

## JFK Meeting Tapes 111.7 and 112.1

**Date:** 1963-09-19

**Participant:** John F. Kennedy

**Participant:** Martin Luther King Jr.

**Start Time:** 17:00

**Place:** Unspecified

SCROLLER TITLE: "The Destiny of Our Nation Is Involved"

SCENE SETTER: Four days after White supremacists bombed a church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four young Black girls, civil rights leaders descended on Washington, D.C., to plead for greater federal protection. With racial violence breaking out in the city, President Kennedy asked that all "keep their nerve" and stressed the need for support among White Americans in the cause of racial justice.

**Martin Luther King Jr.:** We come today representing Birmingham [Alabama] in general and, more specifically, some 200 business and professional, religious, labor leaders who assembled the day after the bombing to discuss the implications and to discuss the seriousness and the whole crisis that we face there in Birmingham.

And we come to you today because we feel that the Birmingham situation is so serious that it threatens not only the life and stability of Birmingham and Alabama, but of our whole nation. The image of our nation is involved, and the destiny of our nation is involved. We feel that Birmingham has reached a state of civil disorder.

*End of excerpt 1.*

**King:** Now, the real problem that we face is this: the Negro community is about to reach a breaking point. There is a great deal of frustration and despair and confusion in the Negro community, and there is a feeling of being alone and not being protected. If you walk the street, you aren't safe. If you stay at home, you aren't safe. There is a danger of a bomb. If you're in church now, it isn't safe. So that the Negro feels that everywhere he goes, if he remains stationary, he's in danger of some physical violence.

*End of excerpt 2.*

**King:** And I am convinced that if something isn't done to give the Negro a new sense of hope and a sense of protection, there is the danger we will face in that community the worst race rioting we've ever seen in this country. I think it's just at that point. I don't think it will happen if we can do something to save the situation, but I do think—and I voiced the sentiment [*unclear*] as well as those whom you met with the other day—that something dramatic must be done at this time to give the Negro in Birmingham and Alabama a new sense of hope and a good sense of protection.

*End of excerpt 3.*

**President Kennedy:** Now, it's tough for the Negro community. [*Someone coughs.*] On the other hand, what the Negro community's trying to do is a very important effort, which has implications all over the country. And I know that this bombing is particularly difficult. But if you look at any, as you know, any of these struggles over a period of, across the world, it is a very dangerous effort. So everybody just has to keep their nerve. [*Someone coughs again and continues to cough intermittently.*]

If the Negroes should begin to respond and shoot at Whites, we lose. And I think [George C.] Wallace [Jr.] has lost. I heard a southern senator with regard to the civil rights [bill] say to me today, what I hear from him, that Wallace has made a bad mistake. Now, if you get—Wallace is in a bad position. And it's because of you, gentlemen, the community, have conducted yourselves in the way you have, it's with you. But, of course, when the police starts going for guns, they'll shoot some innocent people, and they'll be White, and then that will just wipe away all this support that's been built up.

And there will be no—in the beginning—you can't get anything—I can't do very much, Congress can't do very much, unless we keep the support of the White community throughout the country, as a country. Once that goes, then we're pretty much really down to a racial struggle. So that I think we just got to tell the Negro community this is a very hard price, which they have to pay to get this job done.

*End of excerpt 4.*

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