

John Seigenthaler Oral History Interview – JFK #3, 2/22/1966
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Seigenthaler was aide to Robert F. Kennedy during the 1960 Presidential campaign and Administrative Assistant to the Attorney General, Department of Justice (1961). This interview focuses on his role as administrative assistant, Justice Department reforms and appointments, tax and antitrust cases, and civil rights, among other issues.

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these dedicated, bright young people who could help the Southern Negro find two things: one, courage to participate in political affairs; and two, find a way to educate themselves so that they'd be able to register and understand the issues – give

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them some leadership in there on who the people were who were most likely to be helpful to them, who the candidates were. I remember Bob used this term; he said, "You know, if you had a massive Negro vote in Mississippi, congressmen like John Bell Williams wouldn't be so fresh." And King agreed in general with the theory. But as I say, a year later Bob talked to him and they hadn't done a bloody thing in that area. They'd moved in a number of other areas, but they had hardly turned a peg in voter registration. By that I don't mean that they had not tried in some areas, and that we had not supported in some areas to get Negroes registered to vote. But they always seemed to try in an area where they could make a graphic demonstration as opposed to moving in areas where they literally could get Negroes registered. They left that to other groups such, I guess, as local political

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organizations.

GRELE: What was the first incident in which you were involved directly?

SEIGENTHALER: I don't know. I guess it was Montgomery.

GRELE: How did you become involved in Montgomery?

SEIGENTHALER: My memory about this is sketchy. It's time, not the blow on the head, that did it. But the letter that came from CORE about the freedom rides through the South, that was only a form letter that had been sent to many people, I presume. As I remember it, it was a mimeographed letter. I later looked back in the files and tried to locate it and couldn't. I had the feeling that it was sent on to the civil rights division in that mass of mail. I think it was from Farmer [James Farmer], but it could've been from somebody else. At any rate, there was little press given to those riots before they started. They went through the South. I remember before they left, a reporter for

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Johnson Publications whose name is Simeon Booker came in to see Bob. I was out when he came in. He talked to Bob and told him he was going on this trip. Really, I don't think there was much attention given to the riots in the Department of Justice because.... There just was not much attention given to them, by the press or any other group. There was not much concern about something happening to them. Then they got to Alabama – I guess there were a couple of incidents along the way. They got to Alabama, and it hit. The bus was stopped, wrecked, and burned. This, I guess, was in Birmingham, or maybe north of Birmingham.

GRELE: Anniston.

SEIGENTHALER: Yes, it was at Anniston. That's right. At any rate, they wound up in Birmingham. They were bound for New Orleans. I remember – I guess that was on a Sunday, weekend – Monday, Simeon Booker called in, and I talked

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with him. Ultimately, Bob talked with him, and he said, "It's pretty bad down here, and we don't think we're going to get out. Bull Connor [Eugene Connor] and his people are pretty tough, and I don't think there's any bus that's going to take us out of here." They started talking about getting on an airplane. We began to work – Burke Marshall and I and Bob – through political and business contacts to try to get Greyhound to take them through, to try to get the police to give them protection. Bob tried to reach John Patterson and couldn't. He was supposed to be out on a boat somewhere in the Gulf. Burke tried to work through the Greyhound people. Greyhound had just had a bus destroyed and was real concerned about it. Finally, late in the afternoon these people said they were going to get on an airplane and fly out of there that night. And sometime in the afternoon in a conversation

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I had with Bob, he suggested that I go down and get with them. He thought that would give them some umbrella of protection and a sense of security, and very well might mean that, with a federal representative with them, they would not be harassed by local authorities. So I got on an airplane and flew down.

GRELE: Prior to this time, when the Attorney General was attempting to contact the people at the Greyhound bus terminal, did he in fact over the phone give any reason for people to construe his words to mean that he had sent the freedom riders down there?

