

The Right to Vote in Mississippi

Voter Education Efforts Meet with Violent Resistance

At the time John F. Kennedy takes office in January 1961, a person trying to register to vote in Mississippi must first pass a literacy test, then explain a portion of the US Constitution, and also be able to pay a poll tax before voting. While poor educational opportunities and overt racial discrimination by registrars make it difficult for many blacks to meet all of these requirements, terror, violence, and economic intimidation also suppress black voter participation. In 1955, two civil rights workers active in voter registration were murdered.

In the summer of 1961, talks between civil rights leaders and Attorney General Robert Kennedy lead to the creation of the Voter Education Project (VEP). Funded by a private foundation, the program provides grants to civil rights groups to help coordinate and increase the registration of black voters in southern states. The president and the attorney general believe this strategy will be a more effective way to bring about change than sit-ins, freedom rides, and demonstrations. Several civil rights organizations obtain grants from the program. One effort the VEP funds is run by Bob Moses.

Moses comes to Mississippi from New York in July 1961 as an organizer for SNCC -- the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee -- "Snick". On August 7, he opens his first voter education school and begins teaching Negroes how to pass the tests, register, and respond non-violently if they are attacked. When he brings them to voter registration offices, many are badly beaten by white segregationists. Tensions escalate and, in late September, Herbert Lee, a farmer who volunteers for SNCC, is shot and killed. The US Department of Justice investigates Lee's murder, as well as the ongoing harassment of Moses and blacks participating in voter registration efforts. Most of the people being helped by the VEP efforts in the rural counties of the Mississippi Delta are poor sharecroppers. They depend on food surpluses from the federal government to survive. In October 1962, two county governments cut off the distribution of these food supplies to 22,000 people. The Justice Department investigates and the Commission on Civil Rights begins asking the president for permission to hold hearings on racial discrimination in Mississippi. By the end of the year, Moses is desperate. On New Year's Day 1963, he files a lawsuit against the federal government demanding that the Justice Department enforce laws meant to prevent interference with voter registration. By early 1963, the retaliation of the counties in cutting off federal surpluses spurs hundreds of Negroes to try to register to vote.

On February 28, President Kennedy sends a Special Message to Congress on Civil Rights, calling for effective legislation and urging "every state legislature to take prompt action ... to outlaw the poll tax...as the 24th amendment to the Constitution." On the

same day, 22-year-old Jimmy Travis, a veteran of the Freedom Rides, and a SNCC and VEP worker, is shot while driving Moses on Highway 82 near Greenwood, Mississippi. Travis survives, and SNCC channels its efforts into Greenwood. White segregationists respond by burning SNCC offices and shooting at more volunteers, including Dewey Greene Sr., who is killed on March 24. In Greene's and Travis' honor, SNCC launches registration marches in Greenwood. After Moses is arrested on March 27, Burke Marshall of the US Department of Justice threatens the city with a federal lawsuit. Meanwhile, the SNCC marches continue. The best-known civil rights activist in Mississippi and NAACP field secretary for the state, Medgar Evers and other leaders come to Greenwood to support the movement. On April 5, popular black comedian Dick Gregory joins the marchers, attracting national media attention. That day, the Justice Department strikes a deal with the city. Greenwood officials agree to release the jailed demonstrators and the Justice Department agrees to drop the lawsuit. Additionally, the federal government pays for the distribution of federal food to the starving people of the rural counties.

Later that spring, on June 11, the same evening that the president delivers his major address on civil rights to the nation, Medgar Evers is killed outside of his home in Jackson, Mississippi.

July 12, 1961: In the Oval Office, the president meets with a group from the NAACP. They praise Kennedy's "effective executive action" in civil rights matters, but hope that Congress can do more to change or create new laws. Kennedy explains that he believes more needs to be done in carrying out current laws. He presses for a greater effort in registering more Negro voters. **How to Change That (Photograph)**

September 13, 1962: A reporter quotes Martin Luther King Jr., saying that there is "anti-Negro terrorism in the South," explaining that many civil rights groups believe the government "hasn't done enough" about it. What does the president think? He gives his answer. **Anti-Negro Terrorism (Video)**

September 21, 1962: Charles R. McLaurin writes to the president from Ruleville, Mississippi. For black people living in his small delta town, registering to vote is no simple thing. **Vote at Your Own Risk (Letter)**

October 3, 1962: Troops are now in Oxford, Mississippi, keeping the peace. Two days ago, riots erupted there when Federal Marshals escorted James Meredith to register as a student at Ole Miss

– the all-white University of Mississippi. Aaron Henry and Medgar Evers, of the NAACP, think this could have been avoided. **Tragedy at Ole Miss (Telegram)**

October 22, 1962: Lee White, Special Assistant Counsel to the president, asks for advice from Burke Marshall, the assistant attorney general. Aaron Henry and Medgar Evers made a suggestion in a telegram received this month. Perhaps it is worth considering. **Advice on Henry and Evers? (Memo)**

October 25, 1962: Burke Marshall responds to Lee White, who has asked for Marshall’s opinion on a telegram that arrived earlier this month from Aaron Henry and Medgar Evers of the NAACP. **In a Word: Outrageous (Memo)**

October 29, 1962: Burke Marshall has called a telegram from Aaron Henry and Medgar Evers “too outrageous to respond to.” Lee White agrees, but there is something in the telegram he finds interesting. **The Whole Picture? (Memo)**

February 12, 1963: The Commission on Civil Rights is less than six years old. It was established under President Eisenhower. Its two-year term has been extended twice. This could be its last year. Its members, under Chairman John Hannah, investigate civil rights problems for the president and US Department of Justice. **Civil Rights Commissioners (Photograph)**

March 1, 1963: Wiley Branton is the Director of the Voter Education Project, which distributes grants for voting registration efforts across the South. He writes President Kennedy about the shooting of SNCC worker, Jimmy Travis. “This cannot longer be tolerated,” he proclaims. He tells the president what his group intends to do. **James Travis Shot (Telegram)**

March 7, 1963: Last week, it was James Travis in a car with two other SNCC voter registration workers. This week another group of volunteers has been targeted on the road. Roy Wilkins, of the NAACP, sends a telegram to the president asking for new action, including withholding federal funds from the State of Mississippi. **Yet Another Shooting (Telegram)**

March 16, 1963: Much of Leflore County’s black population is surviving on federal food surpluses. To punish these people for trying to register to vote, and to distract SNCC with a new problem in the area, the county government cuts off the distribution of the food supply. The

Northern Student Movement will deliver supplies to them. Raymond Blanks asks for donations.

