

**CIVIL RIGHTS DURING
THE JOHNSON
ADMINISTRATION,
1963-1969**

**Part IV:
Records of the White House
Conference on Civil Rights,
1965-1966**

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Conference on Civil Rights,
1965–1966**

**Edited by
Steven F. Lawson**

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The Lyndon Baines Johnson Library,
Austin, Texas**

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August Meier and Elliott Rudwick
General Editors

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NOTE ON SOURCES

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EDITORIAL NOTE

These documents have been filmed in their entirety with the exception of duplicate material, which has been omitted.

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INTRODUCTION

Records of the White House Conference on Civil Rights

The White House Conference on Civil Rights occurred at a crossroads for the civil rights movement and the administration of Lyndon B. Johnson. Originally conceived in mid-1965 by the President and his advisers at the height of cooperation between civil rights workers and the federal government, the conference was held a year later amidst deteriorating relations between many activists and Washington. Paradoxically, much of the tension grew out of the very successes of the freedom movement. The struggle for passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, filled with frustration and danger, placed a severe strain on relations between black protesters and white liberals and drove a wedge between former interracial allies. This rift widened during the year in which planning for the White House Conference took shape. Members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) questioned such traditional civil rights goals and tactics as integration and nonviolence and condemned President Johnson's conduct of the war in Vietnam, which they regarded as racist. At the same time, when black racial violence erupted in northern urban ghettos, the Johnson administration felt the sting of a sharp white backlash against moving too far and too fast in promoting civil rights.

In this highly charged atmosphere, the civil rights conference generated a storm of controversy. Mandated to explore ways "to secure the rights" that lawmakers had already extended to blacks, the planners of the meeting ran into immediate trouble in trying to formulate an agenda. A suggestion for including a discussion of the Negro family triggered an angry dispute that nearly terminated the conference prematurely. To black leaders a report written by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Moynihan appeared to suggest that black economic and social problems had their roots in the pathology of the Negro family. They feared that white opponents might interpret this as meaning that blacks were themselves to blame for their impoverishment. The White House heeded their concern and the disputed subject was dropped from the program. Apprehensive over the furor this issue created and distressed over the increasing black mili-

tancy that it reflected, the President's advisers attempted to steer the conference in a moderate direction. A preliminary meeting of 200 participants was convened on November 1 and 2, 1965, to discuss potential topics; and during the next six months a blue ribbon council decided on a final agenda which included sessions on economic security and welfare, education, housing, and the administration of justice. The president took the added precaution of appointing as conference chairman Ben Heineman, the head of the Chicago and North Western Railway, whom LBJ considered sound on civil rights issues.

The gathering of some 2,500 carefully selected guests on June 1 and 2, 1966, came off without a hitch. Although SNCC boycotted the meeting, representatives of the major civil rights organizations participated along with scholars, public officials, community organizers, and civic and religious leaders. They broke up into panels and discussed recommendations that had been prepared in advance by the planning council. Attempts to bring up resolutions against the administration's escalation of the conflict in Southeast Asia were easily defeated. The final report of the conference called for proposals to solve economic, social, and legal problems through combined governmental and private action. The President, increasingly preoccupied with the Vietnam War and troubled by domestic strife at home, did not respond to the suggestions with any sense of immediacy. Nevertheless, some of the offerings were incorporated into the Civil Rights Act of 1968, the last of the major racial reforms legislated during the Johnson era.

The records of the White House Conference on Civil Rights detail this pivotal period in liberalism and race relations. They provide a view of the attempt by the Johnson administration to manage a volatile social movement while also remaining faithful to its civil rights promises. These working papers furnish insights into the thinking of both black critics and supporters of the Johnson White House at a time when appeals to "black power" and retaliatory violence were gaining popularity. They also make it possible to reconstruct the political considerations that guided the conference and to reexamine the substantive racial problems to which the participants directed their attention. The voluminous correspondence and memoranda of conference officials and staff, transcripts of the proceedings, and technical reports compiled by expert consultants will allow historians, sociologists, political scientists, economists, and legal scholars to study the enduring problems of racial discrimination. In addition, the reminiscences of many of the conference planners and participants can be found in "Part III, Oral Histories," of *Civil Rights during the Johnson Administration, 1963-1969*, which is also available from University Publications of America.

Steven F. Lawson, Editor
University of South Florida

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