

“Who Among Us Would Be Content?” John F. Kennedy’s June 11, 1963 Civil Rights Speech

By Sara Lowe

In the spring of 1963, William Moore, a white postal service worker, set out on a lone march across the south to dramatize the cause for civil rights. On April 16, Moore appeared at the gates of the White House with a letter announcing his intentions for a ten-day freedom walk from Chattanooga, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi. On April, 20, his body was found along a highway in Alabama, with gunshot wounds in the neck and head. The sign that still hung around his neck, read: “Equal Rights for All,” and “Eat at Joe’s, both Black and White.” In a press conference that same afternoon, President John F. Kennedy referred to the murder personally. Kennedy’s recognition of William Moore’s sacrifice demonstrated his growing concern for those who “dramatized the plight of some of our citizens.”¹ His public objection to this particular murder was a detachment from his earlier hesitancy in the contested area of civil rights. In the several months following, Kennedy dramatically cast aside his previously held reservations and began in earnest to directly address the moral issue of securing basic human rights for every American. To fully appreciate Kennedy’s dramatic change in heart toward civil rights policy, it is essential to understand the events which brought it about.

John F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign promises for civil rights initiatives were sharply contrasted by neglect and non-committal once he began his administration. Taking the lead toward massive civil revolt, the actions of southern blacks made it impossible to ignore their outcries for civil justice, and the reluctant president was forced to act in order to secure their safety as they were met with southern whites’ resistance. Tensions in the south intensified, leading up to demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama in May of 1963. The events in Birmingham were a turning point for Kennedy. Blacks’ non-violent demonstrations were met with a violent white reaction. Soon after, frustrated blacks retaliated in violence in the streets of the city, causing the President to fear for what he believed to be inevitable: after one hundred years of limited freedom, blacks were frustrated and impatient and, without warning, could unleash violence in every American city. Despite Kennedy’s initial hesitation, he finally realized that to save the nation from erupting into uncontrolled lawlessness, he must risk his presidency by proposing civil rights legislation. After many failed opportunities to act on the issue of civil rights, John F. Kennedy finally addressed the nation, immediately following the successful integration of the University of Alabama. This address contained the announcement of his plans to send to Congress the most sweeping civil rights bill to date, while making a plea to the nation to consider the immorality of denying another citizen’s rights.

According to Presidential aide and speechwriter, Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy’s civil rights speech was one of the most important speeches of his administration, in regards to its impact and consequences, and the most direct civil rights speeches to date.² It could be considered that Kennedy used this speech to regain the waning trust of civil rights leaders.³ In contrast, the politician realized that this very same speech would alienate southern white voters and enrage southern leaders in Congress. Kennedy used powerful rhetoric to assert a moral argument for civil rights—an argument not used since his presidential campaign.⁴ That moral argument could be summed up in this state-

ment: “If an American would be discriminated against and denied basic rights entitled to all citizens, who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed? Who among us would then be content with the counsels of patience and delay?”⁵ Kennedy left no option for any American except to face the issues of racial inequality.

While Kennedy urged the nation that equal rights for all Americans is a moral aim, he had not always been concerned with the issue of equality for blacks. Historian Nick Bryant considered the thoughts of two people close to the President. Kennedy aide Ted Sorensen and family friend Arthur Krock were in agreement that early in his political career, “Kennedy ‘simply did not give much thought’ to civil rights and had ‘no background or association of activity,’ and that his ‘compassionate spirit was toward the underprivileged community as a whole, without concentration on the civil inequality of Negroes.’”⁶ Despite being generally ignorant of the blacks’ demands, Kennedy embraced the issues of civil liberties in his presidential campaign platform. As his presidential campaign progressed, Kennedy actively sought black voters.

John F. Kennedy’s Presidential Campaign

Early on in his campaign, Kennedy had fallen behind the Republican candidate, Richard Nixon, who had benefitted from the public support of athlete, Jackie Robinson. As the first African-American to integrate Major League Baseball, Robinson’s endorsement strongly encouraged the black vote. Robinson’s refusal to support Kennedy was based on the candidate’s link to segregationist and white supremacist Alabama governor John Patterson, and Patterson’s alleged description of Kennedy as a “friend of the south.”⁷ After a public snub by Robinson, Kennedy asked a mutual friend who had influence on Robinson to assure him that civil rights was a major concern to the presidential candidate. While doubts lingered, the endorsement had made a positive impact on Robinson.⁸

Kennedy sought opportunities to demonstrate his seriousness about civil rights. Robert Kennedy had appealed to Notre Dame Law professor and Kennedy speechwriter, Harris Wofford, Jr. for him to work with the presidential candidate. Wofford was, at the time, the legal counsel for Father Theodore Hesburgh, a founding member of the Civil Rights Commission. Wofford had many contacts in the Civil Rights Movement, including that of Martin Luther King, with whom he had become friends before the Movement began. As the first white graduate of Howard University, Wofford earned the trust of black civil rights leaders. Kennedy’s appointment of Wofford was pivotal in his campaign.⁹

Kennedy also sought advice from Harry Belafonte, an influential black artist and civil rights activist, on how to build trust among blacks. Belafonte’s advice for the Senator was to build a relationship with Martin Luther King, Jr. King simultaneously received advice from Belafonte that he should get to know Kennedy, whom Belafonte

¹Nick Bryant *The Bystander: John F. Kennedy and the Struggle for Black Equality*, (New York: Basic Books 2006), 385

²Theodore Sorensen, *Counselor A Life at the Edge of History*, (New York: HarperCollins 2008), 214

³This could be inferred from the conversation held between Lyndon Johnson and Ted Sorensen, Theodore Sorensen and Lyndon Johnson, Telephone Conversation on Civil Rights, June 3, 1963, 06/03/1963 From Collection: John Kennedy-SRNSN: Theodore C. Sorensen Papers, 1953-1964

⁴Steven R. Goldzwig and George Dionisopoulos “John F. Kennedy’s Civil Rights Discourse: The Evolution from Principled Bystander to Public Advocate” *Communications Monographs*, (56, September 1989)

⁵*Civil Rights Speech*, June 11, 1963, 6-11-1963, Item from Collection: John Kennedy-SLNGR: White House Staff Files: Papers of Pierre E.G. Salinger, 03/1960-12/1964

⁶Bryant, *The Bystander*, 25.

⁷*Ibid.*, 105.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Nick Bryant, *The Bystander*. 108-9

described as “unemotional, but very quick.”¹⁰ According to Bryant, Kennedy met with King and talked frankly about civil rights for ninety minutes. Kennedy claimed that he just recently “came to comprehend fully the true moral force of the civil rights struggle.”¹¹ The candidate also promised, if he won the presidency, to “exert greater moral leadership.”¹² This conversation impressed King who found the candidate to be “forthright and honest”¹³ in the area of civil rights. King stated: “I have no doubt that he would do the right thing on this issue if he were elected president.”¹⁴

Perhaps his most effective strategy came in the eleventh hour of the campaign. Kennedy solidified his case for black support when called on a terrified Coretta King after the arrest of her husband and his sentence to hard labor on the basis of a minor traffic offense. An additional call by Robert Kennedy made to the judge in the case resulted in King’s release from jail. The Kennedys’ involvement encouraged an outpouring of black support.¹⁵ It could be argued that because of this support gained from this incident, Kennedy narrowly won the election to become the 35th president.

