



HANDOUT 1

DO-NOW ON THE 1965 VOTING RIGHTS ACT

From the website of the [United States Department of Justice](#):

The Voting Rights Act, adopted initially in 1965 and extended in 1970, 1975, and 1982, (sic and 2006) is generally considered the most successful piece of civil rights legislation ever adopted by the United States Congress. The Act codifies and effectuates the 15th Amendment's permanent guarantee that, throughout the nation, no person shall be denied the right to vote on account of race or color. In addition, the Act contains several special provisions that impose even more stringent requirements in certain jurisdictions throughout the country.

Clifford Alexander served as Special Counsel to President Lyndon B. Johnson and the White House staff from 1964 to 1967, and was later appointed Chairman of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. In the Interview Archive, he offers this account of the passage of the Voting Rights Act:

"I think that it's very important and never been done to talk about how a bill becomes a law. A bill does not become a law by a conversation of two people with one person. Now, how did this happen? It happened through the pressure of people before Martin Luther King and Andy Young, people like A. Philip Randolph, several white people who also did, and that affected the members of Congress to the extent that they saw that for their future, it would be important to get on the right side of this issue. So, before you had [President Lyndon] Johnson talking to King and Andy about the possibility of a Voting Rights Act, you had a lot of generation of energy, thoughts, visits, drafts done by people in the executive branch, over at the Justice Department, within the White House staff itself, outside forces, some lawyer groups or other groups giving what their thoughts were, other civil rights groups coming in with their thoughts. Then you also had in the Congress, 'cause they're the ones who vote on this by the way, so you can have all the goodwill in the world, but if you can't get the votes doesn't make a damn bit of difference. So, in the Congress, what you had to have was a pressure, specific kind of pressure, on them that they saw to it or they felt about this pressure that their future was at stake . . .

"The media got off its blind horse and started to cover what indeed was happening to black people in America. The physical denials to them, the physical [assaults] against them, the denials of opportunity, the lack of job opportunities, the insults of the segregated water fountains. All of these things were going on at the same time. Finally, you had a camera that was focused on these things. So, you wake up and you get up in the morning and you see your morning news, and you see the Bull Connors¹ of the world with their outrageous behavior, or you see that people trying to go to school are taken on by the [George] Wallaces² of the world. . .

"Very few members of Congress, senators or members of Congress, do things just because it's right or we'd have a far better world than we have today. So, they do something because there's pressure on it. Now, the understanding of pressure, the understanding of how to execute pressure was something that both Martin and Lyndon understood. Now, Lyndon Johnson pressured you a very different way than Martin Luther King did, and images of Martin Luther King more than the specific words, what he was willing to do on behalf of people, what he was willing to take on behalf of people. But we have to remember that it ain't all about Martin. A. Philip Randolph, Dorothy Height, Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins³, all of these and hundreds and thousands more who over the years had not only lobbied but helped draft or helped go for these things. "

1. Bull Connor was a Selma, Alabama public safety commissioner known for his racist policies and harsh tactics used against civil rights activists.

2. George Wallace was a governor of Alabama, and presidential candidate, who favored racial segregation and opposed the Civil Rights Movement.

3. A. Philip Randolph, Dorothy Height, Whitney Young, and Roy Wilkins were prominent activists within the Civil Rights Movement.