SEIGENTHALER: No, there's a question of semantics there, and I'd have to look at the file. But what he said was subsequently misunderstood – completely misunderstood – I think perhaps honestly by that fellow who later testified about it. But if you look at what he said in the context in which it was said, that never occurred. It

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just never occurred. Do you remember the exact quote? I don't either. He, I'm sure, does and I probably should and will research it because it's important. But the *U.S. News and World Report* made it an issue in a piece, and Bob had a conversation....Did David Lawrence tell you about that? Well, he should've if he didn't.

GRELE: No we haven't interviewed David Lawrence of *U.S. News and World Report* yet.

SEIGENTHALER: Oh.

GRELE: Did you go first to Birmingham?

SEIGENTHALER: So I went to Birmingham, flew in there, and when I flew in, they were in the air terminal. And three planes to New Orleans had been cancelled because of bomb threats. Another was due in a half an hour. I walked into the terminal, and they were scared. They were literally shaking. They were a sad befuddled group. Some of them had been badly beaten; their heads were bandaged.

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Simeon Booker and his photographer were there, and they were really upset. Simeon Booker said to me, "I don't believe they'll ever let us get out of Birmingham." They were concerned about people coming in to the terminal on the highways and groups standing around and glaring at them, and they were so easily identifiable because they were sort of cluttered in a little group in one corner of the terminal. I talked with them and told them who I was and why I was there. I went to see the airline official.

GRELE: Did this seem to reassure them?

SEIGENTHALER: They were scared. They were scared. I wouldn't say it reassured them; they were glad to see me. I went to see the official of the airline – I think it was Eastern, but I could be wrong. It could've been Delta. I said, "I'm from the federal

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government. I've flown down here on instructions of the Attorney General. We want to get these people out of here and on their way. It's going to be better for you if you do that." He said, "Well, we've had two bomb threats, and we've cancelled two flights. We have another flight coming up now, and I'm afraid we're going to have another bomb threat." I said to him, "They're not going to blow up any airplane. Couldn't you just ignore it?" He smiled and said, "No, we can't." I said, "Well, you don't want these people here forever. Why don't you get them the hell out of here, and we'll all be better off." He said, "Well, I'm hopeful we'll be able to get them out."

A short time after that the plane arrived – well, it arrived while we were talking. He pointed it out to me, and he said to me, "Let the people sit there. You tell them to sit there until the plane is

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loaded and ready to go. Let them act as if they were not going to get on the plane. When I give you the high sign, we'll go. You get them on quickly; we'll get the plane off the ground as quickly as possible." And they coordinated that through the control tower so that the airplane didn't have to wait. The plane revved at the ramp. We got them out and got them on, and I got on with them, and we were in the air. It was the quickest takeoff of any plane I've ever flown.

Anyway, we flew to New Orleans. And we got off the plane in New Orleans. I never will forget it. We walked through the lobby of the airport and who was out to greet us but Barry Goldwater, in his shirtsleeves. You just wouldn't believe it. Walking along – all of a sudden comes Barry Goldwater with his hand out.

GRELE: I hadn't heard this before.

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SEIGENTHALER: Nobody has. I don't know that anybody had heard it, but there are pictures, I'm sure, that show Barry Goldwater shaking hands with them in Miami. And I identified myself, and he said, "This is horrible. Just horrible. Never should have happened. I'm glad you're with them. If there's anything I can do, I'm going to be down here," and he told me where he was staying. "Please contact me."

So they all were met by people waiting for them. An organization there – I guess it was CORE – met them and took care of them, housed them. I contacted the lady who was in charge there, and she said they'd let me know. So I registered in a hotel, and about three o'clock that morning I got a call from Burke Marshall who said, "Do you know Diane Nash in Nashville, Tennessee?" I said, "No. I know who she is." She was a young girl active in civil

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rights here, and I'd known her during the demonstrations here in 1960, I guess, '59 and '60. And he said, "Well, she's getting ready to lead a group to Birmingham to take up where the other group left off. Could you call her and ask her not to do that?" I said I could. I tried to reach her, and I couldn't reach her. I called a lawyer here named George Barrett who knew her and who had represented some civil rights people in cases from time to time. He gave me the number where I might reach her. I did get her on the phone and she said, "I'm not coming. But there is a group on the way to Birmingham now to take up where the other group left off. I said, "You know, they're going to kill them." She said, "They don't care. They think this is important. If they kill them, we'll just have that many more down there, and sooner or later we'll get somebody through."