You Can Help Today (Letter)

March 20, 1963: Since Wiley Branton sent a telegram to the president on March 1, three more voter registration workers have been “shot at.” White replies to Branton. **We’re Doing What We Can (Letter)**

March 21, 1963: Lee White responds to Roy Wilkins on behalf of the president. He explains what actions the administration has already taken, and what it will continue to do, moving forward. **Actions Have Been Taken (Letter)**

March 21, 1963: Five states still use the poll tax, which requires people to pay a tax when they vote. Congress agreed in September that the poll tax is unconstitutional, and proposed the Twenty-Fourth Amendment to make it illegal in federal elections. If three-fourths of the states also say they agree, then the amendment can take effect. President Kennedy asks state governors to move on this quickly. **Please Ratify the Twenty-fourth Amendment (Telegram)**

March 26, 1963: With the stamp of its official seal, and the signature of its Secretary of State, Washington ratifies the Twenty-Fourth Amendment to the US Constitution. That’s twenty-one states down and seventeen to go before the poll tax is eliminated in federal elections. **Signed, Sealed, and Delivered (Resolution)**

March 27, 1963: Longtime civil rights champion A. Philip Randolph sends a telegram to the president. He lists the recent attacks on the voting registration movement in Mississippi, including the latest by Greenwood police just this morning. **Need Protection Now (Telegram)**

March 27, 1963: Students at two colleges in Geneva, New York, want the president to “investigate the Travis incident,” and “bring integration to the South.” Together, they sign a petition. **We The Undersigned (Petition)**

March 30, 1963: The Commission on Civil Rights recommends “withholding federal funds from Mississippi,” which stands “in defiance of the Constitution.” It also claims that the president and attorney general have repeatedly obstructed hearings in that state. The commission warns it may give its resolution to the press. **Resolution of the Commission on Civil Rights (Resolution)**

April 3, 1963: Albert Rosellini, governor of Washington, responds to the president’s request. His state legislature has voted on the twenty-fourth amendment: the poll tax should be eliminated. He presents Joint Resolution 15 stating so. **Washington State Agrees (Letter)**

April 3, 1963: “Do you have any comments on the voter registration drive?” a reporter asks. Comedian Dick Gregory is in Greenwood now, generating national publicity for the movement. A photo in today’s *New York Times* shows him being abused by policemen. The president responds. **Any Comments, Mr. President? (Video)**

April 10, 1963: Lee White reads the resolution of the Commission on Civil Rights, and writes a memo about it for President Kennedy. He believes many of the Commission’s claims are “manifestly wrong,” and that its recommendations could have harmful effects. **In Defense of the President (Memo)**

April 10, 1963: Two days ago, the *Evening Star* – an edition of the *Washington Star Newspaper* – ran a “misleading” article about events in Greenwood, Mississippi. Wiley Branton, director of the Voter Education Project, writes to the paper and forwards his letter to Lee White. **Get the Facts Right (Letter)**

April 19, 1963: President Kennedy writes to the chairman of the Commission on Civil Rights, responding to accusations and recommendations in the commission’s Resolution on the State of Mississippi, which the president calls an “Interim Report.” **Kennedy Defuses the Resolution (Letter)**

April 24, 1963: A reporter wants to know, why has the president rejected a certain suggestion from the Commission on Civil Rights? The president shares his reasons. **About the Commission’s Resolution (Video)**

May 23, 1963: In March, the government of Leflore County stopped distributing federal food surpluses to the “approximately 21,000” needy people there. As Burke Marshall explains in his response to a letter, people did begin receiving supplies again in April when the federal government stepped in, but there is still a “definite need.” **Starving Mississippians (Letter)**

June 12, 1963: The president speaks to the nation about civil rights at 8:00 p.m. on June 11. Four hours later, at 12:20 a.m., Medgar Evers, NAACP field secretary for Mississippi, is killed. Richard Anderson of Deckerville, Michigan, writes to the president. He has heard there's a reward for information leading to the arrest of the killer. He thinks the same should be offered for the arrest of those who killed two white men. **Two Killers, Equal Rewards? (Letter)**

June 13, 1963: The president writes a personal message to Mrs. Medgar Evers the day after her husband is killed. **Condolences from the President (Letter)**

June 15, 1963: Earle Belle Smith writes to President Kennedy. The Catholic Interracial Council believes Medgar Evers should be given "the highest civilian award available." **Honored at This Time (Letter)**

June 17, 1963: Lula M. Donaldson, "a southern white lady," sends a telegram the president about the death of Medgar Evers. **Sarcastic Suggestion (Telegram)**

June 21, 1963: Two days ago, 3,000 people attended the funeral of Medgar Evers. He was buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Today, President Kennedy visits with his family in the Oval Office. **Together in Grief (Photograph)**

June 26, 1963: Frank Smith has had "personal contacts" with Byron De La Beckwith, whose name he misspells. He writes to Burke Marshall about this and warns, "There are others like him all around." Twenty-nine years later Beckwith is convicted. **Evers' Assassin (Letter)**

July 19, 1963: On behalf of President Kennedy, Lee White responds to Richard Anderson. He mentions nothing about rewards, but he does explain why he thinks the murder of Medgar Evers is different. **This Murder was Different (Letter)**

October 29, 1963: SNCC, along with other civil rights organizations known together as the Council of Federated Organizations, holds a Freedom Vote. It is a mock election to demonstrate the will of black Mississippians to vote if not held back by intimidation or violence. **A Mock Election (Photograph)**

August 6, 1965: Next year, President Lyndon Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964, making it harder for states to keep non-whites from voting. Also, the states ratify the Twenty-Fourth Amendment, ruling the poll tax unconstitutional in national elections. But it will be two years before a federal Voting Rights Act makes any and all discrimination at the voting booth illegal. President Johnson will sign the bill into law on August 6, 1965. **The Voting Rights Act (Photograph)**

Project C

Confronting Jim Crow in Birmingham, Alabama

Martin Luther King Jr., head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, calls Birmingham, Alabama “the worst big city in race relations in the United States.” He writes this on December 17, 1962 in a telegram to President Kennedy after the bombing of Birmingham’s Bethel Church. Before that, when Bethel was Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth’s church, it had been bombed twice. These are just three in over fifty bombings in fifteen years, in a city that has segregation written in its laws and a police department, under the command of Eugene “Bull” Connor, which strictly enforces its codes.

A major demonstration in Birmingham could bring a much-needed victory for the civil rights movement. King works with Wyatt Tee Walker, Ralph Abernathy, Fred Shuttlesworth and other SCLC leaders to devise a plan. They call it Project C - ‘c’ for confrontation. Starting on April 3, 1963, it will build in waves, first with sit-ins, then a boycott, and finally, non-violent protest marches on a daily basis, which are likely to provoke heavy-handed reactions from police, with mass arrests. The media will cover it, and everyone will see why black people are asking for justice in the South. By the time the plan is launched, Birmingham has become a city with no stable government. Albert Boutwell has just won the city’s mayoral election, but his opponent, Bull Connor, is challenging the results. Connor, an out-and-out segregationist with a short fuse, is still in charge of the police force.

At first, few people join Project C. Store managers shut down their lunch counters in response to the sit-ins, few activists are arrested, and the news media pay little attention. On April 6, Shuttlesworth leads the first march and is arrested with forty people – still too few for a major impact. On April 12, Good Friday, King and Abernathy are arrested along with fifty others and spend the next eight days behind bars. During this period, King reads criticism of Project C by local white clergy in a smuggled-in newspaper. In its margins he begins to pen a response. One day, it will become famously known as his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*.

While King is in jail, one of his young cohorts, James Bevel, begins to recruit and train youth to take part in non-violent marches. Word spreads, and soon students as young as six are ready to leave school and march in the streets. On May 2, they set forth on the first demonstration in what becomes known as the “Children’s March.” Police arrest over 600 young people, but 1,500 more

are ready to take their place the next day. Bull Connor orders in police dogs and fire hoses. Images of people pummeled and drenched by high-pressure hoses, and snarling German shepherds tearing clothes off demonstrators highlight the evening news. With Birmingham's jails overflowing, thousands more students join the demonstrations, sparking similar protests across the country. Before long, the story is making headlines around the world.

On May 5, Burke Marshall, Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, helps to get talks going between black and white community leaders in Birmingham. After several days of negotiations, a truce agreement is finally reached and announced to the press on May 10. In exchange for the civil rights groups ending the demonstrations, business leaders will take initial steps to integrate lunch counters, changing rooms, water fountains and restrooms at downtown stores, as well as open better job opportunities for blacks.

