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Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations

Presidential Address on Civil Rights

by Gerald F. Goodwin

Date: June 11, 1963

Author: John F. Kennedy

Genre: speech; address

Summary Overview

On June 11, 1963, President John F. Kennedy addressed the nation on the topic of civil rights for African Americans. His address was significant. First, his speech was his most explicit to date on black civil rights, which was becoming the most significant domestic issue of the 1960's. Kennedy's willingness to speak at length about the issue represented a dramatic shift. While supportive of equal rights in principle, Kennedy initially expressed little interest in public. He feared alienating southern Democrats whose support he needed for domestic legislation. He was also more interested in promoting his foreign policy agenda. However, as nonviolent sit-ins, marches, and boycotts in support of racial equality and in opposition to segregation spread throughout the South, Kennedy felt he had to address the issue more forcefully.

Kennedy's address was also significant because it expressed considerable sympathy for civil rights protestors and support for their objectives. He not only provided strong words of support for black equality, but he also made it clear that he was going to propose appropriate legislation to Congress. By advocating congressional action, Kennedy made it clear that the executive branch supported the objectives of the civil rights movement.

Defining Moment

President John F. Kennedy is sometimes depicted as a staunch, longtime supporter of civil rights, but his views and positions were much more complex. During the first few years of his presidency Kennedy was largely ambivalent. Although he courted the black vote during the 1960 presidential election, his narrow victory over Republican candidate Richard Nixon made him fearful of alienating white southern Democrats who opposed any meaningful civil rights legislation. The possibility of congressional action on his other domestic proposals might be lessened. His reelection in 1964 might also be put into jeopardy. As a result, the issue of civil rights was not a priority for his administration.

It was a priority for such civil rights groups as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). In a series of protests, sit-ins, boycotts, and marches these groups placed considerable pressure on politicians to address the issue of black civil and political rights. On February 1, 1960, four college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, sat down at a Woolworth's lunch counter and refused to leave, challenging a state law that required segregation in public accommodations. These protests spread throughout the South to include 70,000 demonstrations. The following year "Freedom Riders" traveled throughout the South to test a recent Supreme Court decision that desegregated transportation facilities. White segregationists frequently reacted to these protests with violence which placed further pressure on Kennedy to act.

Kennedy's first forceful intervention in the civil rights conflict came when he sent federal troops to the University of Mississippi to ensure the admission of African American student James Meredith in 1962. Events in Alabama forced Kennedy to take even more decisive action. In April, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Fred Shuttlesworth launched a series of nonviolent demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama. To break up these peaceful protests, which eventually involved hundreds of school children, Public Safety Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor used attack dogs, tear gas, cattle prods and fire hoses. Over a five-week period 2,200 protestors were arrested. The events were widely publicized by the national media. Kennedy finally decided that he needed to act decisively on the issue of civil rights. He became convinced that a "moral crisis" faced the nation. As president, he had a responsibility to act.

Author Biography

Born on May 29, 1917, in Brookline, Massachusetts to a wealthy and prominent Irish Catholic family, John F. Kennedy would become one of the most revered American presidents after his assassination. After graduating from Harvard in 1940, Kennedy joined the United States Navy and served in the Pacific theater during World War II. In 1946, he was elected to the House of Representatives in the eleventh Congressional district in Massachusetts. In 1952, he was elected to the United States Senate. In 1960, he won the Democratic Party nomination for president and narrowly defeated Republican Richard Nixon. At 43 years of age, he was the youngest elected President. When he took office, he promised a robust foreign policy and a willingness to confront the Soviet Union, America's Cold War adversary. However, his desire to focus on foreign policy changed because of growing public concern about African American civil rights. He was assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald on November 22, 1963.

Historical Document

Good evening, my fellow citizens:

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

That they were admitted peacefully on the campus is due in good measure to the conduct of the students of the University of Alabama, who met their responsibilities in a constructive way.

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 by men of many nations and backgrounds. It 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.

Today we are committed to a worldwide struggle to promote and protect the rights of all who wish to be free. And when Americans are sent to Viet-Nam or West Berlin, we do not ask for whites only. It ought to be possible, therefore, for American students of any color to attend any public institution they select without having to be backed up by troops.

