The 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing: The Response from the White House

**Topic:** Interplay of Individuals, Groups and the Federal Government during the Civil Rights Movement

**Grade Level:** 9-12

**Subject Area:** US History after World War II - History and Government

**Time Required:** Two 50-minute class periods

**Goals/Rationale**
Key events in 1963, such as the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, brought national attention to a local conflict. During the crisis, the president had to decide how to respond to the needs of diverse individuals and groups directly involved in the situation while working towards making progress on civil rights as a nation.

In this lesson plan, students act as civil rights advisors to the president. They examine a variety of responses to the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church and assess what different groups believed should be done to address the situation. They examine the president’s response, its strengths and weaknesses from the perspective of the federal government, and reflect on how it might contribute to making progress on civil rights.

**Essential Question:** What were the interests and needs of diverse groups and individuals in regards to making progress on civil rights and how did President Kennedy respond to these often conflicting needs?

**Connections to Curricula (Standards)**

*National History Standards*
US History, Era 9

*Standard 3B:* The student understands the "New Frontier" and the "Great Society."

*Standard 4A:* The student understands the "Second Reconstruction" and its advancement of civil rights.

*Common Core State Standards*

*RH.11-12.1:* Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

*RH.11-12.2:* Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
**RH.11-12.3**: Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

**RH.11-12.6**: Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

**RH.11-12.8**: Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

**W.11-12.1**: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

**W.9-10.2**: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

**SL.11-12.1**: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**SL.11.12.4**: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

**Objectives**

Students will:
- analyze primary source documents
- examine the responses of a variety of groups and individuals to the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing
- analyze and evaluate President Kennedy’s response to the 16th St. Baptist Church bombing

**Materials**

1. September 15, 1963 Telegram to President Kennedy from Martin Luther King Jr. in which he expresses outrage at the church bombing and promises to “plead with my people to remain non violent” but fears that unless there is some response by the federal government we shall “see the worst racial holocaust this nation has ever seen…”
2. September 19, 1963 Telegram to President Kennedy from Reverend C. Herbert Oliver, secretary of the Inter-Citizen’s Committee in Birmingham, in which he decries the absence of safety after the church bombing. He provides a list of bombings and other forms of violence that have occurred in 1963 and makes a plea for the intervention of federal troops (after he sends a second letter in
October he receives a response dated November 6, 1963 from Assistant Special Counsel Lee White.)

3. September 16, 1963 Letter to President Kennedy from Francis Kornegay, Executive Director of the Detroit Urban League in which he calls for the impeachment of Governor Wallace and calls for the president, as Commander-in-Chief, to take control of Birmingham.

4. September 16, 1963 Telegram from Roy Wilkins to President Kennedy describing the “dastardly bombing.” He blames Alabama and the actions of the Governor for the tragedy. He warns that if the federal government does not address the problem, there will be consequences.

5. September 21, 1963 Letter to President Kennedy from Neil Sivert, a white citizen in Birmingham, believes that his city government is making progress, and is worried that the crisis will push white voters to elect more leaders who will undo the progress that has been made. He asks for the president’s help and influence to “prevail on the negros to lift their demands in Birmingham.”

6. September 21, 1963 Letter to President Kennedy from Wallace Lovett, a white minister in Birmingham who is horrified by the church bombing. He is, however, convinced that forcing integration is not the answer.

7. October 21, 1963 Letter to Senator Sparkman from Denson Franklin, a white minister in Birmingham who blames Martin Luther King Jr. for the lack of progress in his city. He asks Senator Sparkman to use his influence with Kennedy so that the president can “keep Dr. King out of Birmingham for awhile.”

8. September 16, 1963 Statement by the President on the Sunday Bombing in Birmingham in which he expresses outrage and grief about the bombing and outlines the first steps of the federal response.

9. September 19, 1963 Statement by the President in which he acknowledges communication with black leaders and announces his meeting with white leaders. He also announces that he is sending representatives to help the city overcome “fears and suspicions which now exist.”

10. September 23, 1963 Statement by the President describes support by both black and white leaders for the Royall-Blaik mission.

11. September 19, 1963 Audio recordings (Part 1 – 3) and transcript of Kennedy’s meeting with black leaders. Excerpts from a longer meeting in which black leaders express the desperate need for federal intervention to restore a sense of hope and provide protection in the black community following the church bombing.

12. September 23, 1963 Audio recordings (Part 1 -6) and transcript of Kennedy’s meeting with white leaders. Excerpts from a longer meeting in which President Kennedy pushes white leaders to take some action to restore a sense of hope in Birmingham before things become more “radical.”

13. Handout: Responses to the 16th Street Church Bombing

14. Handout: Meetings with the President

Note on audio excerpts:
The excerpts from the meeting with black leaders are posted in three parts on the website, which total about 10 minutes. The excerpts from the meeting with white
leaders are posted in six parts which total about 17 minutes. This lesson plan
provides PDF versions of transcripts of both meetings. The excerpts are selected
from longer meetings. A more complete description and additional excerpts can
be found in Kennedy, Johnson, and the Quest for Justice: The Civil Rights Tapes
by Jonathan Rosenberg and Zachary Karabell.