The Kennedy Administration

During his campaign, Kennedy had successfully gained black support with his promises of moral leadership and executive action in the area of civil rights. However, the close election caused Kennedy’s hesitance to endorse civil rights efforts as President. Attempts to support civil rights would alienate southern white voters and enrage southern Congressmen, and would jeopardize all other programs he had planned to introduce. Additionally, the loss of Democratic seats in Congress left him with a thin margin of support for his programs.¹⁶ Kennedy’s initial civil rights strategy was summed up in the following directives: no new legislation would be sought. Instead, existing laws would be enforced in areas of employment and housing; executive action would be taken in areas where federal authority is undisputed (such as areas of federal employment); Attorney General Robert Kennedy would be the acknowledged leader of the administration’s civil rights activities; and, lastly, the first priority of the administration would be to secure the right to vote, enforced by the Department of Justice.¹⁷ In contrast to campaign promises of administrative support, the President was unwilling to initiate forceful and effective legislation when there was little support from the public and among lawmakers.¹⁸

Kennedy had relied upon his hope that executive action and enforcement of civil rights laws already in existence would be sufficient to bring needed relief. Very early in the Presidency, Wofford warned that Kennedy’s promises were remembered by blacks, and not fulfilling his promise would jeopardize the tentative relationship with those whose votes had helped him enter the White House in a narrow victory.¹⁹ Attempts by Kennedy to help were few and unpublicized. In April of 1962, Kennedy invited a Civil Rights Commission inquiry into equal opportunity in housing but, in August, asked that the Executive Order stay confidential. This demonstrated that while the President wanted to provide practical help for blacks, he was not ready to expose his intentions and make himself vulnerable to southern politics.²⁰

In truth, Kennedy’s civil rights strategy was contentious to civil rights leaders. Merely a month into the administration, NAACP Executive Director Roy Wilkins warned that young people in the Movement were growing impatient with Kennedy’s non-action strategy. Wilkins reported to Ted Sorensen that “already there are grumblings at the delay in indicating more than run-of-the-mill action in this

area,” and that it was “too late for the Kennedy administration to offer warmed-over, slightly revised, or piecemeal civil rights proposals which might have been darling in 1948 or 1953, but are as milk and toast today.”²¹ Kennedy did not truly understand the impatience felt by blacks who expected the promises made by the candidate to be kept by the President. Events unfolding in the South would soon change this.

The Civil Rights Movement

Regardless of the President’s hesitation to make a strong commitment of support, the civil rights movement was gaining strength. Definitive demands fueled the direct, non-violent tactics taught by leaders such as: James Farmer, of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE); Roy Wilkins, of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); the students of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); and the elder leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), led by Martin Luther King, Jr. The Civil Rights Movement disrupted the lives of ordinary southerners who had grown accustomed to the traditions of segregation in public areas, unequal employment opportunities, and disenfranchisement.²²

In the south, decades-old Jim Crow segregation laws were closely protected by the whites who benefited from the gross imbalance of power. After a century of maintaining the status quo, blacks—in a massive movement—demanded the full rights of their citizenship: their right to vote and the freedom to move freely. Blacks challenging Jim Crow segregation were met with white resistance, often in the form of violence, termination of employment, and eviction from their homes. The Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens’ Council worked together to terrorize blacks and suppress their economic power. Although the purpose of these white groups was to resist blacks’ efforts for equality and suppress the Movement, the effects were the opposite.

Through deliberate and purposeful tactics, the activists sought to catch the attention of the media, and ultimately, the Kennedy Administration. In a 1971 interview, James Farmer (CORE) recalled the group’s intentions during the 1961 Freedom Rides:

Our plan and our rationale was that we had to keep up enough pressure on the Administration—even if it were a friendly Administration...so that a crisis which was intolerable would be created and the government would have no choice but to act...in other words, it would be more dangerous politically for them not to act than it would be for them to act.²³

For this plan to succeed, the Civil Rights Movement *depended* on the violent response by white southerners and southern political leaders to demands of desegregation and voting rights.

¹⁰Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 307-308

¹¹Bryant, *The Bystander*, 133.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.* 362-367

¹⁶Fleming, Harold “The Federal Executive and Civil Rights: 1961-1965” *Daedalus*, 94, 4 *The Negro American* (Fall, 1965), 922.

¹⁷*Ibid.* 923.

¹⁸*Ibid.* 945.

¹⁹Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life, John F. Kennedy 1917-1963*, (New York: Back Bay Books, 2003), 493.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Bryant, *The Bystander*, 261.

²²Bond, Julian *The Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), xi-xv.

²³James Farmer Oral interview, John F. Kennedy Library, 1967

An example of Farmer's plan for creating an intolerable crisis is that of the Freedom Ride itself. In May, 1961, integrated buses left Washington, D.C. to travel through the south and test a recent ruling of *Boynton v. Virginia* which outlawed segregation at interstate bus stops. The Riders were met by relatively little resistance until they entered Alabama. Immediately after entering the state, one of the buses was followed out of the town of Anniston and was firebombed by a mob. Then, in Birmingham, the bus pulled into the Greyhound station and was overwhelmed by white mob violence. Police did not intervene until 15 minutes after the attack had begun. To get the Riders out of Birmingham, Kennedy was forced to federalize troops to secure their safe travel. Greyhound had initially refused to continue the ride but an angry Robert Kennedy demanded that a driver come to Birmingham and drive the Riders to Montgomery.²⁴

Once the buses reached the Montgomery city limits, the federal guard pulled away and the Riders had no protection when they entered the Montgomery station. They again, were met with a white mob as they exited the bus. Robert Kennedy aide, John Seigenthaler, was in Montgomery to discuss Governor Patterson's intentions to protect the Riders. During the violence, Seigenthaler joined the efforts to get the Riders to safety and was hit unconscious with a lead pipe and sustained serious injuries. The Riders finally escaped the violence at the station and gathered in a nearby church. A white mob soon surrounded the church and demanded the Riders come out. Martin Luther King had joined the Riders inside the church. Kennedy was again forced to send in federal troops to break up the white mob outside the church and secure the safety of Movement protestors. This was the first occurrence during which the President and the Attorney General were forced to act to secure the safety of civil rights demonstrators.²⁵

Then, in the fall of 1962, black student James Meredith attempted to integrate the University of Mississippi. To resist the integration, a group of angry whites gathered on the Oxford campus. Kennedy was once again forced to disburse federal troops to break up a white mob. A speech made by Kennedy fell on deaf ears; as Kennedy delivered the speech, white segregationists erupted into rioting on the Mississippi campus, and three students were killed.²⁶ However, the President still did not move forward with civil rights legislation. As a result, Kennedy's influence in the arena of civil rights was waning.