It ought to be possible for American consumers of any color to receive equal service in places of public accommodation, such as hotels and restaurants and theaters and retail stores, without being forced to resort to demonstrations in the street, and it ought to be possible for American citizens of any color to register and to vote in a free election without interference or fear of reprisal.

It ought to be possible, in short, for every American to enjoy the privileges of being American without regard to his race or his color. In short, every American ought to have the right to be treated as he would wish to be treated, as one would wish his children to be treated. But this is not the case.

The Negro baby born in America today, regardless of the section of the Nation in which he is born, has about one-half as much chance of completing a high school as a white baby born in the same place on the same day, one-third as much chance of completing college, one-third as much chance of becoming a professional man, twice as much chance of becoming unemployed, about one-seventh as much chance of earning \$10,000 a year, a life expectancy which is 7 years shorter, and the prospects of earning only half as much.

This is not a sectional issue. Difficulties over segregation and discrimination exist in every city, in every State of the Union, producing in many cities a rising tide of discontent that threatens the public safety. Nor is this a partisan issue. In a time of domestic crisis men of good will and generosity should be able to unite regardless of party or politics. This is not even a legal or legislative issue alone. It is better to settle these matters in the courts than on the streets, and new laws are needed at every level, but law alone cannot make men see right.

We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution.

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?

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.

We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it, and we cherish our freedom here at home, but are we to say to the world, and much more importantly, to each other 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 cast [sic] system, no ghettos, no master race except with respect to Negroes?

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.

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 protests which create tensions and threaten violence and threaten lives.

We face, therefore, a moral crisis as a country and as a people. It cannot be met by repressive police action. It cannot be left to increased demonstrations in the streets. It cannot be quieted by token moves or talk. It is a time to act in the Congress, in your State and local legislative body and, above all, in all of our daily lives.

It is not enough to pin the blame on others, to say this is a problem of one section of the country or another, or deplore the fact that we face. A great change is at hand, and our task, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all.

Those who do nothing are inviting shame as well as violence. Those who act boldly are recognizing right as well as reality.

Next week I shall ask the Congress of the United States to act, to make a commitment it has not fully made in this century to the proposition that race has no place in American life or law. The Federal judiciary has upheld that proposition in a series of forthright cases. The executive branch has adopted that proposition in the conduct of its affairs, including the employment of Federal personnel, the use of Federal facilities, and the sale of federally financed housing.

But there are other necessary measures which only the Congress can provide, and they must be provided at this session. 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 and there are no remedies at law. Unless the Congress acts, their only remedy is in the street.

I am, therefore, asking the Congress to enact legislation giving all Americans the right to be served in facilities which are open to the public—hotels, restaurants, theaters, retail stores, and similar establishments.

This seems to me to be an elementary right. Its denial is an arbitrary indignity that no American in 1963 should have to endure, but many do.

I have recently met with scores of business leaders urging them to take voluntary action to end this discrimination and I have been encouraged by their response, and in the last 2 weeks over 75 cities have seen progress made in desegregating these kinds of facilities. But many are unwilling to act alone, and for this reason, nationwide legislation is needed if we are to move this problem from the streets to the courts.

I am also asking Congress to authorize the Federal Government to participate more fully in lawsuits designed to end segregation in public education. We have succeeded in persuading many districts to de-segregate voluntarily. Dozens have admitted Negroes without violence. Today a Negro is attending a State-supported institution in every one of our 50 States, but the pace is very slow.

Too many Negro children entering segregated grade schools at the time of the Supreme Court's decision 9 years ago will enter segregated high schools this fall, having suffered a loss which can never be restored. The lack of an adequate education denies the Negro a chance to get a decent job.

The orderly implementation of the Supreme Court decision, therefore, cannot be left solely to those who may not have the economic resources to carry the legal action or who may be subject to harassment.

Other features will be also requested, including greater protection for the right to vote. But legislation, I repeat, cannot solve this problem alone. It must be solved in the homes of every American in every community across our country.

In this respect, I want to pay tribute to those citizens North and South who have been working in their communities to make life better for all. They are acting not out of a sense of legal duty but out of a sense of human decency.

Like our soldiers and sailors in all parts of the world they are meeting freedom's challenge on the firing line, and I salute them for their honor and their courage.

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.

This is one country. It has become one country because all of us and all the people who came here had an equal chance to develop their talents.