During his time in office, President Kennedy recorded 248 hours of meeting
conversations and 12 hours of dictabelt conversations on a system that remained a
closely held secret even from his top advisors.

Historical Background and Context

By the end of the summer of 1963, civil rights groups had organized a massive
nonviolent movement. Their actions had, in large part, turned the attention of the nation,
and of President Kennedy, to fighting racial injustice in the United States. Kennedy’s
approach to civil rights had evolved since his first days in office. Having narrowly won
the 1960 election, he was at first cautious and reluctant to alienate powerful southern
leaders who supported segregation. During his first two years in office he took, what was
seen by many civil rights supporters, as limited action: he issued executive orders
banning discrimination in federal hiring and federal housing, and he established the
President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. In addition, the Justice
Department, under Attorney General Robert Kennedy, actively promoted school
integration, obtained an Interstate Commerce Commission ruling to enforce
desegregation on interstate travel, and launched five times the number of lawsuits
resulting from voting violations than the previous administration.

However, after witnessing large-scale demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama, in May
1963, and the violent backlash from segregationists, Kennedy became convinced that
racial injustice was no longer tolerable. In a landmark speech on civil rights on June 11,
1963, he called racial inequality a “moral issue” and announced his plans to submit
legislation to help end racial discrimination. On June 19, the president submitted civil
rights legislation to protect all Americans’ voting rights, legal standing, educational
opportunities, and access to public facilities. Passing this legislation became the focus of
Kennedy’s approach to addressing civil rights issues.

In Birmingham, there was hope for progress, too. In May 1963, after weeks of massive
demonstrations, arrests, and a violent police response, black leaders met with a group of
white business leaders who recognized the economic impact of the boycotts and
demonstrations, and the decline of Birmingham’s national reputation. They agreed to
desegregate lunch counters and hire black clerks in department stores. Also, just prior to
the demonstrations, Birmingham’s citizens elected a new government structure and a new
mayor, Albert Boutwell, who proclaimed his support for a more moderate approach, and
had made promises to change the unfair customs of the city. However, the election results
had been contested and die-hard segregationists still held great power in the city. By the
end of the summer, basic demands that had been agreed upon had yet to be fulfilled.
In the week following the August 28 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Birmingham made headlines as a segregation stronghold once again on September 3, as Governor George Wallace attempted to close schools to block desegregation. On the following day, a bomb exploded (the second in two weeks) at the home of Albert Shores, a black lawyer who had been fighting for the desegregation of the Birmingham schools. Riots erupted in the city following the bombing and Wallace persuaded the mayor to close the schools. The brutality of the police response crushed hopes for progress.

When the schools re-opened on September 9, Wallace commanded the National Guard to block the entry of African American students. President Kennedy seized control of the Guard through an executive order and commanded the soldiers to leave. Over the next week, protests for and against integration sprang up around Birmingham. On September 15, an event occurred that changed the history of the city, and the history of the civil rights struggle.

Another bomb exploded, this time at the 16th Street Baptist Church, a spiritual center for the black community and the very place where young demonstrators had prepared for marches that spring. It was yet another attack on black residents by Ku Klux Klan members. The city had already earned the name “Bombingham,” after 47 explosions had taken place since 1947, none of which had been solved. But this one was different. Four young girls were killed: Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair. Martin Luther King Jr. arrived in Birmingham to calm the shattered black community, but young and old were enraged, and police responded brutally to citizens. Later that day, two black boys were shot and killed, one by a police officer and another by a white youth.

The horrific tragedy drew national attention, with a third of the messages sent to the White House calling for federal troops to be sent to Birmingham. President Kennedy was reluctant to send troops and decided on a different course of action. The day after the bombing, he released a public statement, in which he expressed “a deep sense of outrage and grief over the killing the children” in the bombing. In the statement, he announced that Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall “has returned to Birmingham to be of assistance to community leaders and law enforcement officials.” He also directed Federal Bureau of Investigation bomb specialists to “lend every assistance in the detection of those responsible” for the crime.

At the request of Martin Luther King Jr., he met with King and several black leaders from Birmingham on September 19, 1963 to hear and respond to their needs. They expressed the deep sense of frustration and fear rampant in the black community. Facing bombings, killlings, and other acts of police brutality, they insisted that federal intervention was essential; they pressed the president to send in federal troops cancel federal contracts with businesses that practiced racial discrimination. They feared that if the federal government did not take steps to restore hope and protection for blacks in Birmingham, the civil disorder would escalate into race riots. That same day, he announced that he was sending a committee of two, “the Royall-Blaik mission” -- General Kenneth Royall who had served as Truman’s secretary of war and Colonel Earl “Red” Blaik, a retired football
coach at West Point, “to represent me personally in helping the city to work as a unit in overcoming the fears and suspicions which now exist.”

