

Interview after Release
from Georgia State Prison at Reidsville

27 Oct
1960

[27 October 1960]
[Reidsville, Ga.]

On 26 October, Massachusetts senator and presidential candidate John F. Kennedy telephoned Coretta Scott King from Chicago and expressed his concern about her husband's imprisonment.¹ Kennedy's brother and campaign manager Robert initiated a series of calls to Georgia officials, including Judge J. Oscar Mitchell, reportedly to inquire into King's right to bail.² The following day, King was released on a \$2,000 appeal bond after eight days imprisonment.³ In this interview, King concedes that Kennedy "served as a great force in making the release possible." While King maintained a nonpartisan stance in the presidential race, his father publicly announced he was switching his support from Nixon to Kennedy in light of the Democratic candidate's call to his daughter-in-law.⁴ This transcript is drawn from television news footage.

[King]: I understand from very reliable sources that Senator Kennedy served as a great force in making the release possible. [gap in film] I think a great deal of Senator Kennedy. I have met him, and I've talked with him on three different occasions since the nomination, and I think a great deal of him. But I would not, at this point, endorse any candidate because of the nonpartisan position that I follow.

[Interviewer]: Some who say that you espouse the Supreme Court as being the law of the land and yet you break another law by taking part in sit-ins. What comment have you on that?

[King]: I would simply say that a law can only be a valid law if it is a just law, as St. Augustine said centuries ago. If a particular law is not in line with the moral laws of the universe, then I think a righteous and just person has no alternative but to protest against that unjust law. I urge people to follow the Supreme Court's

1. Coretta Scott King later recalled that Kennedy had said: "I want to express to you my concern about your husband. I know this must be very hard for you. I understand you are expecting a baby, and I just wanted you to know that I was thinking about you and Dr. King. If there is anything I can do to help, please feel free to call on me" (*My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, p. 196).

2. Following King's release, Kennedy campaign headquarters confirmed Robert Kennedy's call to the judge but insisted that "any suggestion that interference was involved is untrue" (Charles Moore and Gene Britton, "King Freed on \$2,000 Bond, Flies Home from Reidsville," *Atlanta Constitution*, 28 October 1960; see also Bruce Galphin, "His Call Misinterpreted, Robert Kennedy Says," *Atlanta Constitution*, 1 November 1960). For further discussion of Robert Kennedy's efforts on King's behalf, see Introduction, pp. 38-40.

3. Harold Ross, owner of the Fulton Bonding Company, provided the money for King's release (John Britton, "Minister Flies Back to Atlanta from Reidsville," *Birmingham World*, 2 November 1960).

4. Moore and Britton, "King Freed on \$2,000 Bond." In a second interview, King acknowledged that he was "deeply indebted" to Kennedy for his help (King, Interview on John F. Kennedy's role in release from prison, 27 October 1960). For more on King and the presidential election, see King, Statement on Presidential Endorsement, 1 November 1960, and King to Ray A. Burchfield, 5 November 1960, pp. 537-540 and 542-544 in this volume, respectively.

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decision of 1954 because I think that particular decision is in line with the moral law of the universe. That decision establishes a fact that persons should be treated as persons and not things, so that I would urge everybody to follow that law. But if there are laws that are out of harmony with the moral law of the universe then I think we have a moral obligation to disobey those unjust laws in order to bring man-made laws into harmony with the law of God or the moral laws of the universe.

[*Film shows King's release from the Georgia State Prison at Reidsville*]

[*Interviewer*]: Dr. King, have you heard anything from Vice President Nixon or any of his supporters?

[*King*]: No, I haven't. I've been confined for the last eight days, and I haven't talked with anybody, actually, from Washington or from the campaign.⁵

[*Interviewer*]: Do you know whether any efforts were made on behalf of the Republican headquarters to help you?

[*King*]: No, I don't. I haven't heard of any efforts being made, and I don't know of any personally.

[*Interviewer*]: Do you know of any efforts made on behalf of the Kennedy group?

[*King*]: Well, I understand that the Kennedy group did make definite contacts and did a great deal to make my release possible. I don't know all of the details of this just coming out of [*gap in film*]

[*Interviewer*]: [*words inaudible*] you to vote for Kennedy?

[*King*]: Well, I would not like to make a public statement concerning the person for whom I will vote because I follow a nonpartisan course and, heading a non-partisan organization, namely the Southern Christian Leadership Conference [*film interrupted*]

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5. Following reports of Kennedy's role in King's release, Republican nominee Richard Nixon was criticized in some circles for his silence. Gloster B. Current, an NAACP official, commented at a conference that "Vice President Nixon may have thrown away a large segment of the Negro vote by his failure to speak out on the King arrest" ("NAACP Says Nixon Hurt in King Case," *Atlanta Constitution*, 31 October 1960). E. Frederic Morrow, the first African American appointed to an executive position in the White House, similarly recalled that Kennedy's phone call "won the election" and that the newly elected president "had keen, intelligent Negro advisers" that "he obviously listened to" (Morrow, *Black Man in the White House* [New York: Coward-McCann, 1963], p. 296).