

WH6406-13-3832

Date: 1964-06-23

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Nicholas deB. Katzenbach

Start Time: 15:35

Place: Oval Office

SCROLLER TITLE: "What Do You Think Happened to Them?"

SCENE SETTER: In conversation with Deputy Attorney General Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, President Johnson ruminated over whether to see the parents of three civil rights workers—James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman—who had gone missing in Mississippi. Johnson asked Katzenbach what he thought had happened to the men, and Katzenbach replied that he thought they had been murdered by the Ku Klux Klan.

President Johnson: Nick?

Nicholas deB. "Nick" Katzenbach: Yes, sir.

President Johnson: The Attorney General [Robert F. "Bobby" Kennedy] called me. Were you around when he called me?

Katzenbach: No.

President Johnson: He—

Katzenbach: I was gone just before he called you.

President Johnson: I was in the TV studio on my statement on Laos and Vietnam, and when I called him back ten minutes later, he'd gone to a TV studio and [is] going to be gone an hour.

Katzenbach: Yeah.

President Johnson: Now, he talked to Jack Valenti and suggested that he thought I probably should make a statement on these three boys that are missing down in Mississippi, and I ought to consider seeing their parents. I've been considering that all day. I talked to the Speaker [of the House] [John W. McCormack] [D–Massachusetts] about it. [*Katzenbach acknowledges throughout.*] The little Republican congressman, Ogden [R.] Reid [R–New York], is trying to get it in here. I'm afraid that if I start housemothering each kid that's gone down there and that doesn't show up, that we'll have this White House full of people every day [*Katzenbach attempts to interject*] asking for sympathy. And congressmen, too, 'cause they want to come over and have their picture made and get on TV. And I don't know whether the President of the United States ought to be busy doing that or not.

End of excerpt 1.

President Johnson: What do you think happened to them?

Katzenbach: I think they got picked up by some of these [Ku Klux] Klan people, be my guess.

President Johnson: And murdered?

Katzenbach: Yeah, probably, or else they're just being hidden in one of those barns or something, you know, and getting the hell scared out of them. But I would not be surprised if they'd been murdered, Mr. President. Pretty rough characters.

President Johnson: How old are these kids?

Katzenbach: Twenty, and 24, and 22.

President Johnson: Mm-hmm. What did you say to them, and what'd the Attorney General say to them?

Katzenbach: Simply that we were doing everything that we possibly could to find out what had happened and essentially what you just said: the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] was there; we had helicopters out; we are doing everything we could. And if they had any suggestions as to what ought to be done, to get in touch with us and tell us what ought to be done. And an expression of sympathy, and then some discussion of the general difficulty of the federal government being involved beforehand in protection and why the Constitution didn't permit this.

President Johnson: What did they say?

Katzenbach: And they reacted quite favorably to this. They said they understood the problem, and they just were distressed and just hoped that everything was being done that could be done, and they're . . . They were not dissatisfied with anything, Mr. President. I think they felt everything was being done, that could be done.

End of excerpt 2.

CITATION: "Lyndon B. Johnson and Nicholas deB. Katzenbach on 23 June 1964," Tape WH6406.13, Citation #3832, *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition [Mississippi Burning and the Passage of the Civil Rights Act]*, vol. 8, ed. Kent B. Germany and David C. Carter] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014-). URL: <http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/9080013>