Four days later, at the request of Birmingham’s mayor, Albert Boutwell, the president met with white business and clergy leaders from the city, and listened to their perspective. They explained that their local leadership needed time and calm to make progress. They pointed to outside “agitators” such as King whom they believed were the main problem in Birmingham. The president challenged their position and pushed them to take action on hiring practices to ease tension in their volatile city. These two meetings reveal the needs of these groups, as well as President Kennedy’s approach to dealing with them. We know much of what happened at these meetings because they were recorded at the White House, two of many conversations that Kennedy secretly recorded during his time in office. This primary source serves as the main focus of this lesson. It provides unique content for students to investigate the question: how does a president respond to needs of conflicting groups while working towards goals he has set for the country?

Procedure

In this assignment, students consider how the president responded to the needs of different groups after the September 15, 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church. In responding to the situation, Kennedy had to consider the needs of the groups involved, but also the needs of the nation and the priorities of his administration. He had concerns such as passing an omnibus civil rights bill, keeping the crisis contained, and adhering to the Constitution. These national concerns impacted the course of action in response to the crisis in Birmingham.

1. Review the historical background leading up to and including the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church. Explain that over the next two days, students will be acting as civil rights advisors to the president. They will research the needs of various interest groups involved in the Birmingham conflict as well as the response of the federal government. As advisors to President Kennedy, they will write a summary report on the federal response, including its strengths and weaknesses from the perspective of the federal government, and its impact on making progress on civil rights.

2. Homework: Have students read the chapter summary of the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing on the 1963: The Struggle for Civil Rights website and review the “Pressure” subchapter. For the written component of the homework, students will use documents in the “Shockwaves,” “Aftermath,” and “Public Opinion” subchapters. Have each student investigate responses to the bombing of the 16th St. Baptist Church by one of three groups:

   Group 1: Civil rights supporters, including black leaders in Birmingham and white allies nationwide

   Group 2: White citizens in Alabama, including clergy and business leaders in Birmingham, concerned about demands from blacks
Group 3: Federal government

After reviewing primary source material from their group, have students select one document that represents the group and complete the sheet, Responses to the Bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church.

Document assignments:

Group 1: Civil rights supporters, including black leaders in Birmingham and white allies nationwide

a. September 15, 1963 Telegram from Martin Luther King Jr. to President Kennedy
b. September 19, 1963 Telegram from Reverend C. Herbert Oliver to President Kennedy
c. September 16, 1963 Letter from Francis Kornegay to President Kennedy
d. September 16, 1963 Telegram from Roy Wilkins to President Kennedy

Group 2: White citizens in Alabama, including clergy and business leaders in Birmingham, concerned about demands from blacks

a. September 21, 1963 Letter from Neil Sivert to President Kennedy
b. September 21, 1963 Letter from Minister Wallace Lovett to President Kennedy
c. October 21, 1963 Letter from Denson Franklin to Senator Sparkman

Group 3: Federal Government

1. September 16, 1963 Statement by the President on the Sunday bombing in Birmingham
2. September 19, 1963 Statement by the President
3. September 23, 1963 Statement by the President

4. In class, have representatives from each group form a committee to discuss the needs and interests of each group, and how they see the role of the federal government.

5. Debrief as a whole class. What did they discover about the needs of various groups? How did they differ? How did they see the role of the federal government? Did they identify any common ground?

6. Explain that they will now have an opportunity to hear first-hand audio excerpts of two meetings that took place in the White House following the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church: one with black leaders representing civil rights groups and business and clergy leaders in Birmingham, and one with white
business and clergy leaders of Birmingham. Distribute the Handout, *Meetings with the President*, along with transcripts from the meetings. The handouts will guide students to listen to and analyze Kennedy’s response to different interest groups.

Play the audio recording from the meeting that took place on September 19, 1963 between President Kennedy and black leaders. Using the questions from the handout, discuss students’ responses to the meeting.

7. During the following class, have students use the handout and guiding questions to listen to the second audio tape, the September 23, 1963, meeting with white business and clergy leaders from Birmingham. Use the following questions to guide students to compare and contrast the two meetings. We have included possible responses here for teacher use.

- **How did President Kennedy’s response to the groups differ?** *(He explains why he cannot send federal troops in the first meeting and in the second, he challenges the leaders to explain why progress is not being made.)*
- **What did he emphasize in the first meeting?** *(He explains there is no legal ground to send in federal troops, thinks it more advisable for local leaders to take responsibility, he says if his actions do not work, he will consider more federal intervention.)*
- **What was his focus in the second meeting?** *(He pushes white leaders to take some action to show progress – hiring Negro police or store clerks. He explains that communication between groups is important and counteracts claims that King and Shuttlesworth are the problem.)*
- **How did he explain the role of the federal government to each group?** *(In the first meeting he claims that he has no legal grounds to send in troops and that it does not help the local leaders face the problem. In the second meeting, he acknowledges that neither he nor the meeting attendees want federal intervention. He references the civil rights legislation. He explains that the federal government has no power to remove civil rights leaders.)*
- **What do students think of Kennedy’s responses to the different groups?** *(Students’ opinions)*
- **What are alternative responses he might have made in the meeting, or alternative courses of action he might have taken to address the situation?** *(He might have brought in the federalized National Guard; selected different people for the mission; taken steps to solving the bombing.)*
- **What might the outcomes have been to those alternatives?** *(Troops might have escalated the conflict and polarized local and federal government even further; different representatives might have had a better chance of bringing different leaders together in Birmingham; devoting more resources to solving the crime could have restored hope in the black community but it could also have escalate anger among some whites.)*
Assessment

