I don't think he ever had any reservations as to Dr. King's motivations and desires. He wanted only justice for his people and greater opportunity, and Mr. Johnson wanted that also.

In fact, Mr. Baker, I can't think of any more fitting way to bring this interview to a close than to say that in my own personal estimation, and I had the privilege of talking with the President on many occasions and of enjoying a relationship with him that I never expected to enjoy in the light of his allegiances and my own allegiances--say prior to 1957. But I grew to believe that the man is absolutely sincere on this question of opportunity and race. He has risen above his background.

In the first place he was a poor man. He started poor. He understands poverty. He understands the limitations of people. His understanding of racial restrictions came largely with his contact with the Mexicans--Spanish-speaking people and how wrong people were in the way people treated them. And he looked around and found these same conditions existing with respect to the Negroes of his own country. I just believe that Mr. Johnson will go down in our history, fifty years from now, even now, as the man who when he got in the most powerful spot in the Nation--and some say in the world, but we're interested in the nation--when he got there, he committed the White House and the Administration to the involvement of government in getting rid of the inequalities between people solely on the basis of race. And he did this to a greater extent than any other President in our history. It will take many, many Presidents to match what Lyndon Johnson did. This is not said merely out of personal allegiance to the man. I have great affection for him and great admiration for him. I think he understood government as no other President we've ever had. He knew all the ins and outs of government and he understood it. I feel that his record is safe. He was a consummate politician, of course he was. He made agreements here and he made alliances there as every politician has to do. But when the chips were down he used the great powers of the presidency on the side of the people who were deprived. And you can't take that away from him.

B: Thank you very much, sir.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION  
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

By Roy Wilkins

to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

In accordance with Sec. 507 of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-10), I, Roy Wilkins, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and transcript of a personal statement approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. Title to the material transferred hereunder, and all literary property rights, will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.

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ACCESSION NUMBER 73-27

Narrator: Roy Wilkins

Biographical information: Social welfare exec.; b. St. Louis, Aug. 30, 1901; A.B., U. Minn., 1923; hon. degree Lincoln U., 1958; Mng. editor Kansas City Call, 1923-31; asst. sec. Nat. Association Advancement of Colored People, 1931-49, acting sec. 1949-50, adminstr. 1950, exec. sec., 1955-64, exec. dir., 1965-77. Editor Crisis mag., monthly ofcl. N.A.A.C.P. organization, 1934-49.

General topic of interview: Discusses civil rights issues and his relationship with Lyndon Johnson.