However, Alabama Governor George Wallace insists that no local or state officials have knowledge of "any so-called agreement." On Saturday night, May 11, bombs explode at Martin Luther King Jr.'s headquarters at the Gaston Motel, and at the home of his brother, the Reverend A.D. King. Riots erupt and continue into the next morning.

On Sunday evening, in a radio and TV broadcast from the White House, President Kennedy announces that he's sending Burke Marshall back to Birmingham to consult with local citizens, ordering Armed Forces units to bases in the vicinity, and taking preliminary measures to federalize the Alabama National Guard "should their services be required." Governor Wallace is outraged and accuses the president of disregarding the sovereignty of the state of Alabama. Despite the violence and continued opposition by white extremists, the shaky peace agreement holds and by mid-summer the city council will vote to repeal Birmingham's segregation ordinances. Project C has succeeded and young people have made a difference.

April 13, 1963: King and Reverend Ralph Abernathy have been arrested in Birmingham. Ten days ago, a deputy sheriff handed them an injunction, banning any Negro protests. King and Abernathy led protests, anyway. Now they are being held in solitary confinement without the barest essentials. Wyatt Walker sends a telegram to the president for assistance. **Jailed on Good Friday (Telegram)**

April 16, 1963: With King in jail, Wyatt Walker writes to Burke Marshall at the Justice Department. He encloses a statement by King and other Project C leaders on why they felt it necessary to defy a state injunction against further demonstrations. Marshall drafts his reply in the margins; on the lower left are names of Birmingham's big retail stores targeted by sit-ins. **Why Break the Law? (Statement)**

April 16, 1963: King reads that Birmingham's clergy disapproves of Project C in a newspaper smuggled in by Clarence Jones, his friend, counsel, and speechwriter. In the paper's margins, King begins to scribble a passionate response. Jones smuggles the document back out. Wyatt Walker and his secretary type it up, and mail it to clergy members and many others. In years to come, this letter becomes the most significant document of the civil rights movement. **Letter from Birmingham Jail (Letter)**

Undated: James Ridout sends a telegram to his congressman, Democrat George Huddleston. He is worried about what an "outside Negro element" might do in his home state of Alabama. He hopes the congressman will help **To Representative Huddleston from James Ridout (Telegram)**

May 3, 1963: Project C is now a month old. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy issues a statement. Certainly, Alabama is denying black people their rights, but there might be a better way and a better time to fix this problem. **Dangerous Business (Statement)**

May 3, 1963: Special fire hose guns have been made – monitor guns – which direct two hoses through one nozzle. Their force is enough to peel bark from trees, pin demonstrators against walls, and roll young children down streets. **An Inextinguishable Fire (Photograph)**

May 3, 1963: William Moore begins walking to Birmingham from Washington, DC on April 19. He wears a sign that reads, "Equal Rights for All Men." He is killed in Georgia. On May 3, Freedom Walkers attempt to finish Moore's journey. **Freedom Walkers (Photograph)**

May 3, 1963: The first demonstrator bitten is nineteen-year-old Leroy Allen. That was on April 6. Today's marchers know his story. Some of them flee when the K-9 units rush the crowd. Others stand fast. Officers sick their dogs upon them. **Attack Dogs (Photograph)**

May 4, 1963: Marlon Brando, Lena Horne, Mrs. Marshall Field, and other celebrities and people in the public eye tell the president they are disappointed in his “failure” and “betrayal.” **We the Undersigned (Telegram)**

May 6, 1963: George Huddleston, Democrat, represents Alabama in Congress. He agrees with the concerns of a citizen of his state, James Ridout. Huddleston hopes O’Brien will tell the president. **To Lawrence O’Brien from Representative Huddleston (Letter)**

May 7, 1963: Here in America? A university official and local Democratic Party leader is shocked by news photos of police brutality in Alabama. He wants to hear a statement of outrage from the White House. **To Ralph Dungan from Bob van de Velde (Letter)**

May 8, 1963: President Kennedy tells reporters what he is doing about the situation in Birmingham. He has already sent Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall there to help black and white leaders reach some agreement. Reporters ask the president about the “techniques” used by either side in Birmingham. The president responds and comments about the impact of the Birmingham crisis. **The President Speaks (Video)**

May 8, 1963: Texas State Representative Goode believes the situation in Birmingham is a “horror,” partly because those who’ve been arrested are being held for twelve months, at a fine of \$500. It seems Goode does not know yet that the city has increased the bail for King and Ralph Abernathy to the maximum \$2,500 each. **To Kennedy from Mary Ann Goode (Letter)**

May 9, 1963: Should the federal government send troops into an American city? This is the main question of discussion in a White House meeting today. The president meets with Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Vice President Johnson, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Associate Attorney General Burke Marshall. The attorney general describes the scene in Birmingham and recommends three steps the president should take. The president will decide what to do next. **The Decider (Audio Recording and Notes)**

May 9, 1963: Congressman Huddleston, Democrat, has forwarded a letter from Alabama citizen James Ridout to the president’s congressional liaison, Lawrence O’Brien. He receives a reply from Assistant Special Counsel Lee White. **To Representative Huddleston from Lee White (Letter)**

May 10, 1963: Bell has read King's letter from jail. He urges the president to speak out on civil rights as a moral issue. **To Kennedy from Colin Bell (Letter)**

May 10, 1963: The president of the American Jewish Congress agrees with the president: "Peace talks" in Birmingham are important. But Rabbi Prinz also believes more is needed soon. **To Kennedy From Rabbi Joachim Prinz (Letter)**

May 11, 1963: Emotions run high. Explosions have just rocked two locations: King's headquarters, and the home of his brother. Angry crowds fill the streets. Wyatt Walker climbs atop a car and through a megaphone, he pleads for nonviolence. **Please, No Riots (Photograph)**

May 12, 1963: Last night, at 10:45 p.m., someone threw a bomb through a window of this home. Alfred Daniel (A.D.) King lives here, Martin Luther King's younger brother. Quickly, A.D. gathered his wife and children to run, when another bomb exploded. Everyone is safe. A.D. is back today to survey the damage. **A.D. King (Photograph)**

May 12, 1963: Just after leaders from the black and white communities reach an agreement, two bombs explode. One goes off at King's headquarters. The other is at his brother's home. Birmingham's Negro sections riot through the night. **Far From Over (Photograph)**

May 12, 1963: On the other side of this wall is Room 30 of the Gaston Motel, where King has his Project C headquarters. Last night, a bomb tore a hole in this wall. Nothing is left of the trailers that stood outside. **Gaston Motel Bombing (Photograph)**

May 12, 1963: Buildings burn in the morning's dark hours. Police and firefighters cannot reach them. Those who try are hit with rocks thrown by rioters. **Birmingham Ablaze (Photograph)**

May 12, 1963: Chief Police Inspector Bill Haley is going to the hospital. During the riots last night, he took a blow to the head. Someone threw a rock that caught him on the right side. **Bloodied Inspector (Photograph)**

May 12, 1963: The riots seem to have ended. But just in case, special police forces patrol the streets with shotguns and helmets. **Ready for Trouble (Photograph)**

May 12, 1963: Order will return to Birmingham, even if it takes “1,000 or 10,000 law enforcement officers.” The governor criticizes the so-called “nonviolent” actions of King. He suspects communists are involved. **Governor Wallace is Outraged (Statement)**