As civil rights advisors to President Kennedy, have students write a summary report to the president on the response of the federal government to the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church. The report should include a description of the federal response and its strengths and weaknesses from the perspective of the federal government. It should also address how the response might impact making progress toward civil rights.

Guide for teachers: Possible responses for students’ summary reports:

1) The federal response
   - President’s public statement on bombing
   - Sent Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall to Birmingham
   - Involvement of FBI bomb specialists
   - Met with black and white leaders
   - Sent Royal-Blaik mission

   - Strengths:
     - Statement was made fairly soon after bombing. President took a stance on bombing (outrage, grief), and supported black leaders in calling for nonviolence
     - Brought in federal assistance and support in form of sending Burke Marshall, FBI bomb specialists, and two representatives
     - Royal-Blaik would have good chance of having respect from much of Alabama’s white community, including Governor Wallace
     - Did not involve federal troops in a situation where it would be difficult to remove them
     - Listened to representatives of both black and white groups and communicated federal position to them

   - Weaknesses:
     - Did not address needs expressed by black community of the danger in the city and needing more protection
     - Royal and Blaik were unfamiliar with situation in Birmingham and may not have understood needs of the groups involved
     - Did not insure significant civil rights progress on a local level

2) Will it contribute to making progress on civil rights?
   - Makes federal stance clear: violence will not be tolerated
   - Will probably not escalate crisis, could help in working with groups
• Allows for continued work on passing legislation
• Probably contributed to some, but limited progress in Birmingham
• Will need to assess progress of Royal and Blaik mission

Extensions

1) Have students research the administration’s efforts to pass an omnibus civil rights bill. How might these efforts have impacted President Kennedy’s course of action in response to the church bombing?

2) Have students research the president’s response to other crises in civil rights. How do these actions compare? How were they different?

3) Although students have been studying the responses of different groups, these groups were not monolithic. White citizens of Birmingham had a range of responses to the bombings, and to integration, as did members of the black community. How did responses vary within different groups? Using the meeting with white leaders of Birmingham, and the letters from Wallace Lovett and Denson Franklin, discuss the different responses of white citizens in Birmingham.

4) What was the result of the Royall - Blaik committee? Have students research what they did, who they spoke with, and how their work impacted civil rights progress. Have students consider whether the committee was an effective response through different perspectives of constituencies in Birmingham.

5) Have students research how the church bombing affected civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Fred Shuttlesworth. How did it impact strategies for continuing to make progress on civil rights?

6) Have students research the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church and its aftermath. It was not until 1977 that “Dynamite Bob” Chambliss was convicted of the crime. It would take over twenty years for two more Klansmen to be convicted: Thomas Blanton and Bobby Cherry, members of the Cahaba Boys, a Ku Klux Klan splinter group. Why did the convictions take so long? How did the FBI handle the investigation?

Additional Information
Handouts and transcripts of audio excerpts can be downloaded in PDF form.
Meetings with the President

After the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, President Kennedy had two separate meetings: one with leaders representing the black community in Birmingham and the other with white business and clergy leaders of that city. With the audio recordings of these meetings you can listen in to a conversation with the president during an urgent situation. It’s a rare opportunity to witness history as it was being made. The meetings were two of many that were secretly recorded by President Kennedy during his time in office. Not even his top aides knew that he recorded over 248 hours of conversations. The exchanges here are excerpted from more extended meetings, the transcripts of which can be found in *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Quest for Justice: The Civil Rights Tapes* by Jonathan Rosenberg and Zachary Karabell.

Meeting with Black Leaders

The first meeting took place on September 19 at the request of Martin Luther King Jr. Those present included President Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr, Ralph Abernathy, Fred Shuttlesworth, Lucian Pitts, A.G. Gaston, J.L. Ware, and Bishop Murchison.

Consider the following questions as you read the transcript and listen to the audio:

1) As you listen to King and Ware, what is the main concern of blacks in Birmingham at that moment in time? What is King afraid will happen?

2) What does King want the federal government to do? Why? What does he think this will accomplish?

3) What is Kennedy’s response? What reasons does he give for his response? Do you agree?

4) What can you learn about President Kennedy from his responses during the meeting?
Meeting with White Leaders

The second meeting took place at the request of Birmingham’s mayor Albert Boutwell, four days later on September 23, 1963. Those present included President Kennedy, Landon Miller, Caldwell Marks, William C. Hamilton, Frank Newton, Don Hawkins, and Burke Marshall of the Justice Department.

