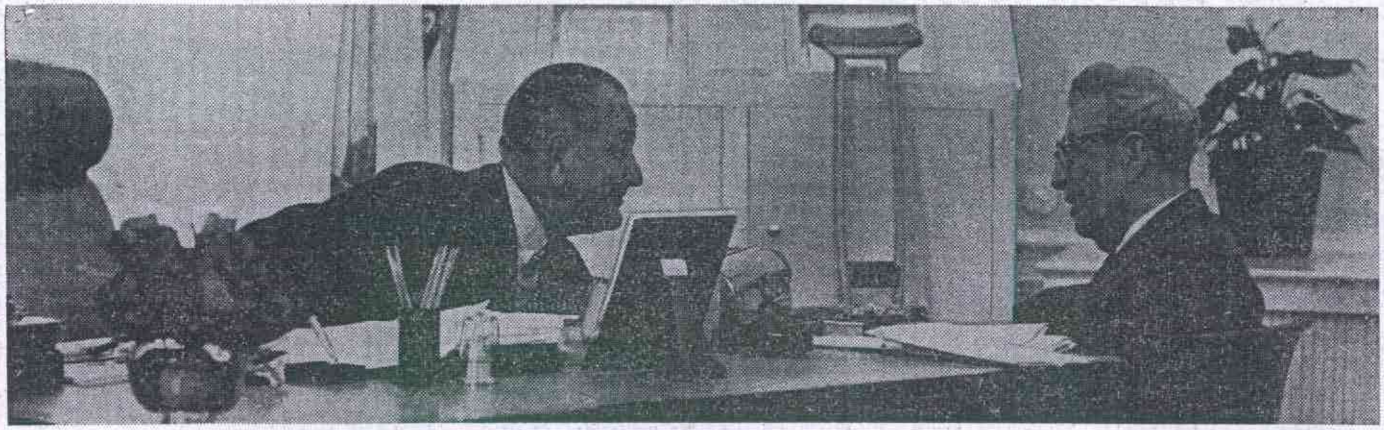


Photo by Y. R. Okamoto

Mr. Johnson confers with Sen. Everett Dirksen, minority leader who supported key civil rights legislation.

'Growing Up' in Race Relations

This is the fifth of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.

"THE STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE"

When I was in the Senate, we had an extra car to take back to Texas at the close of each congressional session. Usually my Negro employees—Zephyr Wright, our cook; Helen Williams, our maid; and Helen's husband, Gene—drove the car to the Ranch for us. At that time, nearly twenty years ago, it was an ordeal to get an automobile from Washington to Texas—three full days of hard driving.

On one of those trips I asked Gene if he would take my beagle dog with them in the car. I didn't think they would mind. Little Beagle was a friendly, gentle dog.

But Gene hesitated. "Senator, do we have to take Beagle?"