Civil Rights Campaign—Birmingham, Alabama

In the spring of 1963, Martin Luther King brought the SCLC to Birmingham to work with Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth to protest the lack of access to public accommodations. Project C—C for confrontation—was designed to bring national attention to whites' violent reactions to blacks' non-violent demonstrations. After several occasions of protest, children became involved in the marches, and were arrested regardless of their ages. The jails soon filled to capacity. When the marches resumed, Birmingham Commissioner, Eugene "Bull" Connor unleashed police dogs upon the marchers and ordered firemen to use high powered water hoses to push back demonstrators. The firemen's use of monitor guns—tripods which held the hoses and forced the water from two hoses through a single nozzle—was arguably needless. Historian Taylor Branch described the scene: "the monitor guns 'made limbs jerk weightlessly and tumbled whole bodies like scraps of refuse in a high wind.'²⁷ Famous Associated Press photos were taken of demonstrators being pushed against the wall by the force of the water hoses. These photos were instrumental in getting the attention of an otherwise ignorant nation.²⁸

The events in Birmingham affected Kennedy. Previously, the violent reactions of whites to demonstrating blacks compelled Kennedy to move during the Freedom Rides and at the University of Mississippi. The Birmingham campaign was further proof for the president that the Civil Rights Movement was growing in power and momentum. Kennedy, and the nation, watched as thousands of blacks submitted to "Bull" Connor's tactics of arrests and beatings. An AP photo of a German shepherd lunging at the stomach of an unarmed demonstrator was the subject of debate during a May 4, 1963 meeting with the lobbying group Americans for Democratic Action. The President commented on this famous photograph: "I think it's a terrible picture in the paper. The fact of the matter, that's just want [Bull] Connor wants...Birmingham is the worst city in the south. It's done nothing for the Negroes. It's an intolerable situation."²⁹ The President then commented on the actions of his administration: "We worked hard as we possibly could given the laws we had...we have not done enough for a situation so desperate. We have shoved and pushed and...there is nothing more that my brother's given more time to...I quite agree if I was a Negro I'd be sore."³⁰ The President's admission was more than many presidents had made in the previous one hundred years, and in retrospect, could be viewed as the persuasion to finally propose legislation. Still, Kennedy was not easily willing to abandon his original position regarding a civil rights bill. A decision to introduce civil rights legislation would not be made merely in response to his disgust with white's treatment of blacks. The President's resolve would again be tested as a second wave of violence erupted in Birmingham. However, this second wave consisted of blacks becoming violent against whites.

The Birmingham demonstrations had brought business leaders to the table for discussion, after Project-C had run its course, and an uneasy peace settled over the city. That peace was quickly threatened when three explosions rocked the area where Martin Luther King was staying with his brother, A.D. King. Angry blacks filled the streets and rioted, affecting a 28-block area. The Birmingham police reacted by bringing in an armored car and three police cars filled with police dogs, which further enraged the rioters. Two hundred and fifty Alabama state troopers were called in to quell the rioters but the Confederate flags emblazoned on their cars further fueled the angry black mob. Burke Marshall cited the situation in Birmingham on the morning of May 13, as "almost out of hand" and "complete chaos."³¹

Robert Kennedy was deeply concerned by the report that blacks had begun the violence in Birmingham. The Attorney General stated:

The Negroes are mean and tough, and have guns and have been worked up about this...If you have another incident... another bombing...and it attracted a large number of Negroes, then the situation might very well get out of hand...The group that has gotten out of hand has not been the white people; it's been the Negroes, by and large.³²

The Attorney General feared that the situation in Birmingham would trigger angry groups of blacks not only in the South but throughout the nation. At this point, the proposal for new legislation

²⁴Bryant, *The Bystander*, 261-282.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶*Ibid.* 331-356

²⁷Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 75-79.

²⁸Bryant, *The Bystander*, 387.

²⁹Bryant, *The Bystander*, 387.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹*Ibid.* 392.

³²*Ibid.* 393.

was the second option behind settling an agreement in Birmingham between business leaders, city government, and the city's blacks. But Burke Marshall once again reminded the president that if any tentative agreement reached in Birmingham would not be followed through, the situation would become "uncontrollable."³³

Kennedy visited the South and shared a helicopter ride and a conversation with George Wallace on May 18, 1963 about the events in Birmingham. Kennedy offered his position that the situation in Birmingham, as in other places, would remain tense as long as progress was not made. Kennedy argued that several things could be done in Birmingham to achieve progress. The president said he could not understand why Negroes could not be hired to work in various downtown stores (if they're encouraged to shop there). He said that "the very people who protested this action had Negroes serving their tables at home."³⁴ The president further argued that "Birmingham could not afford for this to continue—the only way the problem would be solved would be through some progress on rights."³⁵ The President's admonishment was ignored completely by Governor Wallace. The President refused to be photographed with the governor.³⁶ Kennedy's discussion with Wallace brought him to realization that Southerners were not going to change their feelings about black Americans. White southerners were "hopeless, they'll never reform" John Kennedy stated, "the people of the south haven't done anything about integration for a hundred years, and when an insider intervenes, they tell him to get out; they'll take care of it themselves, which they won't...it was time to be less concerned with southern feelings."³⁷

The President's earlier position was that no legislation would be introduced in response to white violence. But he soon began to face the growing reality that southern ignorance and resistance to change could ignite a widespread outbreak of black on white violence. According to historian Robert Dallek, the breakout of black violence in Birmingham, and the ignorance of southern leaders, forced Kennedy to realize that the pattern would repeat itself in many areas of the nation.³⁸ Kennedy wanted to deal "not with Birmingham, but what was clearly an explosion in the racial problem that could not, would not, go away, that he had not only to face up to himself, but somehow to bring the country to face up to and resolve."³⁹

Burke Marshall remembered that, for Kennedy, the Civil Rights Movement was "politically unpleasant."⁴⁰ In a 1964 oral interview, NAACP Secretary, Roy Wilkins, offered an insight into civil rights demonstrations:

People didn't demonstrate because they want to intimidate a president, they [demonstrated] because they have deep-seated grievances that they feel they cannot be advertised or dramatized in any other way. They've tried all other ways: petitioning, they can't vote the people out of office who hold and enthrall them because they can't get to the ballot box, and they have no money, they can't get jobs because they're black, and they have no economic standing. So what do they do? In desperation they're forced out into the street to cry aloud and it's not for the purpose of intimidating and the man who listens to them is not thereby being intimidated.⁴¹

Kennedy vocalized his reaction to Birmingham demonstrations: "The problem is today there is no other remedy...we can't be [going] around saying 'you can't demonstrate' and at the same time not

have them have some means of getting...justice in the matter. They can't demonstrate. They can't get a solution. I think we can't duck this one."⁴² The President became convinced that resistance to the proposal of legislation was no longer possible.

But John Kennedy was not naïve about the integration of a civil rights bill to Congress, especially one which contained a public accommodations segment; the President was aware of the consequences and how they would affect the rest of his presidency.