As you listen to the conversation, consider the following questions:

1) What is the main concern of the white leaders?

2) How do they explain why there are problems in Birmingham?

3) What do the white leaders want the federal government to do? How does Kennedy respond to them?

4) What does President Kennedy want the white leaders to do? What reason does he give for his request?

5) What can you learn about President Kennedy from his responses during the meeting?
Responses to the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing

Document:

Who is the author?

Who is the audience?

What is the response to the situation in Birmingham, particularly concerning the bombing?

What needs are expressed? What obstacles are identified?

What does the individual or group believe should be done, including actions by the federal government, in response to the situation?
Meetings with the President
(Guide for Teachers with possible responses)

Meeting with Black Leaders

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Consider the following questions as you read the transcript and listen to the audio:

1) As you listen to King and Ware, what is the main concern of blacks in Birmingham at that moment in time? What is King afraid will happen?
   - Extreme violence against black community is untenable
   - People feel unprotected and unsafe
   - There will be devastating race rioting if something is not done

2) What does King want the federal government to do? Why? What does he think this will accomplish?
   - Need federal government to take steps to restore sense of hope and protection
   - Asks for federal troops to maintain order as a temporary measure
   - Investigate industries with federal contracts, cancel contract if there is evidence they have practiced discrimination

3) What is Kennedy’s response? What reasons does he give for his response? Do you agree with him?
   - No legal basis for sending federal troops
   - Will be too hard to remove troops once they are there
   - White community will not take responsibility if federal government comes in
   - Will send General Royall and Colonel Blaik to meet with community

4) What can you learn about President Kennedy from his responses during the meeting?
   - Listened to the requests, responded to one
   - Considered multiple factors in making the decision to send federal troops
   - Tried to have problem solved at local level
   - Expressed some level of empathy and acknowledgement but does not meet leaders demands and does not respond to demand for investigation of federal contracts.
Meeting with White Leaders

Four days later on September 23, 1963, a second meeting took place at the request of Birmingham’s mayor Albert Boutwell. Those present included President Kennedy, Landon Miller, Caldwell Marks, William C. Hamilton, Frank Newton, Don Hawkins, and Burke Marshall of the Justice Department.

As you listen to the conversation, consider the following questions:

1) What is the main concern of the white leaders?
   - Local leadership can handle problems
   - Need time, calm and then local leaders can make progress
   - Need local black leadership that can “accomplish something for themselves to establish a sense of responsibility”
   - Need outsiders to leave the city
   - Civil disobedience is dangerous

2) How do they explain why there are problems in Birmingham?
   - Outside agitators such as King cause trouble, provoke response from law enforcement and make it impossible to make progress
   - Change cannot be forced on the community

3) What do the white leaders want the federal government to do? How does Kennedy respond to them?
   - Want time, calm, to be left alone
   - Want “sources of these incidents” to be removed
   - Civil disobedience is dangerous
   - Kennedy makes it clear that federal government cannot remove leaders and that would not solve the problem

4) What does President Kennedy want the white leaders to do? What reason does he give for his request?
   - Wants them to “ease the situation”
   - Hire black policemen
   - Communicate with black leaders
   - Hire people in stores
   - If progress is not made, situation will become more extreme, more violence will occur

5) What can you learn about President Kennedy from his responses during the meeting?
   - Eager to have local leaders take action to ease tensions; relentless in his questioning of “what can you do now?”
   - Willing to confront white leaders
Martin Luther King Jr.:

We come today representing Birmingham in general and more specifically some 200 business and professional, religious, labor leaders who assembled the day after the bombing to discuss the implications and to discuss the seriousness and the whole crisis that we face there in Birmingham.

And we come to you today because we feel that the Birmingham situation is so serious that it threatens not only the life and stability of Birmingham and Alabama, but of our whole nation. The image of our nation is involved and the destiny of our nation is involved. We feel that Birmingham has reached a state of civil disorder.

Now there are many things that you could say that would justify our coming to this conclusion. I'm sure that you are aware of the fact that more bombings of churches and homes have taken place in Birmingham than any city in the United States and not a one of these bombings over the last 15 to 20 years has been solved. In fact, some 28 have taken place in the last 8 or 10 years and all of these bombings remain unsolved. There is still a great problem of police brutality, and all of this came out in tragic dimensions Sunday when the bombing took place and four young girls were killed instantly and then later in the day two more. I think both were boys, the other two who were killed.