May 12, 1963: Who is Birmingham’s mayor? Albert Boutwell won the election in an April 2 run-off, but his opponent, Bull Connor, is challenging the results. The State Supreme Court will decide after May 16. In the meantime, Boutwell makes a mayoral statement. **The Maybe-Mayor Wants Peace (Statement)**

May 12, 1963: Just before the bombings, Birmingham’s leaders, “both Negro and white citizens,” had reached an agreement. President Kennedy says he will place troops near Birmingham, but he hopes not to use them. The agreement should guide the city. **The President Asks for Understanding (Audio Recording and Transcript)**

May 12, 1963: At 8:56 p.m., Governor Wallace sends a telegram to President Kennedy. He asks what legal right the president has to send troops into a state that has not requested help. Also, he has already alerted the Alabama National Guard. **Wallace Challenges Kennedy (Telegram)**

May 13, 1963: Governor Wallace sends a telegram to the president. He believes the president has no right to send troops into Birmingham, and certainly not to protect an “alleged” agreement. **What Agreement? (Telegram)**

May 13, 1963: The president is about to meet with Alabama newspaper editors. His press secretary, Pierre Salinger has notes for him about the state of civil rights Alabama. **The State of Alabama (Memo)**

May 13, 1963: The president has not yet replied to Governor Wallace’s telegram from yesterday; so the Governor writes to him again. He promises everything is under control, despite the “abuses of rioting Negro mobs.” There is no need for federal troops. **Wallace is in Control (Telegram)**

May 13, 1963: In his response to Governor Wallace, President Kennedy says there are no troops in Birmingham, but that if he does need to send them, there is a “domestic violence” statute to legally back him up. **Kennedy May Use Force (Telegram)**

May 14, 1963: Even though President Kennedy has said there are no federal troops in Birmingham, Governor Wallace is sure there are. He asserts that “lawless Negro mobs” will see the troops as their protectors. **Wallace Accuses Kennedy (Telegram)**

c. May 15, 1963: Being white in Birmingham and in favor of integration is dangerous, but a group of prominent whites, called the Senior Citizens Committee, has been meeting with black leaders towards a peaceful agreement. They have remained quiet, but here, committee member Sidney Smyre steps forward. **This is the Agreement (Letter)**

May 17, 1963: L. H. Pitts is the president of Miles College, a black school in Birmingham since 1898. He thanks President Kennedy for the troops and the agreement, but he feels these efforts are only scratching the surface. **From One President to Another (Letter)**

May 17, 1963: The Project C leaders write to the white members of the Senior Citizens Committee. They are 100% committed to the agreement they have reached together, but they do have one question. **Are We on the Same Page? (Letter)**

May 17, 1963: The world is watching Birmingham. In a memo for the president, Donald Wilson, acting director of the US Information Agency, summarizes international opinions collected from global newspapers. **Global Headlines (Memo)**

May 17, 1963: The Governor, Senate, and House of Representatives of Alabama commend their policemen and state patrol for their performance in “facing and quelling the racist mob” in Birmingham with a “high order of discipline and training.” **Appreciation for Law Enforcement (Resolution)**

May 17, 1963: US Department of Justice official Joe Dolan calls from Birmingham. He reports that the city’s school board has certain plans for the children who marched in the demonstrations. Also, there are rumors of more violence. **Joe Dolan on Line 1 (Telephone log)**

May 18, 1963: High above Alabama, President Kennedy and Governor Wallace talk about Birmingham, the need for progress, and Martin Luther King Jr.’s character. The two do not see eye to eye. **Follow-Up on Air Force One (Memo)**

May 20, 1963: Milton R. Durrett is a member of the Alabama Wholesale Grocers Association. His organization represents “5,000 . . . large employers” who believe President Kennedy is helping Americans hate one another. The Democratic senator from Alabama should make the president aware. **To Senator Sparkman from Milton R. Durrett (Letter)**

May 24, 1963: Alabama Senator Sparkman, Democrat, is “pleased to forward the letter” he has received from Milton R. Durrett, an Alabama businessman who has a good deal of influence. **To Lawrence O’Brien from Senator Sparkman (Letter)**

May 27, 1963: Congressman Sparkman, Democrat of Alabama, has forwarded a letter from Milton R. Durrett to the president’s congressional liaison, Lawrence O’Brien. He receives a reply from Special Assistant Counsel Lee White, who assures Sparkman that the president is giving it attention. **To Senator Sparkman from Lee White (Letter)**

June 10, 1963: The State of Alabama has sent a copy of Joint Resolution 25 to the president. On his behalf, Lee White sends a simple reply. **In Response to Alabama (Letter)**

December 17, 1963: Kennedy is assassinated on November 22. His vice president, Lyndon B. Johnson is sworn into office the same day. President Johnson’s administration is keeping an eye on Birmingham. Justice Department staff prepare a memo on the status of the agreement. **A New President’s Concern (Memo)**

The Integration of the University of Alabama

Two students ignite a showdown between state and federal government

Since 1954, African-American students have been testing the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which states that separate-but-equal education is unconstitutional. They have been attempting to enroll in previously all-white schools at every level. When they apply for admission to state universities, and their applications are denied, they take the university to court, often with legal help from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. This is what James Meredith did last year. He was admitted to the University of Mississippi on October 1, 1962, but only after President Kennedy sent US marshals to escort him and federal troops to quell mob violence on campus. In the Deep South, it is common for major publicized confrontations to occur around the enrollment of black students at state universities.

Alabama is now the only remaining state with no integrated public schools, and two black students, Vivian Malone and James Hood, have applied for admission to its university in Tuscaloosa. Alabama Governor, George Wallace, who proclaimed “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever” in his inaugural address, says *Brown v. Board of Education* doesn’t apply in his state. On June 5, 1963, the US District Court for the Northern District of Alabama rules that it does, and that the university must admit Malone and Hood. Governor Wallace promises to “stand in the schoolhouse door” and block their entry.

President Kennedy and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, have learned from their experiences last year at the University of Mississippi. Malone and Hood are scheduled to register at the university on June 11. Nicholas Katzenbach, the Deputy Assistant Attorney General, will accompany them and keep the president and attorney general informed by phone.

That day, a crowd gathers outside Foster Auditorium, where the two students will attempt to sign up for classes. The governor, as promised, blocks the doorway. “I stand here today,” he proclaims, “as governor of this sovereign state and refuse to willingly submit to illegal usurpation of power by the central government.” Katzenbach confronts the governor and hands him the president’s orders to step aside. When Wallace refuses, the president is informed and he signs an order federalizing the Alabama National Guard. The commander of the Guard politely asks the governor to move, and he does. Malone and Hood are allowed to enter the university, but Wallace believes he has won: America has witnessed his stand. That night, President Kennedy addresses

the nation on television and radio. He explains what happened in Alabama today, and announces his commitment to a far-reaching civil rights legislation.