The decision to ask for legislation and to bring this problem in a comprehensive and serious way to the Congress was a very, very important decision for [Kennedy]...he knew that it would make other legislation impossible; he knew that it would be very divisive of Southern support that he needed for legislation particularly in the House of Representatives; he knew how much was riding on it for him, politically and historically.⁴³

In spite of the consequences, and how they would affect all of his initiatives, the threat of uncontrollable black-on-white violence, and not merely the photograph of the police dog snapping at a peaceful Birmingham demonstrator, forced Kennedy to recognize his presidential responsibility to provide a legal remedy to the injustice suffered by blacks and moral leadership in the area of civil rights.⁴⁴ As Bryant stated: The threat of a nationwide breakout of black violence "represented the real watershed moment in Kennedy's thinking, and the turning point in administration policy. Kennedy had grown used to segregationist attacks against civil rights protestors. But he—along with his brother—was far more troubled by black mobs running amok."⁴⁵

The Path to Legislation

Immediately after his conversation with Wallace, the President returned to Washington and began to discuss the proposal of civil rights legislation, with the addition of a public accommodations section. The idea to include public accommodations in proposed legislation was a new idea, in that it was never proposed before. Civil rights organizations had introduced bills to desegregate armed forces and desegregate public schools, but no one had ever proposed a general federal right of service in all significant public accommodations.⁴⁶ The debate over the unprecedented legislation was negligible as Kennedy had already resigned to the decision for it. Burke Marshall remembered: "nobody said 'don't do that' and the President wanted to have a legal solution...he wanted to bring this problem under law."⁴⁷

On May 22, Kennedy announced to the press corps that, after the events in Birmingham, his Administration was considering new civil rights legislation. Kennedy discussed, during this conference, his plans to provide "a legal outlet...for a remedy other than having to engage in demonstrations which bring [blacks] into conflict with

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴Kennedy to Wallace, Memorandum of Conversation between President Kennedy and Governor Wallace May 18, 1963 National Archives John Kennedy—Papers of John F. Kennedy

³⁵Memorandum of Conversation between President Kennedy and Governor Wallace May 18, 1963

³⁶Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*, 599.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸*Ibid.*, 600

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰Burke Marshall Oral Interview, JFK Library, 1964

⁴¹Roy Wilkins Oral Interview, JFK Library, August 13, 1964

⁴²Dan Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics*, Louisiana State (Baton Rouge: University Press 1995), 134.

⁴³Burke Marshall, Oral Interview, JFK Library, 1964

⁴⁴Bryant *The Bystander*, 393.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶Burke Marshall Oral Interview, JFK Library, 1964.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

the forces of law and order in the community.”⁴⁸ This press conference was the first mention of the Administration’s planned civil rights legislation. To see the pattern of change in Kennedy’s presidential commitment to civil rights, this 1963 response contrasts his response to a similar question in March, 1961. His 1961 response had been: “I do believe there are a good deal of things we can do now in administering laws previously passed by the Congress...when I feel that there is a necessity for a congressional action, with a chance of getting the congressional action, then I will recommend it to the Congress.”⁴⁹ The 1963 announcement was a clear departure from his earlier, cautious civil rights position.

In the weeks following Kennedy’s announcement of pending civil rights legislation, there was a flurry of activity throughout the administration. The President arranged to meet with leaders from all segments of society: lawyers, business groups, church groups, women’s groups, labor, educators, mayors, and most of the governors. His aim was to discuss the civil rights problems. Burke Marshall recalled that Kennedy “met with 1,600 or 1,700 people in the course of three weeks maybe...the whole month of June was a great deal of activity all at once that was aimed at gaining a consensus.”⁵⁰ The president’s intentions were to secure support in areas other than in Congress, where he expected resistance.

On May 18, Kennedy delivered the commencement address for the graduating class at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. During this address he voiced his concerns about the struggle going on in the South: “This nation is now engaged in a continuing debate about the rights of a portion of its citizens. That will go on, and those rights will expand until the standard first forged by the Nation’s founders has been reached, and all Americans enjoy equal opportunity and liberty under law.”⁵¹ Kennedy then defended the activists: “no one can deny the complexity of the problems involved in assuring to all our citizens their full rights as Americans. But no one can gainsay the fact that the determination to secure these rights is the highest traditions of American freedom.”⁵² This speech departed from his previous stand on his administration’s impartiality and stressed that enforcing civil rights primarily meant implementing neutral laws. “In Nashville, Kennedy committed himself to upholding moral principles as well. It was arguably the strongest statement in support of basic civil rights that any sitting president had ever delivered below the Mason-Dixon Line.”⁵³ This commencement address displayed some softening in Kennedy’s posture in advance of a delivery of a significant address of the nation’s moral obligation to civil rights.

Robert Kennedy

Important to Kennedy’s decision to introduce civil rights legislation was the influence of his Attorney General and brother, Robert Kennedy. The Attorney General’s stance on civil rights and equality had evolved over the Kennedy administration. On May 24 1963, (Robert) Kennedy hosted a lunch meeting in his New York apartment. He invited many African-American activists, and artists including Lena Horne, Lorraine Hansberry, Harry Belafonte, and the psychologist, Kenneth Clark. Included in this group were James Baldwin and Jerome Smith, Freedom Riders and CORE members. During what Robert Kennedy expected to be a meeting of the minds, Smith angrily confronted him about his work in civil rights. Smith had been trained in Gandhian non-violence but had been beaten up and arrested on numerous occasions. He said he was not sure how much longer he could ‘hold out’ under the extreme conditions he’d experienced in the

south. Smith threatened: “when I pull the trigger, kiss it good-bye!”⁵⁴ As Robert Kennedy listened to the tirade directed at him, became increasingly angry at this man who claimed he would not fight for America in war. As the group sensed Kennedy’s anger, they moved in to protect their young representative. This group of whom Arthur Schlesinger referred to as “fortunate Negroes”⁵⁵ who were the “mature, responsible spokesmen of the race,”⁵⁶ argued passionately that they considered Kennedys “the representatives of the best that a white America and offer”, and, they said: “if *you* are insensitive to [what we’re saying], then there’s no alternative except our going out into the streets. (emphasis mine).”⁵⁷

Robert Kennedy could not ignore the significance of a non-violent demonstrator being so angry by the lack of change as result of their efforts that was willing to abandon his non-violent training. Conditions experienced by blacks—poor education and vocation opportunities, resulting poverty and humiliation, and sheer terror—were exponentially increasing the level of hostility in black communities. From this meeting, the Attorney General sensed that violence was ready to erupt at any moment.

