

The
PRESIDENTIAL
RECORDINGS

JOHN F. KENNEDY

➔➔➔➔ *THE GREAT CRISES, VOLUME ONE* ➔➔➔➔

JULY 30–AUGUST 1962

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Thursday, August 30, 1962

The President did not tape any meetings on August 30, just some telephone conversations. Choosing a successor to Arthur Goldberg as secretary of labor was the first order of business for Kennedy. The President was not acquainted with Willard Wirtz, Goldberg's deputy at Labor, but Wirtz had influential allies in the labor movement. Minutes after entering the Oval Office this morning, Kennedy called one of them, Walter Reuther, the president of the United Auto Workers, to discuss nominating Wirtz.

9:30 A.M.

I don't know Wirtz, you know, very well.

Conversation with Walter Reuther¹

Walter Reuther was prepared to give his warm support for Willard Wirtz, the under secretary of labor. Wirtz, a labor lawyer, had previously taught law at the University of Iowa and Northwestern University and had been a member of both the War Labor Board and the National Wage Stabilization Board. He had also been a key member of Adlai Stevenson's 1956 presidential campaign.

The recording begins with Reuther's endorsement of Wirtz.

Walter Reuther: Members of the labor movement would hope that you could get somebody from the labor movement. I think that under the circumstances that Willard Wirtz is perhaps the person best qualified to take Arthur's place at the moment.

President Kennedy: Yeah, yeah.

Reuther: And I think that he would receive very wide support.

1. Dictabelt 33.2, Cassette K, John F. Kennedy Library, President's Office Files, Presidential Recordings Collection.

President Kennedy: Right, right. I don't know Wirtz, you know, very well.

Reuther: [*Unclear.*]

President Kennedy: You know, I just see him very—

Reuther: Well he's a man of great integrity and competence. And I think who has a good understanding of what the labor movement is about, and I think would be able to work quite well with people.

President Kennedy: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Reuther: See, I think that to try to get somebody in the labor movement very quickly would create a very, there are very serious stresses and strains at the moment. You perhaps have been reading the papers. I don't know whether Arthur's talked to you or not.

President Kennedy: Yeah, yeah.

Reuther: But the meeting we had in Chicago, the council, was a very sad one.²

President Kennedy: Yeah, yeah.

Reuther: And as a matter of fact I was going to get in touch with you. Arthur and I ought to sit down before he moves over and talk about where we're going.

President Kennedy: Right, right. Well, I'll tell him to do that.

Reuther: Because, you know, what happens in the AFL-CIO affects you and affects everyone.

President Kennedy: That's right, that's right.

Reuther: And we've got some very very serious problems. And I think it might be well if the three of us could really sit down to chat about them.

President Kennedy: Well, I'll get him as soon as he comes back from Chicago.

Reuther: I'm going to be in Washington next week.

President Kennedy: Well, why don't we meet then?

Reuther: All right. We ought to try to do that before he goes over.

President Kennedy: Could you give Kenny a call?³ Yeah, I'm not going to send his name up for a week or so because I want him to do a few more things.

2. At an AFL-CIO executive meeting in Chicago on 14 August 1962, Reuther and Meany had gotten into a shouting match over Meany's veto of the nomination of Reuther's nominee to head the Packinghouse Workers, Ralph Helstein. Meany and Reuther were bitter rivals [see Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p. 367].

3. Kenny was Kenneth O'Donnell, special assistant to the President.

Reuther: Yes.

President Kennedy: Perhaps you could let Kenny know when you're going to be here.

Reuther: I'll let Ken know, so we can sit down and chat.

President Kennedy: Now, if we're going to take somebody from the labor movement who would you suggest?

Reuther: Well, really offhand, I'm not in a position to make a suggestion.

President Kennedy: Yeah.

Reuther: It's a very difficult decision because of these internal stresses and strains.

President Kennedy: Yeah, yeah.

Reuther: And I think that under the circumstances, Willard Wirtz. I talked to a number of our friends in the labor movement about this, and their reaction to Willard Wirtz is very good.

President Kennedy: It is, yeah.

Reuther: I think that he would be a good choice, and I think that most people would be quite happy about him.

President Kennedy: Right. OK, fine. Well, I'll be in touch with you as soon as I get this thing in shape. I want to do it today anyway, and I wanted to get your judgment.

Reuther: Very good. And I'll be in touch with Kenny [O'Donnell] about our getting together.

President Kennedy: OK, good.

Reuther: Bye.

President Kennedy: Thanks, Walt.

Reuther: Bye.

After this call to Reuther, the President shifted to other matters. Surrounded by the congressional leadership and a representative from the government of the Philippines, Kennedy signed the Philippines War Damage Claim Bill. Left for dead by midsummer, this bill had revived along with most of Kennedy's legislative agenda in recent weeks. Another pleasant duty followed, as representatives of the Tenth International Games for the Deaf dropped by to see the President for a few minutes. Finally, before returning to his quest for a secretary of labor, the President spent half an hour with the Venezuelan minister of defense, Brigadier General Antonio Briceno-Linares.

George Meany of the AFL-CIO entered the Oval Office at 11:00 A.M. It was not enough for Kennedy to have secured Reuther's support for

Wirtz. He wanted Meany on board as well. The AFL-CIO president demanded veto rights over any administration nomination on labor issues and had not warmly supported Goldberg's nomination in 1961.

But today Meany was prepared to support the President's choice. Having received both Reuther's and Meany's support, Kennedy was ready to make the offer to Willard Wirtz.

11:26 A.M.

Listen, I wondered if you would come along on this secretary of labor?