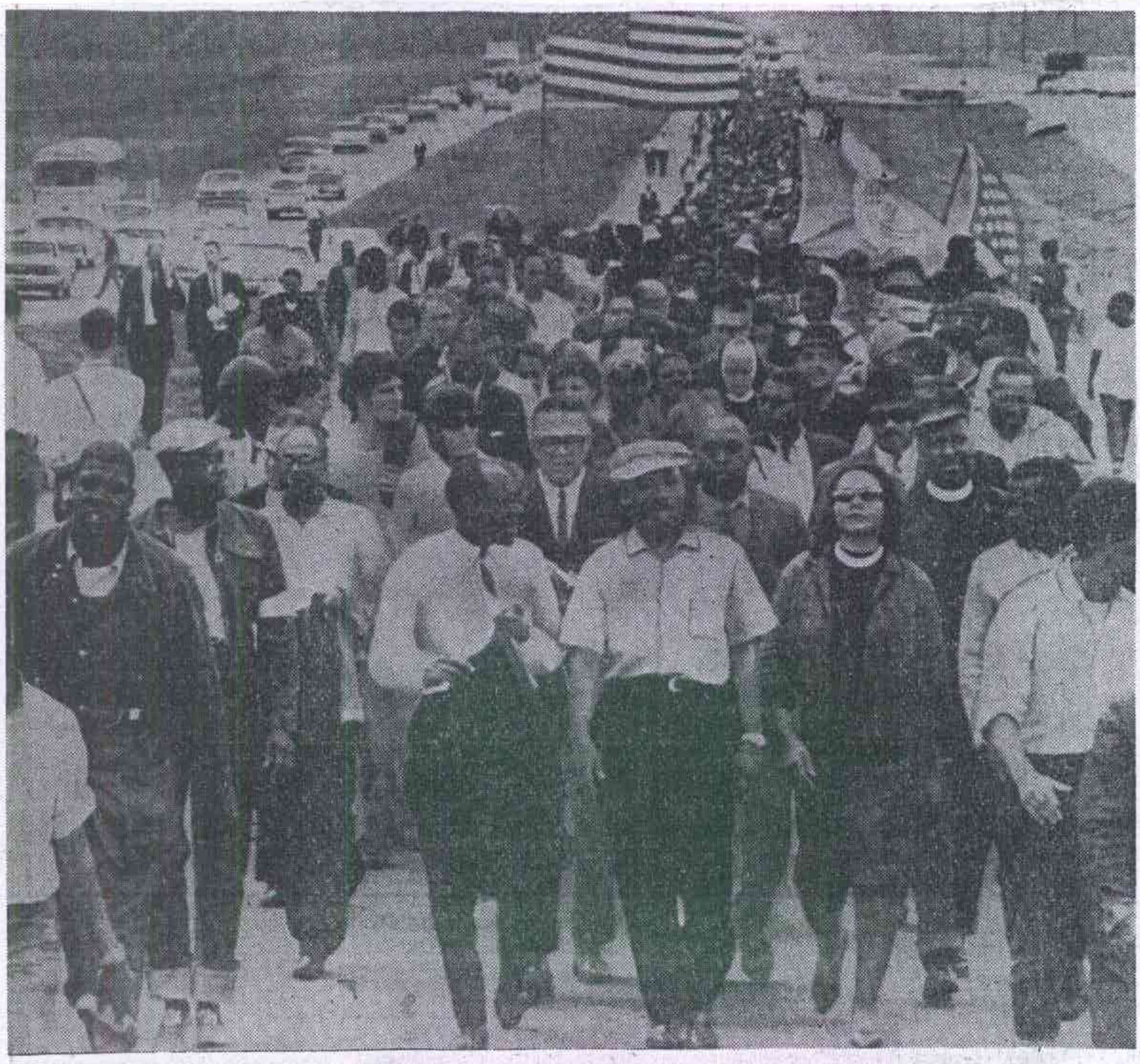
"Well," I explained, "there's no other way to get him to Texas. He shouldn't give you any trouble, Gene. You know Beagle loves you."

But Gene still hesitated. I didn't understand. I looked directly at him. "Tell me what's the matter. Why don't you want to take Beagle? What aren't you telling me?"

Gene began slowly. Here is the gist of what he had to say: "Well, Senator, it's tough enough to get all the way from Washington to Texas. We drive for hours and hours. We get hungry. But there's no place on the road we can stop and go in and eat. We drive some more. It gets pretty hot. We want to washup. But the only bathroom we're allowed in is usually miles off the main highway. We keep going 'til night comes—'til we get so tired we can't stay awake any more. We're ready to pull in. But it takes us another hour or so to find a place to sleep. You see, what I'm saying is that a colored man's got enough trouble

