

## What do you hear?: Investigating the Integration of the University of Mississippi

**Topic:** Civil Rights; The Job of the President

**Grade Level:** Grades 8-12

**Subject Area:** US History

**Time required:** 0-1 hour

### Goals/ Rationale

In the fall of 1962, the college town of Oxford, Mississippi, erupted in violence. At the center of the controversy stood James Meredith, an African American air force veteran who was attempting to register at the all-white University of Mississippi, known as "Ole Miss." Mississippi's refusal led to a showdown between state and federal authorities and the storming of the campus by a segregationist mob. Two people died and dozens were injured. In the end, the university, the state of Mississippi, and the nation were forever changed.

In this activity, students will read a transcript and listen to an excerpted audio recording of a secretly taped phone conversation excerpt between President Kennedy, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett. The students' goal is to identify information the audio recording can provide beyond what they have learned from reading the transcript of the phone call.

**Essential Question:** How do audio recordings enhance historical interpretation?

### Objectives

Students will be able to:

- create a narrative about a phone conversation between President Kennedy and Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett.
- analyze what additional information an audio recording can bring to historical interpretation.

### Prior Knowledge and Skills

#### Historical Background

In January 1961, James Meredith, a 27-year-old African American Air Force veteran, resident of Mississippi, and student at the all-Black Jackson State College, decided that he wanted to transfer to the all-white University of Mississippi, known as "Ole Miss."

The standard application for "Ole Miss" required letters of recommendation from six alumni. In submitting his application, Meredith wrote to the Registrar that he could not provide these references "because I am a Negro and all graduates of the school are White. Further, I do not know any graduate personally." Instead, he included references from other African American Mississippians. Meredith's application was rejected, but he continued in his efforts to gain admission to the school. In a letter to Thurgood Marshall, then a lawyer with the NAACP, he wrote: "My long-cherished ambition has been to break the monopoly on rights and privileges held by the whites of the state of Mississippi... ..I am making this move in what I consider the interest of and for the benefit of: (1) my country, (2) my race, (3) my family, and (4) myself."

The NAACP took up his case, and the ensuing court battles lasted more than a year--with the state of Mississippi ruling that Meredith should not be admitted, and the federal courts overturning the ruling. When the Supreme Court on September 10, 1962 ordered the university

to enroll Meredith for the fall term, it looked as though the legal challenge to Meredith's admission could not be sustained.

But, back in Mississippi, the people in power were not ready to give up. Governor Barnett gave a state-wide TV speech on September 13, calling the integration ruling "our greatest crisis since The War between the States" and deeming the Court order, "tyranny of judicial oppression."

Meredith attempted to register several times, but his entrance was blocked by Governor Barnett and other state officials. During ongoing telephone conversations between Governor Barnett and the White House, President Kennedy sought ways for Meredith to register without involving U.S. troops.

The Kennedy Library microsite *Integrating Ole Miss* lets visitors witness the events firsthand through the actual letters, recorded telephone conversations, and images of those who made history. The "Days of Confrontation" section includes audio recordings and transcripts of conversations between President Kennedy, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and Governor Barnett. Additionally, the Kennedy Library's microsite *The President's Desk*, includes a four-minute excerpted conversation (with transcript) between the Kennedys and Governor Barnett. Beginning in September 1962, President Kennedy secretly recorded phone conversations from the White House. Historians have found these recordings very helpful in understanding events that occurred during Kennedy's Administration.

## Materials

Background reading: "James Meredith and the Integration of the University of Mississippi" (included in this PDF)

[Excerpted audio recording and transcript of a September 28, 1962 telephone conversation between Attorney General Robert Kennedy, President Kennedy and Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett](#)

## Procedure

1. Provide students with background information about James Meredith and the integration of the University of Mississippi either as a homework reading ("James Meredith and the Integration of the University of Mississippi") or by your own introduction in class.
2. In class, discuss the question "Why might President Kennedy have recorded his telephone conversations?" Explain that we have no clear answer to this question.
3. Have students go to *The President's Desk* microsite and read the transcript from the [four-minute September 28, 1962 audio recording](#) of the excerpted conversation with Governor Ross Barnett. (Scroll to the second card --the conversation is the last one on the card.) Tell them to "pause" the audio on their computers so that they completely focus on the transcript without hearing the voices. The pause button is on the card, to the left of "Governor Ross Barnett."

