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# American National Biography

## Doar, John Michael

(3 Dec. 1921–11 Nov. 2014)

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**Doar, John Michael** (3 Dec. 1921–11 Nov. 2014), lawyer and federal official, was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to William and Mae Doar. His father was a lawyer and his mother a teacher. He grew up in New Richmond, Wisconsin and attended St. Paul Academy, graduating in 1940.

After high school he enrolled in Princeton University. His time in college was interrupted so he could serve in the US Air Force from May 1943 to November 1945 during World War II. Doar held the rank of second lieutenant and was training to be a bomber pilot when the war ended. After being discharged he resumed studying economics, politics, and history at Princeton and graduated in 1946 with a B.A. He went on to attend the University of California Berkeley Law School, graduating with his LL.B in 1949. He married Anne Leffingwell on 7 February 1948. They had four children together.

In 1950 Doar worked in his family's law firm, Doar and Knowles, out of New Richmond, Wisconsin. He focused mostly on trial law and made partner in 1953. In 1960 President Dwight D. Eisenhower's assistant attorney general for civil rights Harold Tyler was looking for an assistant for the last six months of the administration. After several candidates refused, a mutual friend recommended Doar to Tyler. On 13 July 1960 he started working for the Department of Justice as special assistant to the attorney general. He went on to become first assistant to the assistant attorney general of the Civil Rights Division on 30 October of that same year.

When President John F. Kennedy, a Democrat, was elected in 1960, Doar, who was a Republican, stayed on to serve in the Justice Department as an assistant to Burke Marshall, the assistant attorney general for civil rights. In this role, he was involved in some of the most volatile situations during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

In May 1961 the Freedom Riders were attacked in Anniston and Birmingham, Alabama. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy sent Doar and his associate John Seigenthaler to investigate. While in Montgomery Doar witnessed white protesters attack the second wave of Freedom Riders, an event in which Seigenthaler was also attacked. He went on to work with the Justice Department to protect

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the Freedom Riders, working behind the scenes to find a solution that involved the Interstate Commerce Commission integrating waiting rooms in bus terminals.

In October 1962 Doar went to Mississippi to support James Meredith, who was attempting to integrate the University of Mississippi. On 20 September 1962 Doar and Chief Marshal James P. McShane accompanied Meredith to register for classes. Governor Ross Barnett, who read a proclamation refusing to admit Meredith, met them with state troopers lined up, shoulder to shoulder. They tried unsuccessfully again on 26 September. Four days later the Justice Department, under the direction of Nicholas Katzenbach, sent US Marshals to secure Meredith's enrollment. Doar stayed with Meredith in his dormitory room while a riot raged all night. President Kennedy ordered the army to protect Meredith and enroll him at the university the next day with Doar as his escort to the registrar's office. Doar remained by his side for several weeks.

Doar was also a part of Kennedy's effort to desegregate the University of Alabama in June 1963. As he did for Meredith, he accompanied James Hood to his dormitory, while Kennedy federalized the National Guard and secured Hood and Vivian Malone's enrollment.

Later that month, after the assassination of NAACP leader Medgar Evers, African Americans gathered in Jackson, Mississippi, to protest his death. As police, armed with clubs and guns, approached the group, Doar famously intervened. "My name is John Doar," he said. "I am from the Justice Department, and anybody here knows what I stand for is right." He stood between the officers, who had their guns drawn, and the protesters. Doar pled with them to remain peaceful and earned credit for preventing the situation from getting violent.

On 22 June 1964 Doar received the President's Award for Distinguished Federal Civilian Service from President Lyndon B. Johnson, who said in presentation that Doar "has made a basic contribution to our democracy as a vigorous champion of equal voting rights." Doar helped with the language and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. After the resignation of Burke Marshall that December, Doar was appointed to assistant attorney general for Civil Rights.