Now the real problem that we face is this. The Negro community is about to reach a breaking point. There is a great deal of frustration and despair and confusion in the Negro community, and there is a feeling of being alone and not being protected. If you walk the street, you aren't safe. If you stay at home, you aren't safe: there is a danger of a bomb. If you're in church now, it isn't safe. So that the Negro feels that everywhere he goes, if he remains stationary, he's in danger of some physical violence…

…And I am convinced that if something isn't done to give the Negro a new sense of hope and a sense of protection, there is a danger that we will face and that will lead to the worst race rioting we've ever seen in this country. I think it's just at that point. I don't think it will happen if we can do something to save the situation, but I do think (and I voiced the sentiment in the evening as well with those that we met with the other day) that something dramatic must be done at this time to give the Negro in Birmingham and Alabama a new sense of hope and a good sense of protection…

…So this is the first point, that we feel that there is a state of civil disorder right now and that there is a temporary need, we have a problem in the South that cannot be ultimately solved with federal troops, but these states have become so defiant, and unfortunately Alabama has a mad man as its governor who will not yield to reason and we feel that something has to be done.

The second suggestion that we are going to make is that Birmingham, which is an industrial center in the South, would have, to put it another way, that all industries with federal, rather, government contracts would be investigated immediately. And if there is
discrimination practiced—and we have evidence that all of these industries practice discrimination against Negroes’ employment—that if there is discrimination, that these contracts would be canceled. We feel that this would help the general situation in the state of Alabama.

In short, we feel that there's a need for strong federal intervention and this will give the Negro a new sense of hope and a new sense of protection, which I think can lead us out of this dark moment because there are enough white moderates in Birmingham, I believe, who really want to see the situation solved, but they need help now. The problem is so serious that they need help.

**Meeting with Black Leaders Part II**

**Reverend Ware:**

Just this morning, possibly at 4:30, a lady called me and said, 'Reverend Ware,' she said, 'I see where you and others are going to Washington to talk to the President.' And she was almost in tears, her voice was trembling and seemed like she was frightened almost out of her wits. And she said, 'Please, for my sake and for the sake of the people of Birmingham, tell the President to do something.' She said, 'I'm frightened to death here. I have six little children and I don't know what's come up. I'm afraid to send them to school; I'm afraid to keep them here at home. And we just don't know what to do.' And she said, 'Tell the President that if there's any way possible to have somebody to at least guard the schools. This, this, this, this is just not an isolated situation in that it's all throughout the city. And the people are frightened and they’re even afraid to go to church at night and some of them won’t even go to church during the day services. The police are brutal.'

**Meeting with Black Leaders Part III**

**President Kennedy:**

Let me just say that we've been talking about this question of troops. We haven't any legal ground. At this point, we don't think because... but aside from the legal thing, we haven't felt that it was the... having been through the Oxford matter, where the troops are in a sense a defeat. Because it finally means that we take over and then everybody then just quits. And the white community just says, "All right, let the federal government have it" [unclear]. Doesn't really make them face it. But it may be that we're going to have to come to that. And I have been reluctant to do that, beyond the troops we have there, the federalized Guard. Now as I say, that judgment may change, but up till now that has been our reasoning…

…The tragic death of four Negro children in Birmingham last Sunday has given rise to fears and distrust, which require the cooperation and restraint of all the citizens of that city. I have received reports from leading Negro citizens concerning the situation this afternoon. Next Monday, I will confer at the request of Mayor Boutwell with white city leaders who want to give us information concerning the steps which the city has taken
and plans to take to reestablish the confidence of everyone that law and order in Birmingham will be maintained. In addition, I have today appointed General Kenneth Royall and Colonel Earl Blaik as a committee to represent me personally in helping the city to work as a unit in overcoming the fears and suspicions which now exist. They will go to Birmingham in the next few days to start on this work of great importance.

In the meanwhile, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, along with the local authorities, is making a massive effort to bring to justice the person responsible for the bombing on Sunday and previous incidents. I urge everyone to cooperate with them in this effort and that all citizens of Birmingham and Alabama will give these processes of law enforcement a full opportunity to work. I urge all citizens in these next days to conduct themselves with restraint and responsibility.

Now, that's what I propose to put out. Then I will meet with these people on Monday. I will have Mr. Royall and Mr. Blaik in Birmingham by Tuesday. I would hope they would meet with you; they're meeting with the Mayor in an attempt to see if we can make some progress on the local level. I think their status in the country is such that it will be more difficult for the Governor to challenge them.

And then if we don't ... if the situation deteriorates, we will stay in close touch and then we will consider this final step, which right now I would rather not take, but it may come to that. I just figure if you ever get them in, you're going to have an awful time getting them out of there. Let's just see if we can do, now it's tough for the Negro community. On the other hand, what the Negro community is trying to do is a very important effort, which has implications all over the country. And I know that this bombing is particularly difficult. But if you look, as you know, at any of these struggles over a period across the world, it is a very dangerous effort. So everybody just has to keep their nerve.
Transcript for Meeting with White Leaders

Meeting with White Leaders Part I

William C. Hamilton:
We honestly believe, sir, that our community, if given a chance to go on with what we started when this new government was elected and put into office, that if we are given a little bit of calm, a little bit of time to put it to work—and by that I don't mean to say we postpone the things that have to be done, I simply mean to create the atmosphere there that will let us go ahead, that we can do it with credit to ourselves and we think, to a credit to the nation. And that is the basis, the premise on which we come, is to try to reach some understanding of your mind as well as to let you understand some of ours.