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So I said, "I'm going to need to contact you. Will you give me your number?" So I took her number and the number of the people they were contacting down there – Reverend Abernathy [Ralph D. Abernathy] and several other numbers. I had them in a little notebook. I called Bob the next morning and said, "Well, they're on their way, and there's nothing we can do." He said, "You better get back up there."

So I flew up to Birmingham and arrived there after they had arrived. They had driven down in cars. It seems to me I contacted Abernathy or Shuttlesworth [Fred Lee Shuttlesworth], or one of them there, one of the numbers they had given me. They were going to try to get out that night.

GRELE: By bus?

SEIGENTHALER: By bus. They were arrested, however, at the bus station – I think this is accurate – put in jail, held there. In the middle of

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the night Bull Connor took them all out of jail and drove them back to the Tennessee line and put them out on the Tennessee side, told them good-bye and left them there in the middle of the night. They immediately called Diane Nash in Nashville. She sent cars down, and they picked them up – almost beat Bull Connor back to Birmingham – and went down and tried to get on the next bus out to Montgomery.

Then there was a period of a couple of days in which we were trying to get them out. I'm a little hazy on this. John Doar [John M. Doar] was down there working on some other matters. Bob by this time reached Patterson and told me to go to Montgomery and meet with Patterson and talk with him. I think it was at this time the conversations with the bus officials took place. It was concerning this group – getting this second group down. I think that's when that

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conversation occurred and when it was transcribed by this bus official's secretary. At any rate, I did drive down to Montgomery that night from Birmingham in a "U Drive." I'm not sure whether I met John Doar in Montgomery or whether I drove down with him. I rather think I drove down with him. Yes, I did drive down with him and registered in a hotel. The next morning I went to see Patterson. Patterson was in his conference room at the capitol, waiting for me when I went in. It seems to me like this was maybe Friday of the next week, but I can't be sure, of course. I went in to see him and there were maybe twenty members of his staff and cabinet there with him --- all of his advisors. They were seated around this table. The only one I remember was a fellow named Floyd Mann. Active in all of this, in the

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background, was Charley Meriwether [Charles M. Meriwether] who was trying to resolve the matter. He was then in Washington, I guess, with the World Bank. He was President

Kennedy's appointee. His appointment, incidentally, was opposed by civil rights groups. But Charley Meriwether had worked very hard behind the scenes to get Patterson to see the light, just to get these people through, and he hadn't been successful.

So I came down. We shook hands and he asked me to be seated at this long conference table. We went over to sit down, and there were two empty seats at the head of the table and on his right. Floyd Mann was seated on my right, and the others were all around the table. Patterson launched into a diatribe – these are some of the things – really a fist-pounding diatribe in which he said,

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“The people of this country are so goddamned tired of this namby-pamby business in Washington where these Negroes are concerned, and I'm sick of it. I'm sick of these spineless people that I supported not standing up. I'll tell you, I've got a stack of letters over there in my desk, and I am more popular today in the United States – not only with the people of Alabama, but with people all across the country – for the stand I've taken against these people than Jack Kennedy ever will be. And it just makes me sick to see this happen.” He went from that general theme, which went on for maybe five, ten minutes – ten minutes, fifteen minutes, maybe – but he went from that general theme into an attack on Bob. And he said, “By God, I'm telling you if federal marshals come in to Alabama, there'll be

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blood in the streets. You'd better not send federal marshals into Alabama.” There had been some statements in the press.