March 19, 1963: Jeff Bennett calls Burke Marshall, the assistant attorney general. He has a report from a meeting with leaders of the University of Alabama system and Governor Wallace. They have discussed how to handle another black student's application to an Alabama school that is different from the one Vivian Malone and James Hood will try to enter. **Meanwhile, In Huntsville (Memo)**

April 25, 1963: Robert Kennedy and Governor George Wallace meet in Montgomery, Alabama. The governor says his role is to see that the laws of Alabama are "faithfully executed." The attorney general reminds Wallace that his state is in the United States. **The Law is the Law (Transcript)**

May 1963: A showdown at the University of Alabama is coming up. Robert Kennedy, attorney general, does not want it to become another Oxford, Mississippi crisis – rioting took lives there last year when federal marshals escorted James Meredith into the University of Mississippi. Perhaps a few phone calls could make a big difference. **Calling For Support (Memo)**

May 22, 1963: "What will the president do?" a reporter asks. The governor of Alabama has announced that he will block black students from entering his state's university. The president responds. **Kennedy's Game Plan (Video)**

May 22, 1963: Just yesterday, the governor of Alabama made a statement about the situation brewing at the university. In President Kennedy's news conference today, reporters will probably ask his thoughts on this. Burke Marshall helps the president be prepared. **Prep for the Press (Memo)**

May 28, 1963: Dr. Frank A. Rose, president of the University of Alabama, has asked for a meeting with two FBI agents. Rumor has it, KKK members are taking hotel rooms in the area. And that's not all. **Extremely Confidential (Memo)**

May 31, 1963: There are a couple of ways the US Department of Justice can handle this University of Alabama situation. Also, there are a few things that will need to happen, no matter what. Nicholas Katzenbach explains. **Integration: Possible Approaches (Memo)**

June 3, 1963: Dr. Fields is the informational director of the National States Rights Party. He wants Attorney General Robert Kennedy to know that his group will be in Tuscaloosa to help Governor Wallace take a stand against federally enforced integration. **Against the Federal Government (Telegram)**

June 3, 1963: Arthur Weisenburger likes an idea he saw in the *New York Times*. The president should “go to Alabama on June 10th and walk in with those two Negro students.” **To Kennedy from Arthur Weisenburger (Letter)**

June 7, 1963: The idea Weisenburger read about in the newspaper has “been among those considered” by the president. White explains why the president will not take this approach. **To Arthur Weisenburger from Lee White (Letter)**

June 9, 1963: Governor Wallace is getting ready for the showdown. He tells the president – and he has already told the attorney general – that he will call “500 National Guardsmen” into service tonight. **Troops at My Command (Telegram)**

June 10, 1963: President Kennedy has learned that Governor Wallace plans to “maintain law and order” tomorrow by bringing in the National Guard. Kennedy’s response: the only threat to order is the governor himself. **Troops are Not Needed (Letter)**

June 11, 1963: “Should we shake hands with the Governor?” This is Nicholas Katzenbach’s only remaining question. Otherwise, he has every step perfectly planned for the US Department of Justice officials in Tuscaloosa and the students in their care. **What to Expect Today (Memo)**

June 11, 1963: Because Governor Wallace has ignored Proclamation 3542, the president issues Executive Order 11111. The secretary of defense is now legally instructed to do what it takes to “remove obstructions to justice in the State of Alabama.” **Executive Order 11111 (Executive Order)**

June 11, 1963: The president is done asking. Governor Wallace has only promised to stick to his plan. So President Kennedy commands Wallace and anyone else “engaged in unlawful obstructions of justice” to step aside. Nicholas Katzenbach delivers the proclamation by hand.

Proclamation 3542 (Proclamation)

June 11, 1963: Vivian Malone and James Hood do enroll at the University of Alabama, but only after a dramatic stand by Governor Wallace. Later tonight, President Kennedy speaks to the nation on radio and television about today’s events, and what he believes needs to happen for civil rights in America. **Face-Off in Tuscaloosa (Newsreel)**

June 11, 1963: Debbie Terrel describes herself “as a hot tempered kid.” She wants the president to know why she has lost respect for him, and why she stands behind Governor Wallace. **To Kennedy from Debbie Terrel (Letter)**

June 11, 1963: Patsy Vesely wants to know why “colored people . . . insist on going to school with the white people?” She admires Governor Wallace and was moved by his speech today. **To Kennedy from Patsy Vesely (Letter)**

June 13, 1963: Governor Wallace sends a telegram to President Kennedy. He has heard that his state troopers have been ordered by the president’s military commander to leave the university campus today. The governor says he will keep them there. **In the Name of Safety (Telegram)**

June 15, 1963: The president responds to the governor about how long will the National Guard will remain on campus at the University of Alabama. “The duration of their duty,” the president writes, “is largely up to you.” **On Wallace’s Watch (Telegram)**

July 18, 1963: The president’s assistant special counsel replies to Patsy Vesely’s many questions. On behalf of the administration, he calls her views “interesting,” and shares another viewpoint. **From Lee White to Patsy Vesely (Letter)**

June 24, 1963: James Barr, the mayor of Trussville, Alabama, wrote to Governor Wallace nine days ago. He shares that letter with the president. It applauds the governor for his “making a stand for the freedoms that we all cherish so dearly.” **To Kennedy from James W. Barr (Letter)**

November 16, 1963: J. W. Cameron reports. A bomb exploded this morning near Vivian Malone's dormitory. It has been months since she started school at the University of Alabama, but it seems some people want her out, including Governor Wallace. **Vivian Malone:**
Tuscaloosa Target (Memo)

Address to the American People on Civil Rights

The president tells the nation: We have a moral crisis

In the spring of 1963, the growing number and size of civil rights demonstrations, and the violent backlash from segregationists shine a national spotlight on the issue of racial inequality. The president is now prepared to take a bold stand.

During his first two years in office, Kennedy has been cautious and reluctant to push ahead with civil rights legislation as a result of his narrow election victory and small working margin in Congress. Instead, he has issued executive orders banning discrimination in federal hiring and federal housing, and has established the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. The Justice Department, under Attorney General Robert Kennedy, has 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. For African Americans who had high expectations for the administration, this is not enough.

On February 28, the president sends a Special Message to the Congress on Civil Rights asking it to enact legislation providing for limited civil rights measures. By early June, nothing has come from Congress; meanwhile major racial conflicts continue to flare in Mississippi, Alabama, and other parts of the South.

The violence in Birmingham, Alabama – the use of police dogs and high pressure fire hoses to put down young demonstrators – broadcast on television to the nation and the world last month compels the administration to speed up the drafting of civil rights legislation. As many civil rights leaders have hoped, President Kennedy now wants Congress to vote on an omnibus bill – one that would combine many civil rights measures into one landmark piece of legislation – by the end of the year. Some of the president's advisors believe he should make a strong statement to the American people about civil rights before sending his bill to congress; it could improve the bill's chances of being passed. Other advisors think this is a bad idea. Too strong a statement could jeopardize his other legislative initiatives, and even his bid for re-election. The president is leaning towards making a speech first, but *when* is another question.

On June 11, the latest civil rights crisis comes to a head. Two young adults, Vivian Malone and James Hood, both black, have applied to enroll at the all-white University of Alabama. A federal court has ruled that the University must integrate, but Alabama governor, George Wallace promises to block their entrance with his own body. When Deputy Assistant Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach accompanies the students to

register, they are turned away by Wallace and Alabama National Guard troops. To protect the students and to secure their admission, the president issues an executive order and takes control of the Alabama National Guard. About four hours later, Katzenbach and the students return with Brigadier General Henry Graham of the National Guard. The governor finally steps aside and the students register. Shortly afterwards, the president learns that Wallace has conceded. He decides that he will deliver his speech on national television and radio that night.

With the speech set for 8:00 p.m., Sorensen has only four hours to finish writing it. Robert Kennedy and Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall give him notes and ideas. It comes down to the wire. A few minutes before airtime, Kennedy and Sorensen are still dictating changes to their secretaries. As cameras roll, the president has only a partial speech in front of him. He tells the millions of Americans tuning in that, “We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution.” “Next week,” he promises, “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.”