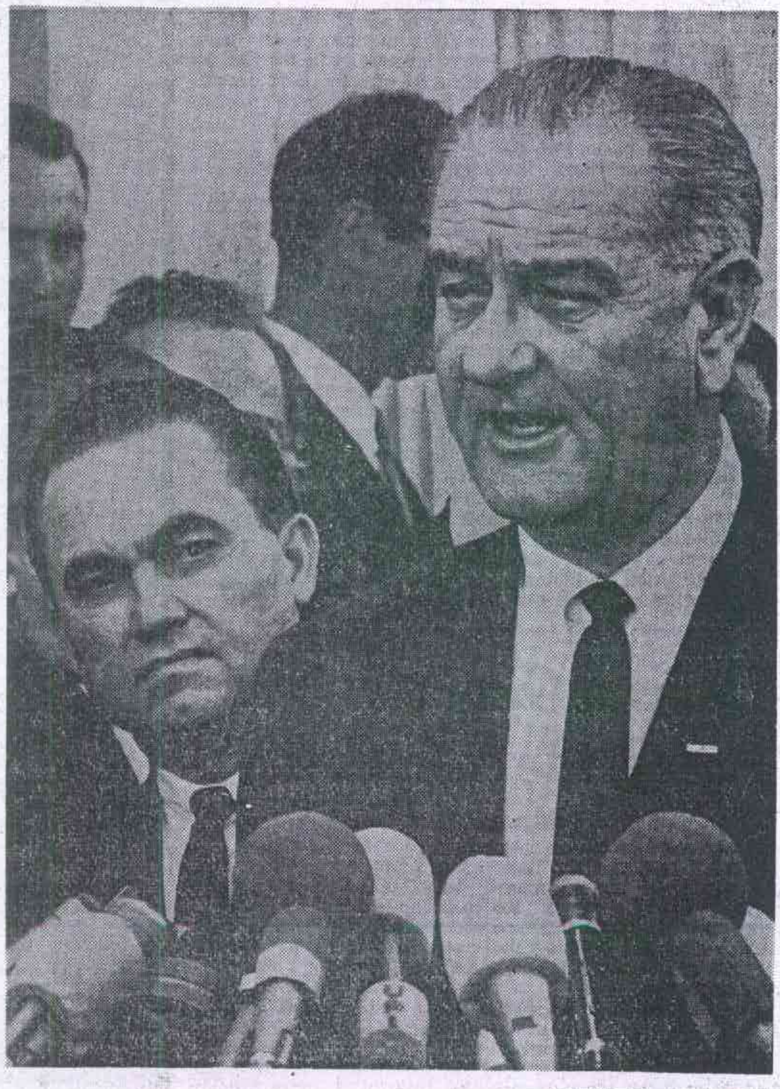
See JOHNSON, A16, Col. 1

LBJ's
Vantage Point



Associated Press

Selma-to-Montgomery march, 1965: "The capstone of their campaign . . ."



United Press International

Alabama Gov. George Wallace listens as Mr. Johnson tells newsmen of three-hour meeting on Selma racial crisis.

JOHNSON, From A1

getting across the South on his own, without having a dog along."

Of course, I knew that such discrimination existed throughout the South We all knew it. But somehow we had deluded ourselves into believing that the black people around us were happy and satisfied; into thinking that the bad and ugly things were going on somewhere else, happening to other people.

There were no "darkies" or plantations in the arid hill country where I grew up. I never sat on my parents' or grandparents' knees listening to nostalgic tales of the antebellum South. In Stonewall and Johnson City I never was part of the Old Confederacy. But I was part of Texas. My roots were in its soil. I felt a special identification with its history and its people. And Texas is a part of the South—in the sense that Texas shares a common heritage and outlook that differs from the Northeast or Middle West or Far West.

That Southern heritage meant a great deal to me. It gave me a feeling of belonging and a sense of continuity. But it also created—sadly, but perhaps inevitably—certain parochial feelings that flared up defensively whenever Northerners described the South as "a blot on our national conscience" or "a stain on our country's democracy."

These were emotions I took with me to the Congress when I voted against six civil rights bills that came up on the House and Senate floor. At that time I simply did not believe that the legislation, as written, was the right way to handle the problem. Much of it seemed designed more to humiliate the South than to help the black man.

Beyond this, I did not think there was much I could do as a lone Congressman from Texas. I represented a conservative constituency. One heroic stand and I'd be back home, defeated, unable to do any good for anyone, much less the blacks and the underprivileged. As a Representative and a Senator, before I became Majority Leader, I did not have the power. That is a plain and simple fact.

But what stands out the most when I think of those days is not my Texas background or my Southern heritage but the recognition that I was part of America growing up. This was an America that accepted distinctions between blacks and whites as part and parcel of life, whether those distinctions were the clear-cut, blatant ones of the South or the more subtle, invidious ones practiced in the North. This was an America misled by a mask of submissiveness and good nature that hid the deep despair inside the hearts of millions of black Americans.

So there was nothing I could say to Gene. His problem was also mine: as a Texan, a Southerner, and an American.

All these attitudes began to change in the mid-1950s and early 1960s.

With the Democratic victory in the 1954 congressional election, I was promoted from Minority Leader to Majority Leader of the Senate. My national responsibilities, as well as my ability to get things done, increased. I was aware of the need for change inside myself.