We cannot say to 10 percent of the population that you can't have that right; that your children can't have the chance to develop whatever talents they have; that the only way that they are going to get their rights is to go into the streets and demonstrate. I think we owe them and we owe ourselves a better country than that.

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, as Justice Harlan said at the turn of the century.

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

Thank you very much.

Document Analysis

President John F. Kennedy's speech of June 11, 1963 should be interpreted in the context of the growing demand for black civil and political equality. Kennedy came to the conclusion that the civil rights movement was the dominant domestic issue of his presidency. It was also the most contentious. Kennedy's address recognized the demands of African Americans for civil rights and sought to assure them that his administration supported their objectives. He also sought to gain white political support for black demands.

Kennedy began his address by reminding Americans that their country 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." State laws that prevented African Americans from entering hotels, restaurants, retail stores, and theatres and denied them the right to vote were antithetical to American principals.

Kennedy argued that the denial of rights to African Americans had disastrous effects on the black community. Compared to whites who lived in the same city, African Americans were far less likely to graduate high school, attend college, or gain steady employment. Blacks were far more likely to be unemployed, underemployed, and underpaid than their white counterparts. According to Kennedy, African Americans had good reason to protest given these gross inequalities.

Kennedy also noted the hypocrisy of the American government advocating freedom overseas while denying African Americans their rights and freedoms at home. The United States claimed to "have no class or cast [sic] system, no ghettos, no master race," but its treatment of African Americans suggested something far different.

Kennedy argued that the United States had the ability to live up to its stated principles. However, he maintained that this would not happen through protests and demonstrations alone. He called on Congress to heed the protests and "enact legislation giving all Americans the right to be served in facilities which are open to the public—hotels, restaurants, theatres, retail stores, and similar establishments." Kennedy sought to place pressure on Congress to end segregation in public facilities.

Kennedy pointed out that while the Supreme Court's *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) decision declared that racial segregation in publically supported schools to be unconstitutional, many schools remained segregated. Congress had a responsibility to empower the federal government to file lawsuits, which would force school districts to desegregate. Without providing any specifics, Kennedy also argued that Congress should provide protection for African Americans trying to vote in the South.

Equally importantly, Kennedy expressed support for civil rights protestors who “out of sense of human decency” sought to end segregation in a nonviolent fashion. He maintained that these men and women were “meeting freedom's challenge on the firing line, and I salute them for their honor and courage.” He concluded by asserting that it was the responsibility of every American to fight for a better country, one in which African Americans were not “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.”

Essential Themes

In his June 11, 1963 address, Kennedy spoke passionately and eloquently in support of the civil rights movement and its goal of dismantling legal segregation in the South. He had neither quickly nor easily reached the position of publically supporting the civil rights movement or proposing legislation. In the first two years of his presidency, he was reluctant to express support, as he feared alienating white southerners and wished to focus on foreign affairs issues. Kennedy's address not only contained his most extensive comments on black civil rights, it also represented a dramatic shift in his thinking. The actions of civil rights protestors undoubtedly contributed to his decision to speak out about these pressing matters. Also, officials in the South almost universally opposed these protests and often condoned or encouraged violence against demonstrators, and this undoubtedly contributed to Kennedy's decision to speak out forcefully.

Kennedy's speech neither ended public conflict nor led to the passage of civil rights legislation. A few hours after his speech, Medgar Evers, a prominent civil rights leader, was assassinated in his driveway in Jackson, Mississippi, demonstrating that opponents of black civil rights were not persuaded by the president's support for civil rights. A few weeks later, Kennedy sent Congress a civil rights bill, which would have outlawed segregation in places open to the public, banned discrimination in any federally backed program, and authorized the federal government to intervene to end public school segregation. To garner support for the passage of Kennedy's civil rights bill, civil rights activists organized the March on Washington in August 1963, which brought more than 200,000 supporters to the capitol.

Kennedy's proposed legislation was never voted on in Congress, largely due to opposition from southern Democrats. However, the bill was the most ambitious attempt to this point in the twentieth century by the federal government to enact legislation to provide civil and political rights to African Americans. After Kennedy's assassination in November, 1963, Lyndon Johnson, his successor, pushed for even more comprehensive civil rights legislation. Johnson provided far more effective leadership of Congress than Kennedy. In 1964, the Civil Rights Act ended legal segregation of public facilities in the South. In 1965, the Voting Rights Act provided federal protections for black voting in the south.

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