I had talked with Bob and with Whizzer at length the night before, before going in, and we had outlined pretty well what our position was going to be. The total speech that he made went on for about a half an hour. He attacked everybody and everything from the Supreme Court to me, but was heaviest on Bob Kennedy.

[END SESSION III, TAPE IV, SIDE II.]

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[SESSION III, TAPE V, SIDE I.]

SEIGENTHALER: But the climax of it was the pitch against the US marshals. This was the final thrust. “You do this, there'll be blood in the streets.” And he played this theme several different ways: “There will also be blood in the streets if you dare to integrate the schools,” or if you do this or if you do that. Basically, “If you send marshals in.” There'd been a couple of stories saying it might be necessary to send marshals in.

I said that I appreciated everything he said; although I didn't agree with everything he said, I respected his right to say it; that I too was a southerner; and that as a southerner, I

respected his position because I knew a lot of people felt the same way. Speaking for myself, I didn't agree with him; that my position was,

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personally, that these people had a right to travel the highways; but more importantly the position of the United States government was that these people had a right to travel the highways. That the United States government was going to make sure, if necessary, that people had the right to safe travel and free access on public conveyances and on public highways; and that if he was not capable or willing to provide safety to travelers that we would provide it in any way that we could. That we wanted to give the state of Alabama the full opportunity to meet the responsibility to protect travelers and that we would provide that opportunity if there was any indication on the part of him or on the part of officialdom in Alabama that safety would be provided and security to travelers would be provided. If no, then it very well might be necessary for the Attorney General to send

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in United States marshals and that the United States Attorney General had advised me to tell him that while we hoped he would meet his responsibility, if he was not ready to do this, we would take whatever alternatives were necessary to give these people safe conduct.

He said, and this is almost an exact quote, "The state of Alabama will provide safe travel for all who travel the highways, including visitors, on the highways and elsewhere while they're in this state. You can tell the Attorney General I said that." And I said, "Well, that's a firm commitment from you, then, that these people can expect safe travel; that you'll protect them." He said, "Yes, we have the means and the desire. Now I'm not going to say I'm going to protect a bunch of goddamn foreign troublemakers who come in here to stir up trouble.

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I can't say that. But I am going to say this: that we have the means and the desire to protect on the highways and elsewhere citizens and visitors, and we will provide them safety."

So I called Bob on the telephone in his office. I said, "Well, can I use your phone?" He said yes, so I called Bob and Patterson was standing there across the desk from me, and this group of people were around the table. Oh, before I called him, I said, "Now, how will you do that?" He said, "Well, now I'll tell you, we ain't going to have no escorts. We ain't going to get a police car in back of them, but we'll take care of them." I said, "How will it be done?" He said, "I'll let Floyd Mann take care of it." Floyd Mann said, "I'll make sure that they'll never be out of sight of an Alabama highway patrol." So

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I called Bob on Patterson's phone with Patterson's permission, and I repeated the statement to him. Bob said, "Will he issue a statement to that effect?" I said, "Governor, will you issue

a statement to that effect?" He said, "No, I prefer that you issue any statement you want to, but I ain't going to say nothing. I'm telling you, however, and you can say that I have given you assurance that we will provide safe conduct on the highways and elsewhere for citizens and others." And I said, "Well, that's fine." Bob said to me, "Has he said this in front of other people down there?" I said, "Yes, we're sitting here with about twenty people around the table." He said, "I don't believe we've got a problem." He said, "If he'll do that, I'll believe him. He's making a statement in front of his friends there. Do you believe him?" I said, "Yes, I think it's sound.

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It would be better if he'd make a statement on it." He said, "Well, don't worry about that. We can make a statement, and he won't deny it."