Doar was committed to breaking down the barriers that made it difficult for African Americans to vote in the South. During Freedom Summer in 1964, three young civil rights workers, who were registering African Americans to vote in Mississippi, were murdered. Doar investigated and prosecuted the alleged killers, who included a Neshoba County sheriff who had links to the Ku Klux Klan. His work resulted in the 1967 conviction of seven men on charges of civil rights violations (although ten others walked free).

When civil rights leaders challenged voting restrictions in Selma, Alabama in 1965, President Johnson sent Doar. He met with Martin Luther King, Jr. and other activists who were planning a voting

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rights march from Selma to Montgomery. Doar negotiated a controversial deal with King to turn around a group of marchers in an effort to avoid bloodshed with the Alabama state troopers in what would be called "Turnaround Tuesday," which took place after the violent acts of "Bloody Sunday" on Edmund Pettus Bridge on 7 March 1965.

Doar played a pivotal role in negotiating between the civil rights groups and the state of Alabama. After the courts intervened to allow the march, Doar walked with the marchers from Selma to Montgomery in favor of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which he then helped get passed through Congress. Doar also prosecuted the Ku Klux Klan members who killed Viola Gregg Liuzzo, a participant in the march.

In November 1967 Doar resigned from his post as assistant attorney general for civil rights. The following October he was elected president of the New York City Board of Education. He presided over a great deal of turmoil in the New York City public schools before stepping down after nine months. Doar went on to become the president for the Bedford Stuyvesant Development and Services Corporation, an initiative to fight poverty in Brooklyn led by Senator Robert F. Kennedy prior to his death.

After Doar left that post in December 1973, he was appointed as special counsel to the House Judiciary Committee that investigated the Watergate break-ins. He would become chief counsel in 1974 and drafted articles of impeachment against President Richard M. Nixon. Nixon resigned before impeachment.

After a short period as a senior fellow at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, Doar went to work for the law firm of Donovan, Leisure, Newton and Irvine as a partner in February 1975. He was co-counsel defending Eastman Kodak in a case involving a monopolization of the amateur photography business. He left the law firm in December 1978 and opened his own practice, which would become Doar, Rieck, Kaley and Mack, devoted to civil law cases. He served as senior counsel for that firm into his eighties. Doar divorced Leffingwell in 1973, but they reconciled and he cared for her until her death in 2013. He married Frances Ferguson Conroy on 19 May 1984. They divorced in 1996.

On 29 May 2012 Doar received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama. He died of congestive heart failure in his home in Manhattan. President Obama issued a statement saying "Time and time again, John put his life on the line to make real our country's promise of equal rights for all. Without John's courage and perseverance, Michelle and I might not be where we are today."

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# Bibliography

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Taylor Branch's three-volume work on the Civil Rights Movement (*Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963* (1988); *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-1965* (1998); and *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years 1965-1968* (2006)) is a good place to start to explore Doar's work in the Justice Department. Raymond Arsenault's *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (2006); William Doyle's *An American Insurrection: The Battle of Oxford, Mississippi, 1962* (2001); and David Garrow's *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (1978) highlight the major moments where Doar played a significant role in the Civil Rights Movement. His obituary was in *The New York Times* on 12 Nov. 2014.

## See also

Eisenhower, Dwight David (14 October 1890-28 March 1969), U.S. Army general and thirty-fourth president of the United States <http://anb.org/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-0700094>

Kennedy, John Fitzgerald (29 May 1917-22 November 1963), thirty-fifth president of the United States <http://anb.org/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-0700152>

Kennedy, Robert Francis (20 November 1925-06 June 1968), politician <http://anb.org/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-0700153>

Evers, Medgar (1925-1963), civil rights activist <http://anb.org/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-1500212>

Johnson, Lyndon Baines (27 August 1908-22 January 1973), thirty-sixth president of the United

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States <<http://anb.org/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-0700147>>

King, Martin Luther, Jr. (15 January 1929–04 April 1968), Baptist minister and civil rights leader <<http://anb.org/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-1500382>>

Nixon, Richard Milhous (09 January 1913–22 April 1994), thirty-seventh president of the United States <<http://anb.org/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-0700684>>