After listening to the speech, Martin Luther King Jr. sends the president a telegram saying, “It was one of the most eloquent, profound and unequivocal pleas for justice and the freedom of all men ever made by any president.”

April 5, 1961: In 1960, John F. Kennedy made civil rights part of his presidential campaign. Shortly after taking office, his advisor on civil rights, Harris Wofford, receives a letter from Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary of the NAACP since 1955. Wilkins’ hopes in Kennedy have been dashed. **The President’s Promise (Letter)**

May 8, 1963: A reporter asks the president if he thinks “a fireside chat on civil rights would serve a constructive purpose.” The president responds about a “moral issue.” **An Important Moral Issue (Video)**

May 19, 1963: Yesterday, May 18, Pauli Murray, of Yale Law School, was impressed by President Kennedy’s speech at Vanderbilt University. She believes it showed the kind of “moral leadership” Kennedy spoke of during his presidential campaign. She hopes the president will someday direct this towards race relations. **Your Moral Leadership (Letter)**

May 29, 1961: During the Freedom Rides, Kennedy’s civil rights advisor, Harris Wofford, urges him to speak out strongly and demonstrate moral leadership. **Two Years Ago (Memo)**

June 3, 1963: Lyndon Johnson phones Ted Sorenson. “If I were Kennedy, I wouldn’t let them call my signals,” the vice president says. He believes the president can get a civil rights bill passed, but he has got to approach it in just the right way. **LBJ to Sorenson: If I Were President Kennedy (Transcript)**

June 7, 1963: Linda Sue Eubanks is a teenager, but not the kind that is “always getting into trouble.” She feels strongly that integration will have negative effects, including on her grades in school. **To Kennedy from Linda Sue Eubanks (Letter)**

June 11, 1963: Before anyone writes anything, members of the president’s administration meet. They share ideas. What should the president say tonight? The group works it out. Everyone takes notes, sometimes on the same piece of paper. **Pre-Draft Pen and Ink (Draft of Address)**

June 11, 1963: Ted Sorenson writes the president’s address with only enough time for two drafts. Several people read each one. They write their comments on the pages. “Social revolution?” This reviewer doesn’t like that phrase. Try “a great social change,” instead, he recommends. **Speech: Draft 2 (Draft of Address)**

June 11, 1963: At 8:00 p.m., Americans watching TV and listening to the radio hear a president say things about civil rights that no president has said before. He begins with today’s events at the University of Alabama, but then states this “is not a sectional issue... nor is it a partisan issue ... This is not even a legal issue.” Civil rights, the president says, is a “moral issue.” He tells Americans what he plans to do about it. **Tonight at 8 p.m.(Video)**

June 11, 1963: Martin Luther King Jr. has just finished listening to President Kennedy’s address. He is very moved by the president’s words, and has high hopes for the road ahead. **To Kennedy from MLK (Telegram)**

June 12, 1963: Miss Moore is a “sixteen-year-old blind girl” from Port Byron, Illinois. She heard the president’s speech last night, and this morning the news about Medgar Evers, the assassinated

Mississippi Field Secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. She asks the president an important question. **To Kennedy from Colleen Moore (Letter)**

June 13, 1963: Margaret Price is the vice chairman and director of the Women's Activities for the Democratic National Committee. On behalf of her group, she applauds the president "for spelling out our moral commitment..." She believes women have much to add to the civil rights effort. **To Kennedy from Margaret Price (Letter)**

June 13, 1963: The president has earned the respect of baseball's first black Major League player. Until now, Robinson says he has been skeptical. **Press Release from Jackie Robinson (Press Release)**

June 14, 1963: Since Tuesday – and it is only Friday now – the White House has received 2,158 letters and telegrams about the president's address, and his handling of the University of Alabama situation. Associate Press Secretary Andrew Hatcher gets a pro/con count. It looks favorable. **Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down (Memo)**

June 17, 1963: Fred Abood has ideas about how cities in Florida should move forward with "the process of integrating restaurants." He shares them with his fellow members of the Florida Restaurant Association, and sends this copy to the president and attorney general. **To the Kennedy Brothers from Fred Abood (Letter)**

June 19, 1963: A. A. Leeth agrees that the president has a "moral obligation" to fulfill, but that obligation is to protect America from communism. The president "has been unrealistic and impractical in his methods of raising the standards of the Negro race." **To Lee White from A. A. Leeth (Letter)**

June 25, 1963: Lee White responds to Leeth in very simple fashion. **To A. A. Leeth from Lee White (Letter)**

June 27, 1963: A lawyer from Alabama writes in confidence that many white Alabamians are "extremely proud" of the president's leadership. **To Kennedy from Tom Radney (Letter)**

July 3, 1963: Typically, when the president replies to a citizen, he has an aide prepare his response for him, but not this time. President Kennedy thanks a lawyer from Alabama for his “encouraging sentiments.” **To Tom Radney from Kennedy (Letter)**

The Civil Rights Bill

The president sends Congress a bold plan of action.

Until this year, President Kennedy has tackled civil rights by issuing executive orders, launching investigations, and enforcing existing laws. On February 28, he sends a Special Message to Congress outlining a plan dealing with racial discrimination. But Congress takes no action.

In the spring, a weeks-long series of civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama results in thousands of people arrested and jailed, many of them young schoolchildren. When Eugene “Bull” Connor, Birmingham’s notorious city commissioner, uses police dogs and fire hoses against demonstrators, the violence is broadcast on television and seen in news photos around the globe. The crisis compels the administration to speed up the drafting of comprehensive civil rights legislation.

On May 29, with the intention of sending a bill to Congress, Kennedy begins a series of meetings to get input and support from governors, civil rights groups, business executives, religious leaders, educators, women’s organizations, and others. On June 11, in a nationally televised address, he promises to send a bill to Congress, and on June 19 he does just that.

If the president’s bill were to pass without changes, it would do seven things: safeguard voting rights, desegregate public places, empower the attorney general to desegregate schools, form a community relations service, extend the life of the Commission on Civil Rights, prohibit federal funding of programs that practice discrimination, and guarantee equal employment.

There has never been such a comprehensive civil rights bill; there is a long road ahead before it can pass. Democrats do have a majority in both Houses, but many of those Democrats represent southern states, where segregation is still common practice if not written law.

Following the September bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, where four young girls die, northern Democrats add tough new provisions to the bill and push it through a House Judiciary subcommittee. Republicans are outraged, and the president and attorney general are caught by surprise. Southern Democrats support the bill, knowing it will be defeated on the floor of the House. President Kennedy and the attorney general step in to save the legislation. They gather a small group of influential congressmen to help resolve any differences and to craft another version of the bill – one they believe can appeal to enough conservatives to win its passage.

On October 29, the House Judiciary Committee passes the bill. Three weeks later, on November 22, the president is assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

The new president, Lyndon B. Johnson uses both his connections with southern white congressional leaders and the outpouring of emotion after Kennedy's death to pass the civil rights bill as a way to honor the fallen president. Johnson signs the bill into law on July 2, 1964.