In response to this meeting, a letter to the editor was written to The New York Times, by attorney Clarence Jones who had been in attendance at the meeting with Robert Kennedy. The attorney claimed that

The Attorney General and Burke Marshall have been more vigorous in their prosecution of actions in behalf of civil rights than any previous Administration. Our complaint, however, is that this admittedly increased vigorous activity is incommensurate with the enormity of the racial crisis confronting our country. That the chief legal officer of the United States was shocked over the sentiments expressed by the participants in and of itself is reflective of how the Administration underestimates the explosive ingredients inherent in the continued existence of racial discrimination and segregation.⁵⁸

Jones’ statement was indicative of the major difference in opinion between the civil rights groups and the Kennedys about how much work they have done and how much is sufficient. Since the inauguration, mistrust among blacks of the Kennedys’ true intentions, had been growing.

Robert Kennedy, though, was in anguish after he met with the activists. Arthur Schlesinger wrote about Kennedy after this meeting: “[he had received] a violent jolt that spring afternoon. He began...to grasp as from the inside of the nature of black anguish. He resented the experience, but it pierced him all the same...it was another stage in education.”⁵⁹ In a press conference on June 4, Robert Kennedy spoke frankly about the work done in the area of civil rights:

⁴⁸George W. Johnson, Ed, *The Kennedy Presidential Press Conferences*, (New York: Earl M. Coleman Enterprises, Inc., 1978) May 22, 1963, 512-513.

⁴⁹Johnson, *Press Conferences*, March 8, 1961.

⁵⁰Burke Marshall, Oral Interview, JFK Library 1964.

⁵¹John F. Kennedy, *Remarks in Nashville at the 90th Anniversary Convocation of Vanderbilt University*, May 18, 1963.

⁵²*Ibid.*

⁵³Bryant, *The Bystander*, 398.

⁵⁴Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), 333-335.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸Letter to the Editor: Clarence B. Jones, *New York Times*, June 15, 1963.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*

I think frequently white people here in the United States have talked about this, have given lip service to the problem, and we haven't really done what we should have done. We haven't accomplished what we should have accomplished. I think the record is bad. We should have done much more, we intend to do much more...we realize this is our greatest [problem]. And we realize we haven't done what we should have done, and we are going to try to make up for it...I think the Negro feels that lip service is not sufficient, that they want to see material gains and see the gains immediately. So it is a question of working that out in the whole context of our laws here in the United States.⁶⁰

After these June 4 statements, it appeared that Robert Kennedy's mood and determination was set before the anticipated events planned for June 11, 1963 at the University of Alabama. The influence of the Attorney General would indeed play a large role in the decisions made by the President during this critical time.

The Integration of the University of Alabama

On the evening of June 10, the President delivered the commencement address to the graduating class of American University. The message of this speech was peace, and the audience of this speech was the world. Kennedy spoke out against ignorance and promoted diversity, in the world and domestically. His argument that the most basic human right: to be free and to enjoy life—should be provided, and protected. The President stressed in his address without stressing that “the quality and spirit of our own society must justify and support our efforts abroad.”⁶¹ On this night the President eloquently addressed the world about peace; the next day he would confront the main threat to peace under his own flag.

At the University of Alabama, George Wallace planned to stand in the schoolhouse door—metaphorically and literally—to block the inevitable integration of the last segregated state university in the south.⁶² The Kennedys were purposeful to allow documentary writer Robert Drew film the events as they occurred in the days of June 10 and 11 to capture the resolution of the Alabama integration crisis.⁶³ Kennedy was preparing to propose his civil rights legislation to Congress and it was not lost on him that the resolution of this next crisis in Alabama would be an opportunity to gain a moral advantage while making the segregationist Wallace look ridiculous in the process. Two students, James Hood and Vivian Malone, planned to enter the Foster Auditorium on campus to register for classes. Governor Wallace planned to position himself at the door of the auditorium, to literally block their entrance. Within reason, Robert Kennedy allowed George Wallace to have his show of standing in front of the schoolhouse door as he had promised, for fear that if he did not, violence would erupt.⁶⁴ Wallace insisted that his presence was aimed to prevent violence and a repeat of the events at the University of Mississippi as they occurred in September, 1962.⁶⁵ Contrasting Wallace's claim that his benevolent efforts were aimed to preserve the peace, the University's board members allowed the Governor's tactics out of their concern that “the events would spin out of control if he did not have his moment in the limelight.”⁶⁶ After many failed attempts to contact the Governor, the Attorney General had no clear direction on how the events would unfold. Robert Kennedy had no indication that the Governor would step down in the presence of federalized troops or if he would allow himself to be arrested in contempt of the court order.

To avoid a situation as in Oxford, the President fully participated in

the planning and organization of the resolution in Alabama. The President claimed that his intervention in the south was to make sure the court order allowing the students to enter the university was obeyed. Keeping law and order was the President's intention. In preparation for the Governor's plans to block the integration, Robert Kennedy worked with Assistant Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach to find a reasonable solution to the crisis. Taking advantage of the situation, Robert Kennedy had told Katzenbach to “make [Wallace] look ridiculous; and that the Governor is a “second-rate character to you, and that he was wasting your time, wasting the students time.”⁶⁷ In fact, the University Board of Trustees had already indicated that they planned to obey the court order and accept the two students.⁶⁸ Whether the Governor intended to merely make a symbolic statement, or he seriously intended to block the two black students from registering, the Attorney General was not sure and he had to make a decision at the last minute. Robert Kennedy argued: “if we move too quickly with too much force, we will be subject to criticism; if we fail to do so we run a greater risk of genuine resistance and mob violence.”⁶⁹

During the discussion prior to the confrontation, the question was raised of when, and not if, the president would address the nation on the issue of civil rights. Robert Kennedy argued that a speech should be made very soon following the resolution of the crisis in Alabama, making points on upcoming legislation and the issue of education. He did not believe the administration could get by without having a speech. During this conversation, the President looked directly at Ted Sorensen, counsel and speechwriter for the President, who was sitting to his left, and announced his decision that they ought to begin getting a speech ready saying “we may want to do it tomorrow.”⁷⁰ But he was also hesitant to give the speech unless their efforts yielded a positive result. According to Burke Marshall, “the Attorney General was very much in favor of speaking out to the country...on moral terms. I don't think the President [never intended] not to [make the speech] for a minute. He listened to the arguments against but...the Attorney General thought it ought to be done then.”⁷¹ The timing of the speech, however, had to be delayed until the events of the day proved favorable for the students, and the administration.

The events unfolded nearly perfectly, according to the plans made by Robert Kennedy and Katzenbach. Katzenbach met Governor Wallace in the 95-degree Alabama heat, asking Wallace for his assurance that he would obey the court order and allow the students to register. Among a large crowd, Katzenbach announced that the students had a right to be there, that they will register, and they will attend classes the next day, and that if the Governor would not step aside, federalized National Guardsmen will command him to do so.⁷² At the President's

⁶⁰Voice of America Press Conference June 4, 1963, 6/4/1963. Item from Collection: JFK-RFK, Robert F. Kennedy Papers, 1937—06/06/1968.

⁶¹Kennedy, John F. “Commencement Address at American University” June 10, 1963 John F. Kennedy Presidential Library

⁶²Carter *Politics of Rage*, 147.