But nothing makes a man come to grips more directly with his conscience than the Presidency. Sitting in that chair involves making decisions that draw out a man's fundamental commitments. The burden of his responsibility literally opens up his soul. No longer can he accept matters as given; no longer can he write off hopes and needs as impossible.

In that house of decision, the White House, a man becomes his commitments. He understands who he really is. He learns what he genuinely wants to be.

So it was for me. When I sat in the Oval Office after President Kennedy died and reflected on civil rights, there was no question in my mind as to what I would do. I knew that, as President and as a man, I would use every ounce of strength I possessed to gain justice for the black American. My strength as President was the tenuous—I had no strong mandate from the people; I had not been elected to that office. But I recognized that the moral force of the Presidency is often stronger than the political force. I knew that a President can appeal to the best in our people or the worst; he can call for action or live with inaction.

Even the strongest supporters of President Kennedy's civil rights bill in 1963 expected parts of it to be watered down in order to avert a Senate filibuster.

One man held the key to obtaining cloture: the Minority Leader of the Senate, Everett Dirksen.

Dirksen could play politics as well as any man. But I knew something else about him. When the nation's interest was at stake, he could climb the heights and take the long view without regard to party. I based a great deal of my strategy on this understanding of Dirksen's deep-rooted patriotism.

A President cannot ask the Congress to take a risk he will not take himself. He must be the combat general in the front lines, constantly exposing his flanks. I tried to be that combat general. I gave to this fight everything I had in prestige, power, and commitment. At the same time, I deliberately tried to tone down my personal involvement in the daily struggle so that my colleagues on the Hill could take tactical responsibility — and credit; so that a hero's niche could be carved out for Senator Dirksen, not me.

* * *

The theme of "law and order" became a major thrust of Senator Goldwater's campaign for the Presidency in 1964. I shared the growing concern about violence, but I believed the real danger, far more profound than violence and far more perilous, was the increasing alienation of the black citizens from American society. Our representative system was based on the joint premise that all citizens would be responsible under the law and that the law would be responsive to the needs of all citizens But in the field of human rights a significant number of citizens had not been fully served by our system. I feared that as long as these citizens were alienated from the rights of the American system, they would continue to consider themselves outside the obligations of that system. I tried to state this position as fully as I could in the Presidential campaign. I wanted a mandate to move forward, not simply a sanction for the status quo.

On November 3, 1964, the American voters gave me that mandate. I moved to use it quickly. I directed Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach to begin the complicated task of drafting the next civil rights bill—legislation to secure, once and for all, equal voting rights.

We all knew that the prospects for congressional passage were unpromising, but we decided to go ahead. I