The night before in a conversation we had had, we had discussed the situation with Greyhound, and I had been given the name of the official at Greyhound. I'm not sure if it's the same one Bob had talked with earlier. It could've been. At any rate, Bob said, "I now suggest that you call him and tell him that's what Governor Patterson said and see what he says because he's reluctant to move. He thinks they're going to bomb and burn his bus." So I said to the Governor, "This is what the Attorney General suggests. How do you feel about it?" He said, "Call him, talk to him." So I called him. I got him at his office in Atlanta at the number that I'd been given and I said to him, "I'm sitting here with Governor Patterson. We've talked to the

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Attorney General, and Governor Patterson says he's able to protect all people within his state, citizens and visitors, on the highways and elsewhere, and that this they will do. We thought in light of that you might be interested in making certain that this bus moves from Birmingham down here to Montgomery and then on to New Orleans tomorrow, in view of the Governor's willingness to cooperate." And he said well, he'd want to talk to the Governor about it, and my impression from the Governor's conversation was that he expressed some real concern about the loss of busses at Anniston. Patterson apologized to him for that, assured him that that was an unfortunate incident; that it occurred because they had not had adequate advance notice; and that he felt sure nothing like that would happen in the future. And so I got back on the phone with this man. He

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said, "In the morning I'll have someone on the bus, driving it. We'll get it down. Thank you very much." I left. I thanked the Governor. He gave me his phone number. I wrote that on this notebook. Floyd Mann had a long conversation with me. He gave me his phone number. So John Doar and I went to dinner that night, and I thought I'd done a good day's work – made a substantial contribution.

The next morning Doar and I got up early. We were still in Montgomery. I checked with somebody, looked in the press, and Patterson had issued a statement saying in general

the same thing he had said to us the night before, except he had punctuated it with a few blasts at “trouble-making outsiders.” But the context of the statement was still there: “We’re going to protect the visitors and others on the highways and elsewhere.” And so I didn’t worry about

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that. Just before we left the motel, we found out that the driver at Birmingham had chickened out; that he wouldn’t drive. So I called the man in Atlanta with Greyhound, and he said, “There’ll be a driver on there.”

Doar and I went to breakfast and heard on the radio while we were on the way to breakfast that the bus had left. We had a leisurely breakfast, and Doar had some work at the federal building – the courthouse, really – which adjoined the bus station. I let Doar out at the bus station, and just as I let him out, I noticed a police motorcycle headed in the opposite direction. I didn’t pay any attention to it. I let him out and began to circle the block. The bus was not due for about a half an hour or so.

As I started up the street on the back side of the bus terminal, I looked across and saw that crowds had gathered. And as I drove slowly up, I saw suitcases and bags being hurled into

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the air, and people started shouting. I drove slowly on up, realizing then that the bus had come early and that there was trouble. I looked around for the police officer, but he was gone. I drove on up the street. A Negro boy in a blue suit, chased by about ten white men, came running across the street. A funny thing – the white man who was in the lead chasing him, really sort of holding the other back as he ran, was crippled, dressed in overalls. I thought, “That’s a fellow they’ll never catch.” I circled the block, came down on the other side, and the concrete parking area of the bus terminal looked like an anthill; people crawling, shouting, just a constant movement; people running, pushing, shoving, fighting to get in on these freedom riders who had just gotten off the bus. Bags were still being thrown into the air.

I came on down the front side, really, of the terminal

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and looked over, and I could see in the area where the bus had parked that some people were getting beaten. Just in front of me, maybe twenty yards, a girl was walking around with a circle of people around her taunting her. She was a white girl. There was a woman walking behind her – a little fat woman who looked like Nikita Khrushchev’s wife a little bit. A peasant woman type. She had a pocketbook with a strap, beating this girl over the head about every two or three steps. In front of the girl was a young, skinny kid who looked about fifteen years old, and was facing her and dancing backwards like a boxer and smacking her in the face. There was a second girl on the outer periphery of this circle that I did not notice. But

anyway, as I came along side of her, I saw an opportunity to....The curbing stopped, and there was a driveway up for the busses to come in, I