President Kennedy:
Well, I appreciate it. I appreciate the Mayor's suggestion about you coming up and I'm glad to see all of you. This, this, I think it is a major problem of course nationally, which we have in every city and all over the country, which is going to be with us a long time after all of us are no longer in positions of responsibility.

The particular problem in Birmingham is a problem for the city as well as the country. No one, obviously, who lives in Birmingham wants to keep seeing Birmingham get pasted every day or discussed every day. It hurts the life of the community; people don't want to move in there, or do business, and all the rest. So the problem that I'm just interested in is to see what we could do, just speaking as a country and really what you can do in Birmingham, to ease the situation there…

…Now I think the thing is you've got the situation in Birmingham whether you should have it or not, but you do have it, and the question is what you can do to ease it. Obviously you don’t want the federal government in there and I don’t want the federal government in there. And you don’t want federal troops in there, and I don’t, because I don’t know how you get them out of there…

…Now tell me why it is that you can’t get a Negro policeman around there. Seems to me, if you’ve got 40 percent of the community that’s Negro, to keep order really among Negroes, I would think you’d be much better with Negro policemen…

William C. Hamilton:
We are fairly convinced that at least a third of our police force if, at this particular moment, were forced to share a uniform with a Negro and all the uniform stands for, that they would walk out on us. Mr. President, under circumstances like this, with all the danger that hangs over our community, we can’t have that.

Meeting with White Leaders Part II

President Kennedy:
Well, you know, I was talking to, there were seven Negro citizens came up the other day to talk to me. As I understand that... I suppose what four or five of them you'd regard as natives of Birmingham?

**William C. Hamilton:**
Yes, sir, two or three, four-

**President Kennedy:**
Shuttlesworth, the Reverend Shuttlesworth and Reverend King would be regarded as coming in when you talk about the "outside" versus the "inside." Well now the one of them was president of a school there?

**Unidentified:**
Dr. Pitts.

**President Kennedy:**
Dr. Pitts, and one was a Negro businessman.

**Unidentified:**
Gaston.

**President Kennedy:**
Gaston. And there were two others... Can't you get to talk to, they seemed to me to be ... I don't know anything about them, except that I just met them. But can't you do anything with them?

**Caldwell Marks:**
I've been in Mr. Gaston's office on many occasions to discuss his contributions to the United Appeal and things of that kind. I've always found him to be quite easy to talk to.

**President Kennedy:**
Well now then, it seems to me there must be some leadership there that is not regarded as incendiary by the white community. But I think one of the things that they said to me, this wasn't just Reverend King and Reverend Shuttlesworth, but that they had the feeling about a lack of communication….

**William C. Hamilton:**
...Now, there's been much agitation, and it's our belief that the stimulus for this has come from outside of Birmingham. From some organizations with special interest to benefit, from certain individuals, and it has produced problems that both races have had trouble meeting. But the leaders of both races feel that these matters can be resolved properly over a period of time if we are left alone, but it's essential that the source of these incidents be removed. And this we think is a national problem. It exists in other places, in addition to in Alabama and in addition to Birmingham. And we believe that if it is not effectively treated, the trend in civil disobedience is going to lead to revolution.
Encouragement to violate deep-rooted principles can be just as disastrous as encouragement to violate the laws of a civilized land.

Now, there've been charges of police brutality, when in reality we have a well-trained police force and they have acted with admirable restraint in the face of dangerous provocation. Our local government has attempted to deal with law violators and deal equal justice regardless of their race. And if we can have an avoidance of these incidents and a cessation of them, then the local citizens of both races believe that we can work out our problems.

Our long-standing customs [unclear] do not yield, however, too well to force, any more than they do on the part of other people. We realize that we stand indicted before the world by press agents, but we have not been convicted of the bombings. We're decent people and we believe we can handle our problems if we are left alone without outside agitation. Pardon the use of notes, but I felt that I wanted to be careful to make my points and to be careful of my choice of words.

Meeting with White Leaders Part III

Frank Newton:
The problem, sir, is how to develop authoritative leadership in the Negro community that can accomplish something for themselves to establish a sense of responsibility. Unless we can give our local people credit, unless we can, for instance, let Arthur Shores, or let Gaston, or let anybody else (it doesn't make any difference to us). But he needs to be able to stand up in front of his people and say, "You can follow me because look, I'm getting results for you." At the present moment and after the demonstrations, who got the credit?

President Kennedy:
King. King and Shuttlesworth.

William C. Hamilton:
King and Shuttlesworth. So the next time trouble develops, sir, they do not come to us and seek to work it out. Instead, they call him back again....

President Kennedy:
I agree, now let me ... it seemed to me ... as I understand it, King left after this agreement of May or June. Why wasn't it possible then or why isn't it possible now, if we're-let's say that Mr. Royall and Blaik go there and we have some days of quiet-why isn't it possible to do something? It seems to me there are two or three things that aren't very difficult to do. You must know the situation, I think you do, much better than I do, that you could do and do it with the local groups. Now, what's happening, of course, is that this thing is becoming more and more radical...