⁶³The only film was shot during the crisis provides primary source footage of the players in the integration of the University of Alabama. Drew had followed John Kennedy during his presidential primary campaign and had earned the trust of the elected President and his Attorney General. As the integration crisis unfolded, Robert Kennedy had invited Drew and his camera crew to record the historic events.

⁶⁴George Wallace prepped his administrators prior to the confrontation with Katzenbach: “[the campus is] peaceful and serene and it will be peaceful and serene on Tuesday; be sure that not one acts in violence or anything. We don't want anything to defile this campus. We got agitators and provocateurs coming outside from the state who want to stir up some violence in order to hurt our cause and further their cause because they thrive and raise money on disorder. We're going to keep the peace.” Drew, Robert Crisis: *Behind a Presidential Commitment*, 1963

⁶⁵Carter, *Politics of Rage*, 145.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 149

⁶⁸Johnson, *The Kennedy Presidential Press Conferences*, May 22, 1963, 506.

⁶⁹Carter, *Politics of Rage*, 141.

⁷⁰Drew, *Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment*

⁷¹Burke Marshall Oral Interview, JFK Library, pg. 107

request, the students remained in the car, out of the scene between Wallace and Katzenbach. Kennedy wished that the students did not come into direct contact with Wallace, for fear that they suffer further indignity at the hand of the Governor.⁷³

In the decision to shield the students from the confrontation, Wallace was in agreement but not for the reason of protecting the dignity of the two students. Wallace did not want the students to be directly involved in the conflict; the Governor did not want the confrontation to be centered on race, rather, he wanted the main confrontation to remain between states' rights and the central government.⁷⁴ Drew filmed Wallace's statements: "The might of the central government offers a frightful example of the oppression of the rights and privileges and sovereignty of this state by officers of the federal government."⁷⁵ After the Governor completed his remarks, Katzenbach asked again: "I ask you once more. The choice is yours. There's no choice that the federal government has in this but to see that the orders of this court are enforced."⁷⁶ Wallace refused to stand down and, at 1:30 that afternoon, the President was forced to federalize the Alabama National Guard. An hour and a half later, Alabama Guard General Henry Graham led one hundred of his troops onto the university campus to face the Governor.⁷⁷ Wallace offered a short statement, and then abandoned his position at the door.

Wallace's show was for the benefit of his constituency who loved him and praised him for his courage.⁷⁸ An editorial published in the *New York Times* offers a complaint against the Kennedys for their efforts in Alabama: "[The President and Attorney General] threaten the good order and the integrity of the American people, and [create] confusion about the whole Negro problem under the slogan of civil rights."⁷⁸ In contrast, also in the *New York Times* was a letter written by a group of attorneys. They agreed with Kennedy's actions to uphold the court order allowing the students to register. The editorial quoted philosopher John Locke: "The end of the law is not to abolish or restrain but to preserve and enlarge freedom."⁸⁰ Public opinion as demonstrated by these two letters suggests biased ignorance by the first author and understanding of the effects of lawfulness by the second.

The Kennedys, however, were not fazed by Wallace's dramatization. As the President and the Attorney General watched from the White House and the Justice Department, respectively, the crisis was resolved on national television. Robert Kennedy immediately took a call from the President who had chosen to take advantage of the momentum they had gained. The time came for the President to deliver his planned address to the nation.

The Address

Despite their conversation on June 10, Ted Sorensen was not prepared for a civil rights speech on June 11. He had begun planning a civil rights speech but did not believe that a major national address was proper until the legislation was complete. Also, he did not hold the opinion that the crisis in Alabama was "directly related to the most controversial parts of the legislation, [and it] seemed an unlikely basis for a major presidential speech."⁸¹ Further, Sorensen did not encourage the President to deliver a civil rights address for the reason that it would be politically disadvantageous for the administration if Kennedy would speak on the moral issue of civil rights; such a speech "would involve [Kennedy] much more as a person and it would lose him political support in 1964."⁸² Joining Sorensen in this opinion was presidential advisor Ken O'Donnell who argued that Kennedy's

planned civil rights legislation would be a roadblock for all of other legislation initiated by the Administration.⁸³ To Sorensen's surprise, as the President watched Wallace peacefully leave the doorway of the Foster Auditorium, he turned and said to Sorensen, "I think we'd better give that speech tonight. "The timing of Kennedy's decision left Sorensen less than six hours to prepare an address the nation, which would become one of the most important speeches of the this administration."⁸⁴

Burke Marshall, Assistant Attorney General, was present with Robert Kennedy when he received the news that the address would be made that evening. Since Wallace finally conceded his position around 5:00 that afternoon, television time was requested only two hours before the speech was to be made.⁸⁵ Marshall and the Attorney General would soon thereafter join Sorensen and the President at the White House to assist in finalizing the address.

At the White House Sorensen worried about the very short amount of time he had to work. Sorensen had no previous "civil rights file"⁸⁶ from which he could borrow passages and ideas to construct a major address on civil rights. For parts of the speech, he delved into his own memory of a speech that he, himself, had given about the civil rights issue.⁸⁷ From that speech was the following passage:

We have said that the Negro could study and pray, but not in our schools and not in our churches. We said he could work, but not through our unions. We said he could vote, but warn him away from the polls. We said he could live but not on our level, and we have said he could be free, and the subjected him to discrimination and poverty...[and when] an American soldier on the German Front...wounded and decorated, returned home...he did not find his American liberties...Why? Because his skin was not white.

From these sentiments, Sorensen drafted the following passage of the civil rights address:

Are we to say...that this is a land of the free except for the Negroes; that we have no second-class citizens except Negroes; that we have no class or caste system, no ghettos, no master race, except respect to Negroes? When Americans are sent to Vietnam or West Berlin we do not ask for whites only.⁸⁸

Further inspiration came from a June 3 phone call with Vice President Lyndon Johnson on June 3 who offered suggestions and recommendations for the submission of civil rights legislation and an accompanying speech. As Sorensen drafted the address for the evening

⁷³Drew, *Crisis: Behind the Presidential Commitment*

⁷⁴Carter *Politics of Rage*, 147.

⁷⁵*Ibid.* 147-8.

⁷⁶Drew, *Crisis: Behind the Presidential Commitment*

⁷⁷*Ibid.*

⁷⁸Bryant *The Bystander*. 420.

⁷⁹Drew's documentary shows a sneering Wallace commenting that "there was no violence but they got troops. What would have happened if we had violence? We would have got the United Nations."

Drew, *Robert Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment*.

⁸⁰Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, June 12, 1963.

⁸¹Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, June 11, 1963.

⁸²Sorensen, *Counselor*, 279.

⁸³Burke Marshall Oral Interview, JFK Library, 1964

⁸⁴Carl Brauer, *John F. Kennedy and the Second Reconstruction*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 245.

⁸⁵Sorensen *Counselor*, 215.

⁸⁶Robert Kennedy made arrangements that the executive order to federalize the Alabama Guard would be signed and the Guard would enter the university campus grounds at 4:00. Drew, *Robert, Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment*.