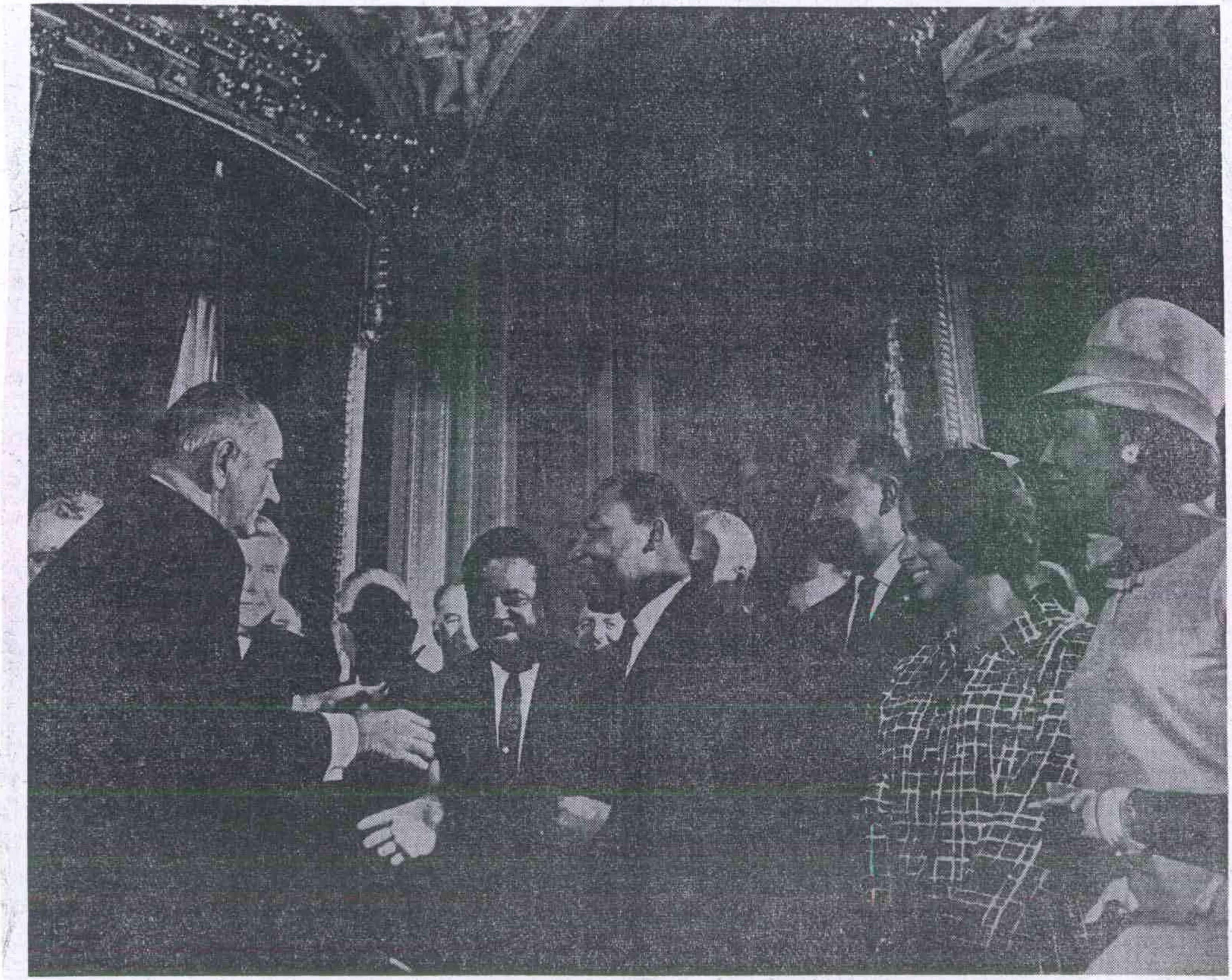


Photo by Y. R. Okamoto

Voting Rights Bill is signed in presence of Ralph Abernathy, Martin Luther King Jr., Clarence Mitchell, and Patricia R. Harris.

would work within the federal government; the black leadership would take their cause directly to the people.

The capstone of their campaign was a fifty-four-mile march through Alabama from Selma to Montgomery.

Meanwhile, there was a storm of public protest to contend with. In front of the White House scores of demonstrators marched up and down with placards: "LBJ, just you wait . . . see what happens in '68" . . . "LBJ, open your eyes, see the sickness of the South, see the horrors of your homeland."

Once again my Southern heritage was thrown in my face. I was hurt, deeply hurt. But I was determined not to be shoved into hasty action. If only there were some way to assure protection for the marchers without the drama of using federal troops; if only the State of Alabama would exercise its state's right and assume its constitutional obligation.

My hopes were answered on Friday, March 12 when Governor Wallace wired me requesting a special meeting to discuss the situation in Selma. I replied immediately that I would be "available at any time." An appointment was set for twelve noon the next day. We sat together in the Oval Office. I kept my eyes directly on the Governor's face the entire time. I saw a nervous, aggressive man; a rough, shrewd politician who had managed to touch the deepest chords of pride as well as prejudice among his people.

The meeting with Wallace proved to be the critical turning point in the voting rights struggle. Several days later I received word from the Governor that the State of Alabama was unable to bear the financial burdens of mobilizing the National Guard. The state could not protect the marchers on its own. It needed federal assistance. I gave such assistance immediately. I signed an Executive order federalizing the Alabama National Guard.

So the troops went in after all. They went in by order of the President, because the Governor said Alabama couldn't afford them financially. But they were not intruders forcing their way in; they were citizens of Alabama. That made all the difference in the world.

* * *

The long history of Negro-white relations had entered a new and more bewildering stage. New problems of racial discrimination came to the forefront: the problems of poverty, slums, inadequate schooling, unemployment, delinquency, and substandard housing. These problems could not be solved entirely by laws, crusades, or marches.