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guess. I pulled into that, and I blew the horn. I thought that I could pull up close to her and tell her to get in the car and then get away. As I pulled up, however, this woman either hit her with her purse or somebody pushed her hard, and she fell into the front fender of the car. I stopped and got out of the car, ran around the front and took them by surprise. I took her by the arm and said, "Are you hurt?" She was bleeding a little bit from the mouth. She said no. I pulled her around to the door and started to put her into the car. It was that far away. I then noticed that the other girl had gotten into the car on the other side, and I yelled over, "Who are you?" She said, "I'm with her." I said to her, "Get into the car." She was dazed, and she said, "Mister, get away. Leave me alone. You're going to get hurt. You're only going to get killed. This is not your fight." I said to her, "Get into the car," and I began to

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push her. She grabbed a hold of the car door and began to resist. At that time some man in khaki clothes said to me, "Who the hell are you?" I said, "Get back, get back. I'm a federal man." I turned back to her, and got it over the left ear.

I don't remember anything until some time later I came to, and I was sitting in the right hand front seat of the car with a policeman looking in the window. He had my notebook. Of course, the notebook had all sorts of names in it; Diane Nash of Nashville and Reverend Abernathy and Reverend Shuttlesworth and Floyd Mann and Patterson. I was pretty groggy, and I said, "What happened?" He said, "You've been hurt. You better sit still." I said, "You'd better call Mr. Kennedy." He said, "What Mr. Kennedy?" and I said, "Robert Kennedy." He said, "Why? Who are you?" I said, "I work for him. I'm with the

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Department of Justice. So it scared him. He opened the door of the car and said, "Get out." I got out, and as soon as I got on my feet, I passed out again.

I woke up in the hospital some time later again with the doctor who was there, an older fellow named Bartlett, talking to Whizzer on the telephone when I came around. He was saying, "He won't stay. He wants to leave. He wants to go." So then I got on the phone with Whizzer and he said, "Look, stay there. Bob's not here. He'll be back in a little bit, but you're going to have to stay there over night." I said, "This is going to cause an awful mess." He said, "It already has. Don't worry about it. Everything's all right. It's probably the best thing that couldn't have happened." They x-rayed me, and I had a concussion. They gave me a room on the downstairs floor and put guards on the doors and around the

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building. Floyd Mann came in and apologized. They had given them good protection all the way from the city limits of Birmingham to the city limits of Montgomery, but at Montgomery the state police protection had dropped off. Patterson had said the day before that after they got inside the city of Montgomery, it would be up to the local police, but they would notify the local police. We later found out they did this, but the local police just stayed away. I always had the feeling that the officer who was driving away really had checked to make sure that they were going to be met and then got away from there. But I had no way of proving that.

At any rate, Floyd Mann came in and apologized and said he was sorry. Bob called a little bit later and said, "How are you? How do you feel?" I said, "All right. I've got a small headache." We talked back and

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forth. Before we rung off I told him.... I said, "Let me give you some advice." He said, "Yes." I said, "Never run for Governor of Alabama. You couldn't get elected." He called pretty regularly. I told him I regretted it. He said, "There was nothing else you could do. I think you did what was right." I said, "it's going to create an awful stink." He said, "Well, the marshals are on their way." I said, "I regret that. I hate that. It's sort of like an invasion." He said, "Well, sooner or later something had to happen. This is what triggered it. You did the right thing. You did what you had to do. I talked to the President about it. He feels very strongly about it. We're moving in the proper direction." So that was it. A number of other things happened when I was in the hospital, but they're not relevant to this.

GRELE: Did the President call? Did you talk to the

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President at all about this incident?

SEIGENTHALER: No, I didn't. I left the hospital the next day and went back to Washington. He called after I got back to Washington.

GRELE: What did he say to you?

SEIGENTHALER: Pretty much the same thing Bob had said. It was a very brief call that night when I got in. He said, "We're glad you're back safe. You did what you had to do."

GRELE: Did this incident in Montgomery trigger any successive action in the Justice Department, or change anything?

SEIGENTHALER: Well, I think it was the first of a series. It was the first federal intervention on the part of the Kennedy Administration in the southern