⁸⁷Sorensen, *Counselor*, 279.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*

⁸⁹Sorensen, *Counselor*, pg. 280.

of June 11, he seemed to have been affected by these passages taken from comments made by the Vice President:

[The President] has to be the leader of the nation and make a moral commitment to them...He should stick to the moral issue and he should do it without equivocation.

The Southern whites and the Negroes share one point of view that is identical: they're not certain that the government is on the side of the Negroes. What Negroes are really seeking is moral force and to be sure that we're on their side...and until they receive that assurance, unless it's stated dramatically and convincingly, they're not going to pay much attention to executive orders and legislative recommendations.

I know one thing, that the Negroes are tired of this patient stuff... and what they want more than anything else is not executive order or legislation, they want a moral commitment that [the President is] behind them.⁸⁹

Sorensen worked with bits and pieces of conversation that he had heard from Kennedy, the Vice President, and others as he quickly wrote the body of the President's address.

Robert Drew filmed Robert Kennedy studying the speech draft in the Cabinet room in preparation for his address. Burke Marshall recalled:

that the preparation of Kennedy's civil rights address was extemporaneous because the typing of the speech that he was given was finished I think not more than three minutes before he went on television...the President was making notes in longhand on a scratch pad and saying 'now, come on, Burke, you must have some ideas' but he knew what he was going to say, and I guess it didn't make much difference whether it was typed or not.⁹⁰

While waiting for the draft to be typed, Sorensen told the President not to worry, that it was being typed. Kennedy replied: "Oh, I thought I was going to have to go off the cuff on national television."⁹¹ At 7:57, the President was handed the typed draft which he edited for two minutes and at 8:00, he looked straight into the camera and began his speech.

He opened his historic speech by stating the basis for its delivery:

This afternoon, following a series of threats and defiant statements, the presence of Alabama National Guardsmen as required on the University of Alabama to carry out the final and unequivocal order of the United States District Court. That order called for the admission of the two clearly qualified young Alabama residents, who happened to have been born Negro.⁹²

Kennedy then addressed the reason for the speech, based on the recent Birmingham crisis:

I hope that every American, regardless of where he lives, will stop and examine his conscience about this and other related incidents.

This nation was founded...on the principle that all men are created equal and that the rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened...⁹³ It ought to be

possible for American consumers of all color to receive equal service in places of public accommodation, such as hotels and restaurants and the stores and retail stores, without being forced to resort to demonstrations in the streets.⁹⁴

Anthems of the Civil Rights Movement were reflected in the President's speech:

One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free. They are not yet freed from the bonds of injustice. They are not yet freed from social and economic oppression, and this Nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free.⁹⁵

This passage speaks to the emotional response of blacks when told it is too soon to demand equality and justice.

One of the most significant themes of this speech is that which reflects Kennedy's passionate commitment to secure fundamental freedoms and rights for all Americans. During the Birmingham crisis, Kennedy saw the worst of man in those who denied basic freedoms to fellow citizens. "Now the time has come for this Nation to fulfill its promise. The events in Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased the cries for equality that no city or state or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them."⁹⁶ Kennedy then addresses his motivation for the introduction of civil rights legislation, after two years of delay: "The fires of frustration and discord are burning in every city, north and south, where legal remedies are not at hand. Redress is sought in the streets, in demonstrations, parades and protest which create tensions and threaten violence and threaten lives."⁹⁷

Ted Sorensen wrote this civil rights address around the major themes he heard from the Kennedys during and following the Birmingham crisis, when the President's full attention was focused on the plight of the black American. Both John and Robert Kennedy had finally acknowledged that simply enforcing existing civil rights laws would not be sufficient to overcome injustice suffered by black Americans. New legislation was needed to secure the rights of blacks—the rights of all were jeopardized when the rights of a few were denied. Kennedy's speech continues:

But there are other necessary measures which only the Congress can provide, and they must be provided at this session [of Congress]. The old code of equity law under which we live commands for every wrong a remedy. But in too many communities, in too many parts of the country, wrongs are inflicted on Negro citizens as there are no remedies at law. Unless the Congress acts, their only remedy is in the streets.

The Kennedys also acknowledged that while legislation can provide protection and remedy under the law, no law brings about a change of heart. This portion of the speech, however, relates to the increasing pressure felt by the administration to provide a legal remedy so that

⁸⁹Theodore Sorensen and Lyndon Johnson Telephone Conversation on Civil Rights, June 3, 1963, 06/03/1963

⁹⁰From Collection: John Kennedy-SRNSN: Theodore C. Sorensen Papers, 1953-1964.

Burke Marshall Oral Interview, JFK Library 1964.

⁹¹Sorensen *Counselor* 280-281.

⁹²Civil Rights Speech, June 11, 1963, 6-11-1963, Item from Collection: John Kennedy-SLNGR: White House Staff Files: Papers of Pierre E.G. Salinger, 03/1960-12/1964

⁹³This statement bears resemblance to the statement: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to Justice anywhere" made by Martin Luther King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail, written by King on April 16. Branch, Parting the Waters, 742-744.

⁹⁴Civil Rights Speech, June 11, 1963.

⁹⁵Civil Rights Speech, June 11, 1963.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*

⁹⁷*Ibid.*

blacks would not become violent because they knew that after eight years of non-violent confrontation, still no remedy existed. Kennedy reached out to Americans, looked at them face to face, and stated that beyond new legislation, it was they who would bring about real change:

The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated, if an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public school available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who represent him, if, in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place? Who among us would then be content with the counsels of patience and delay?⁹⁸

Kennedy addressed the need for legislation, the underlying purpose of Kennedy's speech. At the heart of the speech, Kennedy asked the nation to search its conscience and question the morality of denying a fellow American the basic rights that privileged citizens would not wish to relinquish.

Kennedy's civil rights address can be found in two separate documents: the verbatim transcript of the speech delivered by Kennedy, and a supplemental document entitled "TDS—2nd draft."⁹⁹ On this second draft, minor handwritten changes were made and were included in the final speech transcript. Also reflected in the final transcript are seven paragraphs which had been added extemporaneously by the President. Kennedy hand wrote these notes while waiting Sorensen's final draft to be typed. After reciting Sorensen's speech material, Kennedy concluded his address with his own thoughts:

My fellow Americans, this is a problem which faces us all—in every city of the North as well as the South. Today, there are Negroes unemployed two or three times as many compared to whites, inadequate in education, moving into the large cities, unable to find work, young people particularly out of work without hope, denied equal rights, denied the opportunity to eat at a restaurant or lunch counter or go to a movie theater, denied the right to a decent education, denied almost today the right to attend a State university, even though qualified. It seems to me that these are matters which concern us all, not merely Presidents or Congressmen or Governors, but every citizen of the United States.

Therefore, I am asking for your help in making it easier for us to move ahead and to provide the kind of equality of treatment which we would want ourselves; to give a chance for every child to be educated to the limit of his talents.

As I have said before, not every child has an equal talent or an equal ability or an equal motivation, but they should have the equal right to develop their talent and their ability and their motivation to make something of themselves.

