

Church Bombing 16th Street Birmingham

The Birminghams 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing and its Consequences

By: R. Renée Bembry

In a September 16, 1963 statement expressing outrage and grief regarding the killing of four African American children at a church bombing in Birmingham Alabama, then President John F. Kennedy pinpointed “public disparagement of law and order” as instigators of the incident.

At the time of the bombing, Alabama’s Governor, George C. Wallace, was in noncompliance of court-ordered public school desegregation throughout his state. Due to the President’s statement, including references to the nation and “Alabama” coming together in order to inspire peaceful progress between the races before more people lost their lives, Pierre Salinger, White House press secretary at the time, upon completing the statement to reporters on the President’s behalf was questioned as to whether or not the statement was aimed at the Governor’s noncompliance. Salinger’s response to their question was, “The statement speaks for itself. You can read it any way you want.”

The President’s statement went on to say that the United States was “committed” to “domestic justice and tranquility”; and he asked all citizens to put aside their “passions and prejudices” in order to meet U.S. goals.

Despite the President’s praising Alabama’s “Negro” leaders for preaching and exercising restraint in reaction to the bombing, his possible indirect denouncing of Governor Wallace’s

defiance, and his assignment of government officials to oversee the effort to ascertain the bombing perpetrators; civil rights leaders didn't consider his actions sufficient and requested federal intervention be more forceful. After Salinger mentioned the President had partaken in official discussions regarding the bombing before going to bed that night, he (Salinger) was questioned if the President's statement was made over concern of a telegram he'd received from Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. following the bombing. It was suggested that the President had received such a telegram and that the telegram insinuated a lack of immediate action from the Federal Government "to protect life, limb and property", would subject Birmingham to racial holocaust, unlike any holocaust the nation had ever seen.

Rather than directly address the reporters question, Salinger reiterated his "the message speaks for itself" line but added that: "Those who send messages usually receive replies."

Further demands from the African American Community that the Government take more concrete action went to the President via telegram from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The telegram read: "If we are not to have more picayune and piecemeal aid against this type of bestiality, please tell us now so that we can marshal such resources as we possess and employ such methods as our desperation may dictate in defense of the lives of our people".

Senate responses to the bombing included Senator Jacob K. Javits' (New York) demands to expedite civil rights legislation. He asserted that a change in Administrative strategy could speed up civil rights legislation by four weeks. Javits also said Governor Wallace could not escape a portion of responsibility for the bombing.

Governor Wallace was criticized for offering \$5000 for the arrest and conviction of the bombers. John P. Roche, the

national chairman of American's for Democratic Action, released a statement addressing Wallace's attempts to block court-ordered school desegregation in which he referred to Wallace's offer of reward as "blood money", and suggested Governor Wallace was "as guilty as if he himself had planted the bomb" because his nonconforming lead had instigated the bombers' defiance.