No longer could the struggle for justice be regarded as a peculiarly Southern problem. Nor could it be regarded as a problem to be solved entirely by improved attitudes in the white community. The effect on the black man of centuries of discrimination had become all too visible in the form of apathy, hatred, anger, and violence. The problems at this stage could not be solved by goodwill and compassion; they required large expenditures of public funds.

We were beset by contradictions — movement and progress alongside stalemate and retrogression. Nowhere were these contradictions experienced more deeply than in the black community, where hopes aroused by the early victories were bright but hostilities caused by the persistent gap between promise and fulfillment were deep. It was a volatile mixture.

A new mood began to develop in the black community, symbolized by the "black power" slogan. When asked about black power in 1966, I responded: "I am not interested in black power or white power. What I am concerned with is democratic power, with a small d." As I look back now, that answer seems totally insufficient. It is easy for a white man to say he is "not interested in black power or white power." Black power had a different meaning to the black man, who until recently had had to seek the white world's approval and for whom success had come largely on white people's terms. To such a man, black power meant a great deal in areas that mattered the most — dignity, pride, and self-awareness.

As the mask of black submission began to fall, the countless years of suppressed anger exploded outward. The withering of hope, the failure to change the dismal conditions of life, and the complex tangle of attitudes, issues, beliefs, and circumstances all led to the tragic phenomena known as "the riots" — "the long, hot summers."

The black and stifling smoke had scarcely lifted from the streets of Detroit when an even thicker smoke descended upon the Capitol, the smoke of partisan politics. In this dense atmosphere my concern for constitutional requirements was interpreted by critics as "playing politics," and throughout the country the deep-seated, demanding problems of the ghettos were overshadowed by oversimplified talk of a black conspiracy.

I believed then and believe now that we can never achieve a free society until we suppress the fires of hatred and turn aside from violence, whether that violence comes from the nightriders of the Ku Klux Klan or the snipers and looters in Detroit. Neither old wrongs nor new fears justify arson or murder. A rioter with a Molotov cocktail in his hands is not fighting for civil rights any more than a Klansman wearing a sheet and a mask.

When violence breaks out, my instinct is to ask: What caused it? What can I do about it? It is necessary to search for the deeper causes from which anger and tension grow, the privations and indignities and evidence of past oppression or neglect. In the 1960s that evidence was all too plentiful.

I would have been delighted to have had an appropriation of an additional $30 billion to solve the problems of our cities, but I knew that was unrealistic. Setting such an unattainable goal could easily have produced a negative reaction that in turn might have endangered funds for the many invaluable programs we had fought so long to establish and were trying so hard to strengthen and expand.

A President cannot appropriate public funds by fiat. Nor can he be, as President Theodore Roosevelt once wished, both "President and Congress, too."

A President's limitations are never more evident than when he hears of the death of another man. In that ultimate situation a President is only a man and can do little or nothing to help. I rarely have felt that sense of powerlessness more acutely than the day Martin Luther King, Jr., was killed.

The trouble in Washington, D.C., was just beginning. Crowds had started forming at 14th and U Streets, Northwest, at the first word of the King shooting.

By the next day entire blocks of buildings were going up in smoke. Helmeted troops were patrolling the littered streets. Before the holocaust was over, forty other cities had experienced similar tragic outbreaks—Chicago, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Kansas City, Trenton, Youngstown, Jacksonville, and on and on and on, from coast to coast.

Perhaps the most disturbing thing about the April riots was the fact that so many of us almost instinctively expected them to happen as soon as the news of Dr. King's death was made known. Were we becoming conditioned to the violence? That prospect disturbed me far more than the initial shock of Watts or Detroit.

I decided that we should seize the opportunity and press for an open housing law. For two years we had struggled unsuccessfully for legislation to prohibit discrimination in the sale and rental of housing.

I went against my advisers on this one. But one man stuck with me—Clarence Mitchell.

Late in February Senator Dirksen shifted his position.

Speculation immediately centered on the motive behind Dirksen's switch. The rumor mill explanied his shift as based on a supposed promise from Washington to "force" the Democratic party in Illinois to deliberately put up a weak candidate to assure Dirksen's victory in his forthcoming campaign for reelection.

I never once discussed supporting Dirksen's 1968 Illinois election with him. No President could "force" a strong local party, headed by as forceful a person as Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago, to commit political hara-kiri — especially over a bill that most of his constituents did not want anyway.

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