We have a right to expect that the Negro community will be responsible, will uphold the law, but they have a right to

expect that the law will be fair; that the Constitution will be color blind.

This is what we are talking about and this is a matter which concerns this country and what it stands for, and in meeting I ask the support of all of our citizens.¹⁰⁰

Thank you very much.

Response

"Can you believe that white man not only stepped up to the plate, he hit it over the fence?"

--Martin Luther King, Jr.

"The south will decide who the next president is because you can't win without the south and the south will be against some folks."

--Governor George Wallace

"There are costs and risks to any action. But they are far less than the long-range costs of comfortable inaction."

--John F. Kennedy

Robert Drew filmed a seemingly satisfied Robert Kennedy leaving his office at the end of a very long day on June 11, 1963. In Jackson, Mississippi on that same night, after viewing the speech and meeting until the very late hours, Medgar Evers returned to his home. As he stepped out of his car, he was assassinated in his driveway and bled to death in front of his wife and children. The President had asked the nation to consider the morality of denying a person basic freedoms and equality enjoyed by white men and women every day. For Evers, the speech ultimately meant very little in the stark reality of life and death. For the die-hard segregationists personified in Evers' assassin, the moral directive did very little to change their feelings toward blacks.¹⁰¹

Response to the speech as published in the *New York Times* was mixed. Immediately following the speech, the *New York Times* praised Kennedy: "Again and again, the President returned to the theme of the moral necessity for white Americans to treat Negro Americans as equals. In that respect, his was the broadest appeal on civil rights ever addressed to the nation by a President."¹⁰² Throughout the days following, *Times*' articles reported a political mistrust that skewered positive momentum brought by the speech: "[The Democrats] said in 1960 that if they had the White House, they'd pass a civil rights bill. Now they have the White House...yet if they don't get a civil rights bill, they'll blame the Republicans."¹⁰³ Even days later, after the president introduced his civil rights bill to Congress, the *New York Times* reported a cynical preview of congressional response to the bill.¹⁰⁴

Kennedy sent his legislation to Congress on June 19, 1963. In a Gallup Poll taken between June 21 and 26, Americans were asked how "they would feel about a law which would give all persons—

⁹⁸Civil Rights Speech, June 11, 1963.

⁹⁹Civil Rights Speech 2nd Draft, June 11, 1963, 6-11-1963. John Kennedy—POF: Papers of John F. Kennedy: President's Office Files, 1-20-1961-12/1964.

¹⁰⁰Civil Rights Speech, June 11, 1963.

¹⁰¹Branch *Parting the Waters*, 824-825.

¹⁰²"President in Plea Asks Help of Citizens to Assure Equality of Rights to All" *The New York Times*, June 12, 1963.

¹⁰³"Kennedy Chided for Rights Plea" *New York Times*, June 15, 1963.

¹⁰⁴"One Rights Plea Expected to Fail" *New York Times*, June 20, 1963.

Negro as well as white—the right to be served in public places such as hotels, restaurants, theaters, and similar establishments,” 49% of Americans answered in the positive while 42% answered negatively. Southern whites only responded in the positive only 12% and 82% negative, while whites outside the south answered 55% in the positive and 34% in the negative. When asked, during the same period, if Kennedy is pushing racial integration too fast, or not fast enough, 41% of Americans answered “too fast” and 14% answered “not fast enough”; 77% of Southern whites answered “too fast” and 13% answered “not fast enough.”¹⁰⁵ Regardless of what Kennedy claimed, the poll results demonstrate that southern whites drive public opinion that racial integration is not wanted by Americans.

Later that summer, in an August press conference, President Kennedy himself reflected on the effects that the civil rights legislation had on his presidency. Kennedy confirmed that his position on civil rights had cost him heavily but he also restated to the press that it was the right time to meet his responsibility to “advance their right to equality of opportunity.”¹⁰⁶ At this time, he was unwavering in his position on civil rights and stated that he will continue on the same course.¹⁰⁷

Scholarly analysis of Kennedy’s Civil Rights Address includes the following: “JFK’s address made an important contribution to its own historical moment and to the tradition of presidential civil rights rhetoric by speaking in ethical terms and confirming the justness of civil rights action.”¹⁰⁸ Blacks in Birmingham were seeing very little or no change from their non-violent efforts. Fearful that the tension and frustration felt by blacks in Birmingham would erupt into black-on-white violence in cities all over the nation, Kennedy addressed the nation on the moral issue and the need to submit legislation to Congress. The President lent the power of his Administration to justify his actions; as a leader he stressed the need for legal protection for freedom for blacks while asking those under his leadership to judge the morality of the issue of denying a fellow American the right to come and go freely.¹⁰⁹

For John F. Kennedy, it could be argued that his civil rights address and legislation marked the both the beginning and the end of his relatively short political career. The moral courage that John Kennedy stressed throughout his life could be demonstratively summed up in his decision to propose civil rights legislation, risking the white southern support strategically sought by politicians before and after his presidency. Kennedy was concerned about the injustices and indignities suffered by his fellow Americans. He cared about the entire nation and felt that when a few suffered injustice, the nation suffered as well. The change needed for peace was one hundred years overdue. The peace of American cities in the south and the north was threatened by blacks’ deepening anger and impatience. The moral message in Kennedy’s June 11, 1963 civil rights address was in direct response to his fear that lawlessness would descend on urban streets. Desperate blacks who, after following non-violent leadership for eight years, and still seeing no remote end to the inequality and injustices they had suffered for three centuries, would abandon their reserve and erupt in uncontrollable violence in cities across the nation.

Upon the realization that southern leaders would not bring racial equality on their accord, Kennedy pushed forward and led the nation toward a resolution. The increasing effectiveness of the Civil Rights Movement moved Kennedy to the point of taking necessary action on behalf of the Freedom Riders and hundreds of black students wishing to attend the Universities of Mississippi and Alabama. Kennedy eventually capitulated to the demands of blacks and proposed civil rights legislation that would be effective in securing civil rights for all Americans. In turn, Kennedy’s legislation, passed by his successor Lyndon Johnson in June 1964, catapulted the Civil Rights Movement and gave strength to the struggle for voting rights. Lyndon Johnson would then pass the Voting Rights Act one year later, in 1965. Had Kennedy not made the courageous decision to act when it was more comfortable to do nothing, it is impossible to know the long-range, destructive costs of his inaction.

“Who Among Us Would Be Content?”:

John F. Kennedy’s June 11, 1963 Civil Rights Speech

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¹⁰⁶Johnson The Kennedy Presidential Press Conferences, August 1, 1963, 535.
¹⁰⁷Ibid.
¹⁰⁸Goldzwig and Dionisopoulos “John F. Kennedy’s Civil Rights Discourse: The Evolution from Principled Bystander to Public Advocate” Communications Monographs, V 56, (September 1989).
¹⁰⁹Garth Pauley, *The Modern Presidency and Civil Rights: Rhetoric on Race from Roosevelt to Nixon*, (Austin: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 106-107.

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