
The Integration of the University of Alabama

Two students ignite a showdown between state and federal government

Since 1954, African-American students have been testing the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which states that separate-but-equal education is unconstitutional. They have been attempting to enroll in previously all-white schools at every level. When they apply for admission to state universities, and their applications are denied, they take the university to court, often with legal help from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. This is what James Meredith did last year. He was admitted to the University of Mississippi on October 1, 1962, but only after President Kennedy sent US marshals to escort him and federal troops to quell mob violence on campus. In the Deep South, it is common for major publicized confrontations to occur around the enrollment of black students at state universities.

Alabama is now the only remaining state with no integrated public schools, and two black students, Vivian Malone and James Hood, have applied for admission to its university in Tuscaloosa. Alabama Governor, George Wallace, who proclaimed “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever” in his inaugural address, says *Brown v. Board of Education* doesn’t apply in his state. On June 5, 1963, the US District Court for the Northern District of Alabama rules that it does, and that the university must admit Malone and Hood. Governor Wallace promises to “stand in the schoolhouse door” and block their entry.

President Kennedy and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, have learned from their experiences last year at the University of Mississippi. Malone and Hood are scheduled to register at the university on June 11. Nicholas Katzenbach, the Deputy Assistant Attorney General, will accompany them and keep the president and attorney general informed by phone.

That day, a crowd gathers outside Foster Auditorium, where the two students will attempt to sign up for classes. The governor, as promised, blocks the doorway. “I stand here today,” he proclaims, “as governor of this sovereign state and refuse to willingly submit to illegal usurpation of power by the central government.” Katzenbach confronts the governor and hands him the president’s orders to step aside. When Wallace refuses, the president is informed and he signs an order federalizing the Alabama National Guard. The commander of the Guard politely asks the governor to move, and he does. Malone and Hood are allowed to enter the university, but Wallace believes he has won: America has witnessed his stand. That night, President Kennedy addresses the nation on television and radio. He explains what happened in Alabama today, and announces his commitment to a far-reaching civil rights legislation.

March 19, 1963: Jeff Bennett calls Burke Marshall, the assistant attorney general. He has a report from a meeting with leaders of the University of Alabama system and Governor Wallace. They have discussed how to handle another black student’s application to an Alabama school that is different from the one Vivian Malone and James Hood will try to enter. **Meanwhile, In Huntsville (Memo)**

April 25, 1963: Robert Kennedy and Governor George Wallace meet in Montgomery, Alabama. The governor says his role is to see that the laws of Alabama are “faithfully executed.” The attorney general reminds Wallace that his state is in the United States. **The Law is the Law (Transcript)**

May 1963: A showdown at the University of Alabama is coming up. Robert Kennedy, attorney general, does not want it to become another Oxford, Mississippi crisis – rioting took lives there last year when federal marshals escorted James Meredith into the University of Mississippi. Perhaps a few phone calls could make a big difference. **Calling For Support (Memo)**

May 22, 1963: “What will the president do?” a reporter asks. The governor of Alabama has announced that he will block black students from entering his state’s university. The president responds. **Kennedy’s Game Plan (Video)**

May 22, 1963: Just yesterday, the governor of Alabama made a statement about the situation brewing at the university. In President Kennedy’s news conference today, reporters will probably ask his thoughts on this. Burke Marshall helps the president be prepared. **Prep for the Press (Memo)**

May 28, 1963: Dr. Frank A. Rose, president of the University of Alabama, has asked for a meeting with two FBI agents. Rumor has it, KKK members are taking hotel rooms in the area. And that’s not all. **Extremely Confidential (Memo)**

May 31, 1963: There are a couple of ways the US Department of Justice can handle this University of Alabama situation. Also, there are a few things that will need to happen, no matter what. Nicholas Katzenbach explains. **Integration: Possible Approaches (Memo)**

June 3, 1963: Dr. Fields is the informational director of the National States Rights Party. He wants Attorney General Robert Kennedy to know that his group will be in Tuscaloosa to help Governor Wallace take a stand against federally enforced integration. **Against the Federal Government (Telegram)**

June 3, 1963: Arthur Weisenburger likes an idea he saw in the *New York Times*. The president should “go to Alabama on June 10th and walk in with those two Negro students.” **To Kennedy from Arthur Weisenburger (Letter)**

June 7, 1963: The idea Weisenburger read about in the newspaper has “been among those considered” by the president. White explains why the president will not take this approach. **To Arthur Weisenburger from Lee White (Letter)**

June 9, 1963: Governor Wallace is getting ready for the showdown. He tells the president – and he has already told the attorney general – that he will call “500 National Guardsmen” into service tonight. **Troops at My Command (Telegram)**

June 10, 1963: President Kennedy has learned that Governor Wallace plans to “maintain law and order” tomorrow by bringing in the National Guard. Kennedy’s response: the only threat to order is the governor himself. **Troops are Not Needed (Letter)**

June 11, 1963: “Should we shake hands with the Governor?” This is Nicholas Katzenbach’s only remaining question. Otherwise, he has every step perfectly planned for the US Department of Justice officials in Tuscaloosa and the students in their care. **What to Expect Today (Memo)**

June 11, 1963: Because Governor Wallace has ignored Proclamation 3542, the president issues Executive Order 11111. The secretary of defense is now legally instructed to do what it takes to “remove obstructions to justice in the State of Alabama.” **Executive Order 11111 (Executive Order)**

June 11, 1963: The president is done asking. Governor Wallace has only promised to stick to his plan. So President Kennedy commands Wallace and anyone else “engaged in unlawful obstructions of justice” to step aside. Nicholas Katzenbach delivers the proclamation by hand. **Proclamation 3542 (Proclamation)**

June 11, 1963: Vivian Malone and James Hood do enroll at the University of Alabama, but only after a dramatic stand by Governor Wallace. Later tonight, President Kennedy speaks to the nation on radio and television about today’s events, and what he believes needs to happen for civil rights in America. **Face-Off in Tuscaloosa (Newsreel)**

June 11, 1963: Debbie Terrel describes herself “as a hot tempered kid.” She wants the president to know why she has lost respect for him, and why she stands behind Governor Wallace. **To Kennedy from Debbie Terrel (Letter)**

June 11, 1963: Patsy Vesely wants to know why “colored people . . . insist on going to school with the white people?” She admires Governor Wallace and was moved by his speech today. **To Kennedy from Patsy Vesely (Letter)**

June 13, 1963: Governor Wallace sends a telegram to President Kennedy. He has heard that his state troopers have been ordered by the president’s military commander to leave the university campus today. The governor says he will keep them there. **In the Name of Safety (Telegram)**

June 15, 1963: The president responds to the governor about how long will the National Guard will remain on campus at the University of Alabama. “The duration of their duty,” the president writes, “is largely up to you.” **On Wallace’s Watch (Telegram)**

July 18, 1963: The president’s assistant special counsel replies to Patsy Vesely’s many questions. On behalf of the administration, he calls her views “interesting,” and shares another viewpoint. **From Lee White to Patsy Vesely (Letter)**

June 24, 1963: James Barr, the mayor of Trussville, Alabama, wrote to Governor Wallace nine days ago. He shares that letter with the president. It applauds the governor for his “making a stand for the freedoms that we all cherish so dearly.” **To Kennedy from James W. Barr (Letter)**

November 16, 1963: J. W. Cameron reports. A bomb exploded this morning near Vivian Malone's dormitory. It has been months since she started school at the University of Alabama, but it seems some people want her out, including Governor Wallace. **Vivian Malone: Tuscaloosa Target (Memo)**