February 28, 1963: The president delivers a message on civil rights to Congress on the same day that voter registration volunteer Jimmy Travis is shot in Mississippi. It outlines the “important legislative and administrative measures” he wants Congress to act upon this year. **Kennedy's First Message to Congress (Press release)**

June 4, 1963: Lyndon Johnson, vice president and head of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, addresses a group of national franchise and business owners in the East Room of the White House. President Kennedy and Attorney General Kennedy will also speak with the group. The topic is how civil rights legislation may affect businesses, and how business owners can take a leading role. **Big Business Meeting (Photograph)**

June 4, 1963: Why can't chain stores, movie theaters, and restaurants simply hire black employees and serve black customers? President Kennedy meets with business leaders. They explain their reasons. The president understands, but prepares them: if his bill passes, then the law will do for them what they can't do themselves. **The Business of Integration (Memo)**

June 11, 1963: On national television and radio, President Kennedy defines civil rights as a “moral issue,” and promises to send a wide reaching bill to Congress. He tells America he will ask Congress to pass the bill into law by the end of the year. **Introducing Civil Rights (Video)**

c. June 12, 1963: Labor unions have done much to make conditions more equal between white and Negro workers. Still, there's a lot left to do. The president will meet with union leaders on June 13. Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz provides him with these important points. **Equality at Work for Workers (Memo)**

June 12, 1963: Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, Democrat of Montana, has a conference scheduled with the president. They will talk about how to get the civil rights bill through Congress. Robert G. Baker, the Secretary for the Majority, has met with others about this subject. “Beautiful rhetoric will not suffice in this instance,” he writes. Instead, Baker outlines the group’s recommendations, and adds his own. **How to Make it Happen (Memo)**

June 12, 1963: Oklahoma Representative Carl Albert, Democrat, telephones President Kennedy. Last night, the president announced he’d send a civil rights bill to Congress, and today, his tax bill – a routine funding bill for the Area Redevelopment Administration – appears to be losing support. Albert and Kennedy discuss whether the two are related. **Ripple Effect in Congress (Audio and transcript)**

June 12, 1963: S. D. Mitchell manages a number of movie theaters in Greenville, South Carolina. He is certain that integration will put him and other small business owners in a “predicament.” He hopes the president’s administration will consider this while drafting the bill. **To Lee White from S. D. Mitchell (Letter)**

June 13, 1963: Building on his February Message to Congress, President Kennedy’s administration drafts a bill, which outlines in six titles what the president wants the new civil rights law to do. He gives this draft to a small group of congressmen. They will suggest changes before it is delivered to Congress. **The Civil Rights Act of 1963: Draft (Draft of Bill)**

June 17, 1963: The president gathers more than 200 religious leaders from diverse faiths. If his bill passes, it will protect civil rights across the country, but the country is vast, and civil rights problems often happen on a community level. He asks the clergy for their help. **Collaboration of Church and State (Transcript)**

June 18, 1963: President Kennedy’s party, the Democrats, has a majority in the Senate, but those from the South are not in favor of this bill. The Democrats will need to get a few Republicans behind it. Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, Democrat of Montana, believes he knows how to do it, but the president may not like the approach. **Strategy in the Senate (Memo)**

June 19, 1963: Last week, the president promised the nation he would ask Congress to pass a civil rights bill by the end of the year. Today, President Kennedy sends this message to the Hill.

He hopes Congress will include everything he wants in a single omnibus Civil Rights Act of 1963, and he reminds them he first asked in February. **The President's Message to Congress (Press Release)**

June 19, 1963: President Kennedy meets with educators from across the country in the East Room of the White House. His civil rights bill includes measures aimed at ensuring equality in schools, and opening up opportunities in general for young Negroes. The president speaks and listens. **Teachers Meet (Photograph)**

June 19, 1963: Robert Adler is a fifth grader from Brooklyn, New York who is upset about what is happening in Alabama. Along with his classmates, he writes to the president about it. Robert has some suggestions. **To Kennedy from Robert Adler (Letter)**

June 19, 1963: Miss C. Rosen teaches fifth grade at P.S. 16 in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. Her students have been studying about slavery in the South, and also talking about problems in Alabama in daily current event discussions. The class decided to write to the president. Miss Rosen introduces their letters. **To Kennedy from Miss Rosen (Letter)**

June 22, 1963: A photo is taken at the White House after a meeting with civil rights leaders and activists. The president is absent from the photo as he leaves on a European diplomatic trip. In the meeting, the president says of his civil rights bill, "I may lose the next election because of this. I don't care." But the leaders want more than a bill. They want a mass march on the Capitol. President Kennedy and his advisers don't like this idea. The meeting is tense. **Committed but Careful (Photograph)**

June 27, 1963: Senators Mike Mansfield and Everett Dirksen – Democrat of Montana and Republican of Illinois – have taken President Kennedy's bill, and revised it. Now there are multiple versions. Which one has a better chance of passing in the Senate? Robert Baker, Secretary for the Majority, takes a poll to find out. **Which Bill has a Better Chance? (Memo)**

June 28 1963: K. B. Winterowd, a minister to youth in Decatur, Georgia, writes that he loves the South, and that the "action" of President Kennedy's bill is "the only solution" to the problems there. **To Kennedy from K. B. Winterowd (Letter)**

July 3, 1963: The National Federation of Catholic College Students has many chapters. One chapter wants all others to write letters of support to the president. They send their idea to the Federation's moderator. **To the NFCCS Moderator from One Chapter (Letter)**

July 9, 1963: President Kennedy meets with leaders of organizations representing fifty million women in the East Room of the White House. They discuss what women can do to advance equality and civil rights legislation. **Fifty Million Women (Photograph)**

c. July 12, 1963: The president works hard to build support for a civil rights bill. Since the end of May, he has met with 1,558 people from eleven different interest groups. **Everyone is Involved (Memo)**

July 12, 1963: Following a meeting with leading educators on June 19, President Kennedy writes and signs a letter. It is mailed to educators nationwide. In it, the president recognizes urban problems related to a rising dropout rate. He explains what he means to do about it. **School Dropouts (Letter)**

July 15, 1963: Amanda Godbold Mainwood calls herself "a real Southern Democrat." She has in the past helped non-white people who have worked for her family, but she is against integration. She is worried about where it might lead. **To Kennedy from Amanda Godbold Mainwood (Letter)**

August 5, 1963: On behalf of President Kennedy, Lee White replies to Miss Rosen. He thanks her for sending letters to the president from her students, and also for her "leadership and participation in the struggle against prejudice." **To Miss Rosen from Lee White (Letter)**

August 5, 1963: Lee White writes to K. B. Winterowd on behalf of the president. He expresses President Kennedy's appreciation for the youth minister's letter. **To K. B. Winterowd from Lee White (Letter)**

October 10, 1963: Time-Life Publications has produced several spots for TV and radio. Each features a celebrity, or noted public figure making his or her own case for civil rights legislation and decent personal conduct. Time-Life hopes this will help influence decisions on Capitol Hill,

and sway average citizens to the cause of equal rights for all Americans. **Civil Rights and You (Video)**

October 23, 1963: Earlier this month, the president became uneasy about the bill that was drafted and passed by the congressional subcommittee. So, he has brought together a small group of Republican and Democratic leaders to work out any differences. Hopefully, they can reach an agreement that will work for both parties. **Keeping the Bill Alive (Audio)**

October 29, 1963: By a vote of twenty-three to eleven, the bill passes the House Judiciary Committee. The president issues a statement. He is pleased – the bill could become law by the end of the year – but there’s still a ways to go. **Major Hurdle Passed (Press Release)**

November 14, 1963: 1964 is around the corner. Reporters pressure the president. One asks about the possibility that neither the tax bill, nor the civil rights bill will pass this year. “What has happened on Capitol Hill?” another insists. The president tries to explain. **Will You Get a Bill? (Video)**

July 2, 1964: It has been more than a year in the making. The bill has finally passed its last hurdle, a vote in the Senate which took 54 days because of a Southern filibuster. The bill, which began with President Kennedy, has been approved as signed by President Johnson, and is now the law of the land. **The Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Signed Act)**

July 7, 1964: President Kennedy is assassinated on November 22, 1963. President Lyndon B. Johnson works with Congress to get the legislation passed in honor of the late president, and signs the bill into law more than seven months later. Several civil rights leaders are there to witness the event. **President Johnson Signs the Act (Photograph)**

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

More than 200,000 people come to D.C. to demand racial equality

President Kennedy is out on a political limb. He's committed his administration to a major new civil rights bill, which he outlines in a nationally-televised address on June 11, 1963. The following week, he submits it to Congress. But its passage is very much in doubt and he needs all the support he can get. Now he's learned that civil rights and labor organizations are planning a big demonstration in the capital this summer which they are calling "The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom." Kennedy is afraid that it will hurt rather than help his chances of getting the bill through Congress.