Conversation with Willard Wirtz⁴

The President called Wirtz to ask him to be secretary of labor, replacing Arthur Goldberg. Wirtz would serve as secretary of labor for the next seven and a half years, leaving in January 1969.

President Kennedy: Hello?

Lincoln: Yes?

President Kennedy: Do you want to get me Secretary Wirtz on there. What?

Hello? Hello?

Willard Wirtz: Hello, Mr. President.

President Kennedy: Will, how are you?

Wirtz: Good.

President Kennedy: Listen, I wondered if you would come along on this secretary of labor?

Wirtz: Why, yes sir.

President Kennedy: Good. Fine. [*Wirtz laughs.*] Well, that would be fine. I'll go ahead and announce it then in the next half hour or so.

Wirtz: Well, very good Mr. President.

President Kennedy: I talked to George Meany, and he's very strong for it, and will issue a good statement—

4. Dictabelt 33.3, Cassette K, John F. Kennedy Library, President's Office Files, Presidential Recordings Collection.

Wirtz: Good.

President Kennedy: —and Walter [Reuther], so that I think we'll get good support.

Wirtz: Sorry we couldn't end up with one out here last night.

President Kennedy: I know it. Well, Goddamn it, they're crazy.

Wirtz: Blue-chip game, too.

President Kennedy: Yeah I know it, with the —

Wirtz: Wouldn't be right to legislate.

President Kennedy: Yeah, yeah. Good, OK, fine, well, we'll move ahead then, and I'll put it out in the next hour or so.

Wirtz: Much obliged, Mr. President.

President Kennedy: Thanks a lot. OK, bye.

Wirtz: Bye.

After speaking with Wirtz, the President welcomed General Lucius Clay and General Maxwell Taylor for a discussion of the situation in Berlin. Before beginning this meeting, Kennedy decided to inform the country's labor leadership that Willard Wirtz would be replacing Arthur Goldberg.

11:30 A.M.

Now, wait a sec, have to get them all in the next, just be sure and sort of keep them separate.

Conversation with a White House Operator⁵

Operator: Waiting.

President Kennedy: I want to get Walter Reuther in Detroit—

Operator: All right.

President Kennedy: —George Harrison of the Railroad Brotherhoods who's in Washington—

Operator: Um-hm.

President Kennedy: —and Dave McDonald of the Steelworkers.

5. Dictabelt 33.3, Cassette K, John F. Kennedy Library, President's Office Files, Presidential Recordings Collection.

Operator: All right.

President Kennedy: Now, wait a sec, have to get them all in the next, just be sure and sort of keep them separate.

Operator: OK.

President Kennedy: Right, thank you.

Operator: All right sir, thank you.

The White House operator was able to reach George Harrison before Walter Reuther. The President relayed the news about his selection of Willard Wirtz first to Harrison of the Railroad Brotherhood.

11:33 A.M.

I don't know why they all want to go into retirement up there [to the Supreme Court], but they do.

Conversation with George Harrison⁶

Kennedy began recording after the start of the conversation with the head of the Railroad Brotherhood.

President Kennedy: Substitute that would be at least at this point as satisfactory as Will [Wirtz].

George Harrison: Yeah, well, and on the other hand too, I want to offer my congratulations on the appointment of Arthur Goldberg.

President Kennedy: Yeah, well I hate to lose him. I don't know why they all want to go into retirement up there [to the Supreme Court], but they do.

Harrison: Yeah, you're losing a good right arm there.

President Kennedy: Good, fine. Well, I'll see you soon, George.

Harrison: Well fine, many thanks.

President Kennedy: Thank you.

Harrison: Bye.

6. Dictabelt 33.4, Cassette K, John F. Kennedy Library, President's Office Files, Presidential Recordings Collection

11:35 A.M.

Listen, I'm going ahead with Willard Wirtz. . . .

Conversation with Walter Reuther⁷

President Kennedy: Hello?

Unidentified: Hello.

Operator: [*Unclear.*]

President Kennedy: Hello?

Operator: Yes, sir.

President Kennedy: You got Mr. Reuther on there?

Operator: No, just . . . Ready, sir.

President Kennedy: Hello?

Reuther: Hello.

President Kennedy: Hello, Walter. Listen, I'm going ahead with Willard Wirtz, and I'm going to announce it in just a few minutes.

Reuther: Very good. I think that's a good choice. And I think that most of the public generally, and the labor movement will accept that.

President Kennedy: Oh, good, fine, well that's good, and I'll be looking forward to seeing you.

Reuther: Very good. Now, I'm going to get ahold of Arthur [Goldberg], what about late Tuesday or sometime on Wednesday for our getting together?

President Kennedy: Oh, that would be fine.

Reuther: I'll be in touch with Ken [O'Donnell] about it.

President Kennedy: OK, good.

Reuther: Very good.

President Kennedy: Thanks a lot.

Reuther: Thanks for calling.

President Kennedy: Bye, Walt.

Reuther: Bye.

Following these telephone calls and the conclusion of his meeting with Generals Lucius Clay and Maxwell Taylor, the President walked over to

7. Dictabelt 33.5, Cassette K, John F. Kennedy Library, President's Office Files, Presidential Recordings Collection.

the Fish Room to announce the appointment of Willard Wirtz. A visit from Prince Juan Carlos of Spain and Princess Sophia followed, and then Kennedy spent some time with older Peace Corps volunteers.

In the afternoon, after his customary three-hour midday break, the President had only one scheduled meeting. He saw Maxwell Taylor, the incoming Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for a second time that day.

The President did not tape any meetings or telephone calls on August 31.