

Date: August 28, 1963

Participants: John F. Kennedy, Roy O. Wilkins, A. Phillip Randolph, Walter P. Reuther

Tape: Meeting Tape 108.1 and 108.2

SCROLLER TITLE: "We're on Our Way"

SCENE SETTER: After the March on Washington, President Kennedy met with civil rights leaders to explore the opportunities and challenges associated with pending civil rights legislation. He stressed that Republican support would be essential for Congress to pass a bill that addressed jobs, job training, and public accommodations. While several among the group lobbied for a Fair Employment Practices Commission, Kennedy thought its inclusion might sink the bill's chances.

Roy O. Wilkins: We think today's demonstration, if it did nothing else, and I think this was the principal thing it did, showed that people back home, from the small towns, big cities, the working people, men who gave up two days' pay, three days' pay, paid 30 and 40 and 50 and 100 dollars, who flew from Los Angeles [California] at 300 dollars round trip to come here, it means that they and not Martin Luther King [Jr.] or Roy Wilkins or Whitney [M.] Young [Jr.] or Walter [P.] Reuther have dreamed up this civil rights business. They feel it in their hearts enough to come here and show, by their presence, to you and to the Congress, that what they hope their government will do.

End of excerpt 1.

A. Philip Randolph: And this is our most explosive question. To take the matter of accommodations, public accommodations, and this matter of jobs—they represent the powder kegs. They represent the dynamite in our various communities. And I know all we can do is to continue to repeat it, and we certainly have the greatest appreciation in the world for the sympathetic attitude that the President has, and the Vice President [Lyndon B. Johnson], also Secretary of Labor [W. Willard "Bill"] Wirtz [Jr.].

If we had had this attitude, say, two years ago, we would be a long way forward. But this we didn't have. But now, I think we're on our way, but we need to find some kind of a device, some kind of technique, some kind of tactic and strategy that will enable us to telescope certain areas of craft training and craft education so that we may be able to make a plumber and make an electrician, make a bricklayer and make a carpenter, in much less time than is now required to produce these people.

End of excerpt 2.

Walter P. Reuther: The other thing that I think will come out of this, as I said today in my speech: after we get the legislation, that only means we've got a set of tools to work with. It doesn't mean that automatically this problem is resolved. And what we have to do is to—is develop a broad coalition of men of goodwill in every community, where we've got to implement this program. And I think that this is what this march has done. It's brought into being an active, functioning coalition around this central question of equality of opportunity and first-class citizenship. And I think if we reflect this by practical work in each community, we can mobilize the community, we can mobilize the men of goodwill, and we can search for answers in the light of reason by rational, responsible action. Because if we fail, then the vacuum that we create with our failure is going to be filled by the apostles of hatred. And reason is going to yield to riots, and brotherhood is going to yield to bitterness and bloodshed.

End of excerpt 3.

President Kennedy: [*Unclear*—I just thought that, aside from all the things we can do in the government, and if we can get the Negro community to regard the education of their children as the—that’s really the best way out—I’m not talking about the southern problem or the discrimination, but just making education the same way that the Jewish community and to a degree the [*unclear*—

End of excerpt 4.

President Kennedy: I want to express thanks to you for coming and to tell you I think you did a great job and were very helpful to all of us, and we’ll stay in touch with you through Walter and particularly on this question of the head counts. I think when you go out, it would be a good time to indicate, Mr. Randolph, your strong judgment that both parties will be supporting the right thing. And I think [if] you could start that theme, it would be very useful. And maybe we’ll get this thing so bipartisan that we get Mr. [Charles A. “Charlie”] Halleck [R–Indiana]. [*Laughter.*]

End of excerpt 5.

CITATION: “John F. Kennedy, Eugene Carson Blake, Martin Luther King Jr., Floyd McKissick, Joachim Prinz, A. Philip Randolph, Walter P. Reuther, Roy O. Wilkins, and Whitney M. Young Jr. on 28 August 1963,” JFK Meeting Tape 108.1 and 108.2, *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition* [*Kennedy and Civil Rights*, ed. Kent B. Germany with Kieran K. Matthews and Marc J. Selverstone] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–). URL: <http://prde.upress.virginia.edu.proxy1.library.virginia.edu/conversations/4006294>