

## WH6407-01-4120

**Date:** 1964-07-02

**Participant:** Lyndon B. Johnson

**Participant:** Roy O. Wilkins

**Start Time:** 12:05

**Place:** Oval Office

SCROLLER TITLE: "Sign It as Soon as We Could"

SCENE SETTER: Acting on Attorney General Robert F. "Bobby" Kennedy's warnings about possible violence if the Civil Rights Act were signed before the Fourth of July holiday weekend, President Johnson turned to Roy O. Wilkins, the director of the national NAACP and one of his most frequently consulted Black advisers on civil rights issues, for advice.

**President Johnson:** Roy, I need to have you do a little hard thinking for me. [*Snorts.*]

**Roy O. Wilkins:** Yes.

**President Johnson:** This [civil rights] bill looks like it'll be ready late today. They're trying to filibuster it some in the House, and it may not be. But word got out that we might have a big celebration and signing ceremony on July the Fourth; that came from some of the people on the Hill. And we talked around here about it, and nearly everybody concluded that the wise thing to do was to sign the bill as soon as we could and name the conciliation director [of Community Relations Service] as soon as we could after it became available. So we planned tentatively to do that this evening.

**Wilkins:** Yes.

**President Johnson:** Question has been raised now . . . I've talked to Louis [E.] Martin [Jr.] and some of the folks here, and they think we ought to sign it soon as we can after it's passed. But the question has been raised now that if we sign it that quick, that Saturday throughout the South is a big day when everybody's in town shooting firecrackers, and it's the Fourth of July and celebrating, and the fellows get a few drinks of beer, and we could kick off a wave of trouble that would wind up a lot of people getting hurt, and maybe we ought to wait until after the weekend. Now, we've already tentatively announced that we're going to do it tonight—

**Wilkins:** Yes.

**President Johnson:** —if the bill's available. That is my better judgment, but I thought before I did it that maybe I better check with one or two of my friends and let them think about it and see what their judgment was. They know the situation better than I do maybe.

**Wilkins:** Mr. President, I think the idea, which has already been suggested, of signing it as soon as it's available is the correct idea. I think you have the right hunch here. I think a delay would simply mean that you felt that you . . . [*slight chuckle*] ought to delay signing it, you know? It would be interpreted that way.

**President Johnson:** I'll tell you another thing that worries me: the Republicans are leaving for their convention, and they're getting out tonight.

**Wilkins:** That's right.

**President Johnson:** Congress is not going to be in session in the House tomorrow.

**Wilkins:** That's right.

**President Johnson:** And I'm afraid, I don't know whether they'd come or not, but it was bipartisan, and I think that when the—we ought to have Republican legislators like [Thomas H. "Tommy"] Kuchel [R-California] and like [Charles A. "Charlie"] Halleck [R-Indiana] just the same, [Everett M.] Dirksen [R-Illinois], just like we have [Hubert H.] Humphrey [Jr.] [DFL-Minnesota].

**Wilkins:** That was my second reason. The first one had to do with the problem, perhaps, of violence, but the second one is that the Republicans do deserve a chance at this.

**President Johnson:** That's what I think, and I think they'd charge me with trying to be cute and put off signing after it was ready to sign—

**Wilkins:** That's right.

**President Johnson:** —until after they'd left town.

**Wilkins:** That's right. That's right. [*President Johnson coughs.*] And this is the overwhelming political reason. [*President Johnson acknowledges.*] And that's what's being talked about in Washington—I was there last night—and they said the Republicans wanted a chance at it, and that's the reason it's being moved up, and I think it would be regarded as a gracious gesture on your part to sign it promptly so they could take part in the ceremony and go about their convention.

**President Johnson:** Yeah, all right.

*End of excerpt.*

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