

## JFK Meeting Tapes 112.6 and 113.1

**Date:** 1963-09-23

**Participant:** John F. Kennedy

**Participant:** Frank Newton

**Start Time:** 12:50

**Place:** Unspecified

SCROLLER TITLE: “We’ve Got to Make Progress in This Area”

SCENE SETTER: On 15 September 1963, a bomb exploded in a Black church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four girls inside. Four days after meeting with civil rights leaders about the ongoing crisis, President Kennedy met with several of the city’s White officials. In pleading with them to accommodate Black grievances, Kennedy both acknowledged and minimized their concerns about the implications of desegregating public accommodations.

**President Kennedy:** The particular problem in Birmingham [Alabama] is a problem for the city as well as the country. No one, obviously, who lives in Birmingham wants to keep seeing Birmingham get pasted every day or discussed every day. It doesn’t—it hurts the life of the community. People don’t want to move in there, [*unclear*] business, and all the rest. So the problem that I’m interested is to see what we could do, just speaking as a country, and really what you could do in Birmingham, to ease the situation there.

*End of excerpt 1.*

**President Kennedy:** I recognize that Birmingham is going to—the desire for a segregated society is going to remain very strong in the minds of the majority of the White citizens of Birmingham. And that’s the way they want to live, and that’s the way . . . that’s the way they feel.

*End of excerpt 2.*

**President Kennedy:** I understand that, and I understand that . . . that they feel that, and—but I’m just saying to you what I’ve tried to do is because I do feel we’ve got to make progress in this area. And I think that if confidence is lost in the national government by the Negro community as a whole—I’m not talking about these fellows because I don’t really think they can deliver—but if it’s lost and if there’s no support for what I would regard as a legitimate [*unclear*]*—*Let me make it clear that I regard getting on the police force as legitimate, and I regard people working as clerks in stores as legitimate, and I would do that if—and I don’t think that you can take any other position from the national point of view.

And my opinion is if you can integrate an armed service where you have to live together, eat together, use the same john, all the rest, you can in these cases work together, of the kind I’m talking about. That doesn’t mean that I think you can do anything about all the rest of the deeply held principles. We’re not talking about that. We’re talking about some things which are rather limited. But . . . [*speaking over the group*] So I believe in that kind of progress. Now—

**Frank Newton:** We believe that your public accommodations goes beyond that, though.

**President Kennedy:** [*disdainfully*] Oh, public accommodation is nothing. When I think what Harry [S.] Truman did in integrating the armed forces—to give you an honest answer, and a respectful one—that was really tough. [*Laughter.*] That was really tough. In the first place, most of the armed forces is made up of, a good proportion of them, are southerners, traditionally. But

imagine putting them together in a barracks, taking kids out of Mississippi and all the rest, putting them into a barracks, putting them under a Negro sergeant? They did that 15 years ago.

When I look back, in retrospect, that was really rough because the public accommodation section, when it finally passes, will say that if you, and it's—if you've got the money, you can go to a hotel or motel. How many Negroes are you going to see in a hotel or motel from one day to another? I've been running around Washington 15 years. How often do you see them in a motel or the Statler Hotel or the rest? And they will have a dollar limit because of the substantial effect on commerce. In my opinion that's a relatively mild bill, and that's why they're finally going to come out against it. The hard part that I can see is, if I were a southerner, is in education, in the schools. That's the tough one.

**Newton:** [*Unclear*]—

**President Kennedy:** That I completely understand, how tough that is, but not in public accommodations any more than whether a boy goes or a girl goes down to the university. That's nothing. But it's when you get down to secondary education, when you got 30 or 40 percent Negroes, I appreciate completely what that problem is. And, I mean, nobody's up here is naive about it or doesn't understand it.

I've seen what's happened in Washington, which got 54 percent Negro, and it's 85 percent—the Whites just running out of Washington. Nobody wants that. Public accommodations are nothing. My God, you can walk into a store or go into a hotel. Of course, they could go into the Statler Hotel, but they don't go into the Statler Hotel, and they won't be coming into your hotel in Birmingham. They will have the right to, but they won't have the money or the inclination.

So I don't think public accommodation, if you analyze it, is tough at all. I think integrating the [U.S.] Army was tough. I don't think going to the university was tough. I think the secondary school is really tough. I don't think jobs are tough. So that's at least where I—so, I'm—we're not . . . you know, I can—I understand what the problem is. You know, we're not just sitting up here—

**Newton:** [*Unclear.*]

**President Kennedy:** —unaware of what the southerners are up against. It's very easy. They won't let a Negro in the Metropolitan Club, which is the most exclusive club. All the columnists who write outrageous things about how terrible it is in Birmingham won't even let a Negro ambassador come into lunch!

Now, they're around telling you how to run your affairs. I understand Mississippi, where it's 45–50 percent Negro, where half of them, three-quarters, haven't gone beyond the sixth grade, what it means to try to integrate those schools. That's why, in my opinion, what you're going to get for years and years is a kind of—three or four or five will go in there. That—that's . . . that I understand, the gut feeling about that. But I don't understand the gut feeling about the police force, I don't understand the gut feeling about clerks, I don't understand the gut feeling about public accommodation, or about whether a student goes to [the University of Alabama in] Huntsville. Now, that's my feeling about it.

*End of excerpt 3.*

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