As they are reading, have them consider the following questions:

- a. How might you describe each man's tone? (friendly, nervous, confrontational, conversational, placid, etc.)
- b. If you were President Kennedy would this conversation give you confidence that Governor Barnett is working to prevent violence in Mississippi? Why or why not?
- c. What do you think is happening in the conversation when you see the notation of ellipses (. . .)?
- d. Why do you think Kennedy "laughs" after the statement from Barnett below?:

Barnett: . . . but you all might make some progress that way, you know.

[JFK laughs]

JFK: Yeah. Well, we'd be faced with, uh . . . I'm, I, unless we had your support . .

4. Ask students to create a narrative about what they interpret happened in the phone conversation.

5. Now, have students listen to this recording.

As they are listening (they may read along, if they wish), have them consider the following questions:

- a. Is there anything that strikes you about the interaction between the two men?
- b. How might you describe each man's tone? (friendly, nervous, confrontational, conversational, placid, etc.)
- c. If you were President Kennedy would this conversation give you confidence that Governor Barnett is working to prevent future violence in Mississippi? Why or why not?
- d. When you hear President Kennedy's laughter, how would you characterize it?

Barnett: . . . but you all might make some progress that way, you know.

[JFK laughs]

JFK: Yeah. Well, we'd be faced with, uh . . . I'm, I, unless we had your support . .

6. Ask students to go back to their narrative and see if they want to revise what they have written. (It may be that they do not need to revise anything.)

### **Assessment**

Tell students that one of the benefits to an audio recording of a phone call is that it is possible to hear the tone and inflection of participants' voices to get a better understanding of their emotions and intentions. Have student respond to the following prompt (either in written form or orally): What new understanding about the conversation did you get from listening to the recording that you did not get from reading the transcript excerpt?

### **Extension**

Ask students to respond to the following prompts: How do you think the telephone conversation might have been different if Ross Barnett knew that it was being recorded? How do you suppose the President and Attorney General would justify secretly taping their phone calls with the governor? Do you believe they were right to do it? Explain.

### **Connections to Curriculum (Standards)**

#### *National History Standards*

US History, Era 9: Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s)

- Standard 3: Domestic policies after World War II
- Standard 4: The struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties

#### *Common Core State Standards*

- ELA College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language
- ELA – Reading Informational Texts, Writing, Speaking and Listening, Language, and Literacy in History/Social Studies for grades 9-10 and 11-12

*C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards*

- Discipline 2 - Applying disciplinary concepts and tools (History and Civics)
- Discipline 4 - Communicating conclusions and taking informed action

*Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework*

- USII.T5 - United States and globalization

*Massachusetts English Language Arts Framework*

- Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language

## **James Meredith and the Integration of the University of Mississippi**

In January 1961, James Meredith, a 27-year-old African American Air Force veteran, resident of Mississippi, and student at the all-Black Jackson State College, decided that he wanted to transfer to the all-white University of Mississippi, known as “Ole Miss.”

The standard application for “Ole Miss” required letters of recommendation from six alumni. In submitting his application, Meredith wrote to the registrar that he could not provide these references “because I am a Negro and all graduates of the school are White. Further, I do not know any graduate personally.” Instead, he included references from other African American Mississippians. Meredith’s application was rejected, but he continued in his efforts to gain admission to the school. In a letter to Thurgood Marshall, then a lawyer with the NAACP, he wrote: “My long-cherished ambition has been to break the monopoly on rights and privileges held by the whites of the state of Mississippi... I am making this move in what I consider the interest of and for the benefit of: (1) my country, (2) my race, (3) my family, and (4) myself.”

The NAACP took up his case, and the ensuing court battles lasted more than a year--with the state of Mississippi ruling that Meredith should not be admitted, and the federal courts overturning those rulings. When the Supreme Court on September 10, 1962 ordered the university to enroll Meredith for the fall term, it looked as though the legal challenge to Meredith’s admission could not be sustained.

But, back in Mississippi, the people in power were not ready to give up. Mississippi Governor Barnett gave a state-wide TV speech on September 13, calling the integration ruling “our greatest crisis since The War between the States” and deeming the Court order, “tyranny of judicial oppression.” Meredith attempted to register several times, but his entrance was blocked by Governor Barnett and other state officials.

During ongoing telephone conversations between Governor Barnett and the White House, President Kennedy sought ways for Meredith to register without involving U.S. troops. Governor Barnett did not know that he was being taped by a recording device that had been recently installed in the White House.

Question to consider: Why might a president record these telephone conversations?