

WH6407-01-4117

Date: 1964-07-02

Participant: Lyndon B. Johnson

Participant: Robert F. Kennedy

Start Time: 11:19

Place: Mansion

SCROLLER TITLE: "If It's Signed Today"

SCENE SETTER: President Johnson and Attorney General Robert F. "Bobby" Kennedy discussed the advantages and disadvantages of signing the civil rights bill before or after the Fourth of July holiday weekend.

Robert F. "Bobby" Kennedy: I talked to Jack Valenti, and I don't know whether this has gone down—gone too far, about the signing of the [civil rights] bill. This is a, you know, if it's signed today, we are going to have a rather difficult weekend. Holiday weekend, anyway. And whether . . . that . . . encouraging . . . whether that Friday and Saturday with the Fourth of July and firecrackers going off anyway, with Negroes running all over the South figuring that they get the day off, that they're going to go into every hotel and motel and every restaurant, whether if it's possible—and again, I don't know how far it's gone—whether it would be possible to postpone it till Monday and sign it so that it's in the middle of the week.

The other problem, of course, is that I met with Governor [T. LeRoy] Collins [of the Community Relations Service] this morning. He really hasn't—he hasn't got any appropriation. He hasn't got his machinery set up, and so he doesn't—he won't be able to move in on any of these situations. There is an advantage, if everything was equal, that there'd have been a great advantage in signing it at the beginning of the week, but as I say, I don't know whether it's gone so far that we . . . that . . . you'd feel that it's necessary to sign it today.

President Johnson: No, I don't think so. Here were the considerations that entered into it: they all announced—and we've got to stop that; you tell your publicity man over there, don't say a damn word about what I'm going to do. They've been—all these stories come out about who I'm talking to in the South, and what I'm doing, and kind of the thing we discussed but we didn't carry out, and there's been two or three columns written about it.

Well, the House did the same thing on me. They—some of their people up there planned on what the President is going to do. So they all got it pretty well scattered over the country that he was going to wait till July the Fourth to sign it, so that he'd tie it in with the Declaration of Independence. And that was pretty well accepted and generated all over the country before we could stop it. We never mentioned it, never opened our mouth, never said a word.

Kennedy: But, you know, I was thinking [*unclear*]—

President Johnson: So then, some of them started coming back and saying, "Well, that's not fair. It's the [Charles A. "Charlie"] Hallecks [R-Indiana] and the rest of them who have participated in this thing are leaving, [*Kennedy acknowledges throughout*] and they're going to their convention, and you just want to have it so you'll have [Hubert H.] Humphrey [Jr.] [DFL-Minnesota] and one or two of them up there taking all the glory and the people that helped do it. Why do you wait? Why don't you go on and do it when they pass it?"

So I asked them when they thought they'd get through with it, and they said they thought they'd get through by three or four o'clock [p.m.]. Now they tell me there's some debate that may go on later tonight. I told them that my plan would be to try to sign it as soon as the bill got to me. That I'd already told them how I felt about it. They knew that. There's no point of waiting till it's the Fourth of July. That I thought that'd just irritate a lot of people and unnecessarily, and then I didn't think we ought to wait two or three days. So that's kind of how we got off the hook on the Fourth of July by signing it when it gets to us.

Now, when it gets to us, I don't know, but I think it'll be late today. We tentatively told them that we plan to do it today, before we heard about this, before I knew you—that you thought it'd be better to go over till next week. [*Snorts.*] Now, we could back up on it, but I doubt the wisdom of it after we've said that, if the bill gets to us.

Kennedy: I see. I see, and I suppose all the Republicans will be gone next week.

President Johnson: Yes. Yes, they g—they're quitting tonight.

Kennedy: Well, I think we better go [*unclear*]—

President Johnson: I don't know whether they'll even come or not. I haven't invited them, 'cause we don't know what time. I told them, get Lee [C.] White and [Lawrence F.] Larry O'Brien [Jr.], put them in charge of the signings and get in touch with your people and see everybody that ought to be invited. And we'd try to have it in the East Room around seven o'clock if the bill's here. If it's not, we'll have it whenever we get the bill. But we're kind of waiting till two or three o'clock, see what time we—whether the bill—it got an hour on a rule when they come in at 12 [noon]—and if they make them read the record two or three times, why, it may be late.

But if we have it—I'd rather have it tonight than to have it Saturday, and if we have it passed Saturday, I think they would think that I held it up two or three days till they got out of town because they've been—they've questioned. I asked them to stay next week and act on some of these important bills, and they said that wasn't fair play, that I was being unfair to them, that they—and they wouldn't pass civil rights [bill] unless I let them go. Well, I never did agree to let them go, but they kind of had an agreement among themselves to pass civil rights and then go. Now, if I held it over, I think they'd say that I was trying to take a little glory away from them on a bipartisan basis, don't you?

Kennedy: I see. Well, you mean, because they won't be here?

President Johnson: Yeah, yeah.

Kennedy: Yeah, well, I think that is impossible. I do think that that's impossible.

President Johnson: I think it's important we extend them the invitation [*Kennedy acknowledges*] at a time when they can come—

Kennedy: Yes. I do, too.

President Johnson: —even if they can't come. I don't know; Halleck may go fishing.

Kennedy: Yeah.

President Johnson: But one of them told me, I've forgotten who it was, I believe [Michael J. "Mike"] Mansfield [D-Montana] called up and said that he was going to be in session tonight; he didn't know whether he could come or not. But I believe that we ought to go ahead if—in light of the fact they'll be gone next week.

Kennedy: That's fine. I'd like to have a chance to talk to you about . . . you know, about Poland, some thoughts I had on that.

President Johnson: Fine. You can do it around Cabinet [meeting]—right after Cabinet or right before today, or you can do it tomorrow, whenever you want to.

Kennedy: That'd be fine.

President Johnson: OK.

Kennedy: Thank you.

End of excerpt.

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