

LBJ and the Summer of '64

President Sought Advice After 3 Civil Rights Workers Vanished

By Peggy Fikac
Associated Press

AUSTIN, Feb. 15—It was June 23, 1964, and President Lyndon B. Johnson was dealing with the disappearance of three young civil rights workers in Mississippi.

He was given sharply differing opinions on the situation by Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy and Mississippi officials, according to tape recorded telephone conversations released Friday by Johnson's presidential library.

Before the day was over, the civil rights workers' car had been found in flames and Johnson knew the country was in for a long, hard summer.

Kennedy told Johnson aide Jack Valenti, before the car was found, that the president should meet with the missing workers' parents and express "personal concern for them and for their families."

"I think it's the human equation that's damn important . . . for everything," Kennedy told Valenti.

Less than an hour later, Sen. James O. Eastland (D-Miss.) told Johnson he believed the whole thing was a hoax.

"I believe it's a publicity stunt," Eastland said. "I don't think there's a damn thing to it."

"There's not a Ku Klux Klan in that area. . . . There's no organized white man in that area," Eastland said. "Who could possibly harm them?"

When Johnson told Eastland that he believed it might be best for him to have an aide meet with the workers' parents instead of doing so personally, Eastland agreed.

"I think it's going to turn out that there's nothing to it," Eastland said.

Forty days after they disappeared, the bodies of civil rights workers Andrew Goodman, 20, Michael Schwerner, 24, and James Chaney, 21, were found buried in an earthen dam not far from Philadelphia, Miss.

Eight Klansmen went to prison on federal conspiracy charges. But none served more than six years, and the state of Mississippi never filed murder charges.

The case inspired the 1988 film "Mississippi Burning," starring Gene Hackman, Willem Dafoe and Frances McDormand.

Johnson met with the workers' parents after learning from FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover that the car had been found, still burning. Hoover said it was assumed the three had been killed.

Johnson ventured: "Or maybe kidnapped and locked up."

But Hoover said: "I doubt whether those people down there would even give them that much of a break."

When it was later determined that no bodies were in the car, Johnson conveyed that news to Schwerner's mother and Goodman's father. "That was a little hope that we didn't have earlier, and I thought we would enjoy it as long as we could," he told Schwerner's mother.

Johnson also told the parents that Mississippi Gov. Paul Johnson was making state facilities available and working with the FBI. But the governor was pessimistic: "I frankly don't think that they will find them anywhere, except perhaps in another part of this country."

The governor said he shared the president's concern about the situation.