President Kennedy:
Now, isn't it possible, with everything you say about what you've tried to do and everything-the problem is, we've got a situation here--isn't it possible to do something
with either the Negro ministers, or the people who come from the community and do something about the police force or about hiring some people in these stores, which, as I understand, was one of the subjects discussed in May and June, so that there appears to be some progress?

Now, I know everybody hates to look like they're backing down under pressure. But somebody has to do something because otherwise you're going to have another bombing or somebody's going to get shot some night, and 10 people are going to get killed or 15, and that would just about be the end of Birmingham. So it seems to me it's much easier for somebody to have ...

What we are doing, for example, we're, we're going to have a, just speaking privately here, we're going to have a fight with all these Negro organizations about our legislation because they want to put FEPC in. Well, FEPC in our opinion means that you won't get anything by, you won't get anything by. And you're going to have a really turn radical left among all the Negro communities, [unclear]. So I think somebody has to break the ice and do something in the next two or three weeks, which gives a visible evidence of movement.

**Meeting with White Leaders Part IV**

**President Kennedy:**
I understand the problem about it, but I'm just, it would seem to me it would be... You're not going to get these fellows to leave. Let's just accept the idea. It may be part of the feeling in Birmingham that this administration can move these people in and out. I'm just telling you flatly we can't do it, and this is only the most limited evidence. Others will come in, and as I say, in my opinion are, they're going to be worse that come in, but that time will only tell that. And I think that when you see Farmer, who's with CORE, which was not the most extreme one, unless he starts to move over, then it indicates they're all beginning to outbid each other. Roy Wilkins and... will have to go and they all will. Besides, you can't move them out; you'll have others could take their place. And the Reverend knows for the last, the gospel was spread by outsiders. There's somebody's going to come in there and they're going to talk and they're going to exploit, for one reason or another; there are all kinds of reasons why they do it.

But the problem is, is there anything that you can do now, in this, as you see it in this city in the next month or so that would provide some diminution of tension in Birmingham, and appear to do so publicly so it appears that progress is, while however rocky it may be, it can be made?

**Meeting with White Leaders Part V**

**Burke Marshall:**
I told you that, Mr. Newton, that Sunday after the bombing, I went out to meet with the Negroes, up in John Drew's house, which is near Arthur Shore's house, up on what they call Dynamite Hill. And I was taken out by Captain [unclear] of the civil defense when they put a helmet on me, disguised as one of his civil defense people to get through.
There were Negroes with guns armed on every street corner almost. Now that situation is going to continue unless something can be done to restore the confidence of the Negro community at-in large, in the police. And I don't say that they shouldn't have it now. There's no point in discussing whether there's been brutality in the past. The fact is, as Billy says, the police were hired and trained by Connor; they were used as an instrument of suppression and repression for many years. The Negroes haven't forgot- ten that; they can't forget it.

So that from the point of view of the city and the community and the future incidents, it seems to me that the single most important thing is to do something that restores that confidence. And, as you know, Mr. Hawkins, it's just as bad the other way, because heck, a lot of the whites think the Negroes did the bombing. But I think that that's the single most important thing and that until that's done, you're going to be living on the knife's edge, all the time, on the verge of a real racial war.

**Landon Miller:**

We all had many, many calls, before we left Birmingham, after we announced that the President was going to see us. We all had many calls. A number of them are just what you said, that the whites think the Negroes did the bombing; the Negroes think the police did the bombing. It's all a confused situation. And the people of Birmingham, as a whole, have in the back of their minds that maybe the Department of Justice or Washington knows who did the bombing and will not release the information.

**Marshall:**

Of course, that's why Nathan Weaver made his statement the other day.

**Miller:**

Well, of course, they say-

**President Kennedy:**

Who is Nathan Weaver?

**Marshall:**

He's the United States Attorney there.

**President Kennedy:**

Yeah.

**Marshall:**

He announced that there was a rumor that was quite wide- spread that Negroes had a cache of dynamite and TNT in the basement of that church. And that the little girl who was decapitated knocked over the TNT thereby setting off the dynamite. And the other rumor was that the janitor in the church had done it and the FBI had spirited him out of town so that no one would find out.

**Miller:**

Oh boy.
President Kennedy:
  Do they really get so they believe that?

Hamilton:
  Yes, sir.

Miller:
  Oh, goodness, sure.

Meeting with White Leaders Part VI

President Kennedy:
  I don't know where it will end. I think that probably we'll get through it, as we do in most... But it will take a lot of action by the church groups-Negro and white-and I think we'll get through it. I think this bill, I think is very important because I think it's going to give us a good deal, a breathing spell, for some years. If we don't get it by, there's going to be demands for more legislation next year. And I think you'll find this bill, like a lot of other bills which you dread, that it isn't going to be very bad. That's my view and it will be very helpful. I think we'll get through it, but we're going to have a very difficult time-all over the country, not just Birmingham.