On June 22, the same day he's scheduled to leave on an important European trip, the President has a pre-arranged meeting with civil rights leaders. A. Philip Randolph, the respected black labor leader is there. He's the driving force behind the proposed March. Martin Luther King Jr. is also present and has joined Randolph in supporting the demonstration. The president tells the group he doesn't want "a big show in the capital" that could jeopardize passage of the bill.

Both Randolph and King argue the positive value of the March. Their view is echoed by James Farmer, head of CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality. Others are still on the fence, but it's clear from the meeting that the March is going ahead. Roy Wilkins, leader of the NAACP, and Whitney Young of the National Urban League finally sign on with the understanding that one of the main goals of the demonstration will be to drum up support for the civil rights bill.

Randolph appoints his longtime associate, Bayard Rustin, to organize the March. Rustin sets up headquarters in New York City, in Harlem. Here, the "Big Six" – Randolph and leaders of the five major civil rights organizations – are joined by labor leader Walter Reuther and representatives of Protestant, Catholic and Jewish civil rights groups. Known as the "Top Ten," they put out a call to mobilize individuals and groups from all over the country. The March is set to take place on Wednesday, August 28. As plans for the event come together over two short months, the president gradually comes around and expresses support for the demonstration which he says is in the great American tradition of peaceful assembly for redress of grievances. In the aftermath of protests around the country sparked by the Birmingham crisis, Attorney General Robert Kennedy's Justice Department develops a security plan for Washington DC. And Rustin makes recommendations on how the federal government can protect demonstrators.

From Harlem, Rustin predicts 100,000 people will participate. But on August 28, more than twice that number arrive, coming from throughout the US on planes, trains, buses, automobiles, and even bicycles. The enormous multi-racial crowd proceeds down Constitution Avenue to gather before the Lincoln Memorial, overflowing the space around the Reflecting Pool on the National Mall. Television crews broadcast the event to millions around the world. The three-hour-long program features the singing of spirituals, prayers and speeches by leaders of the March, including A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, Walter Reuther and the youngest member of the group, John Lewis, of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. (While the main speakers are all male, the program does include a "Tribute to Negro Women Fighters for Freedom.") The most stirring and memorable words of the day come from the final speaker, Martin Luther King Jr.

Following the event, the Top Ten are welcomed at the White House by President Kennedy. After he congratulates them on the success of the March, they get down to business and discuss the Civil Rights Bill and what they hope to do.

1941: Back in 1941, labor leader and civil rights advocate, A. Philip Randolph, had an idea: a march on Washington. Now, the time is right. Civil rights leaders have come together, and the president will listen. **Visionaries and Leaders**

Undated: A. Philip Randolph appoints Bayard Rustin to plan the March. Rustin has two months to get it done. **The Planner (Photograph)**

Undated: America's five main civil rights groups are sponsoring the March. Together with A. Philip Randolph, the groups' leaders are known as the Big Six. When another four religious and labor groups join, they unify as the Top Ten. Their representatives work collaboratively here in this building on 130th and Lenox, rented by Bayard Rustin, the planner of the March. Along with 200 volunteers, they strategize for the day. **Harlem Headquarters (Photograph)**

June 22, 1963: Kennedy gets a memo from Special Assistant Counsel Lee White. Today's meeting will be about many things. One is a proposed march on the Capitol, which the memo says may have a "negative impact." **Notes for President Kennedy (Memo)**

June 22, 1963: Civil rights leaders want a march on the US Capitol. The president and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, oppose the idea, fearing potential violence, and believing it could even endanger the civil rights bill they are working on. **June 22nd Meeting (Photograph)**

June 22, 1963: More people join the meeting than appear in the photo. The civil rights leaders are from all different groups. Agreeing is not always easy. They represent the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Congress of Racial Equality, and the National Urban League. **Meeting Attendees (White House Appointment Book)**

July 11, 1963: Bayard Rustin shares his plans for the March with local police, and the Juvenile Delinquency Planning Board, a division of the US Department of Justice. No one wants any violence. Rustin details what he has put in place to assure a peaceful demonstration. Representatives of the Justice Department and the police explain what they can and can't do to help. **Safety Meeting Minutes (Memo)**

July 17, 1963: A reporter wants to know, will the March be “a handicap” to the president? Kennedy responds. **Two-Way Street (Video)**

August 1, 1963: The March may cost you “political prestige and popularity,” a reporter suggests. Kennedy responds, “I assume what you say is probably right.” He goes on to share what he thinks a leader should do in a crisis. **Essential Matters (Video)**

August 1, 1963: Mrs. L. Haynes writes from Memphis, Tennessee. She feels strongly that “the proposed march on Washington is a disgrace.” **To Kennedy from Mrs. L. Haynes (Letter)**

August 3, 1963: W. C. Vaughn, of Vaughn Chevrolet and Cadillac in Lynchburg, Virginia, feels the administration is being pressured to “favor colored over white.” **To Lee White from W. C. Vaughn (Letter)**

August 7, 1963: Mail from Sargent Shriver, the president's and attorney general's brother-in-law: Catholics will join the March. The National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice will

recruit them nationally through parishes. Along with Catholics, many other faiths are similarly recruiting marchers. **Special Delivery to Cape Cod (Letter)**

August 13, 1963: On behalf of the civil rights leaders sponsoring the March, A. Philip Randolph writes to the president. They would like to arrange a meeting with him as part of the day. **A Meeting Requested (Letter)**

August 15, 1963: Chrissy C. Michaelson, of San Diego, California, is convinced that African Americans are “being used by the Communist inspired groups and the vote grabbers.” **To Kennedy from Chrissy Michaelson (Letter)**

August 20, 1963: What effect does the president think the March will have on America? a reporter asks. President Kennedy explains that this issue is not just for any one group of people, or any particular person to work out. **180 Million People (Video)**

August 26, 1963: Some governors, including those of Mississippi and Alabama, believe states should handle their own business, including civil rights. Massachusetts does not agree and therefore, endorses the March. **Resolution from Massachusetts (Resolution)**

August 27, 1963: One of the Big Six cannot make it. He is in jail in Plaquemine, Louisiana. He was protesting against police brutality there. **James Farmer is Not Here (Telegram)**

August 28, 1963: Among others, the Big Six will speak today: A. Philip Randolph, John Lewis, James Farmer, Whitney Young Jr., Roy Wilkins, and Martin Luther King Jr., all leaders of separate civil rights organizations. **Today’s Program (Program)**

August 28, 1963: No one expected this many people to be here today. They march with a shared purpose, and amass before the Lincoln Memorial. They sing together, pray with rabbis and reverends, applaud each speaker, and demand equality. **A Day Like No Other (Photograph)**

August 28, 1963: More than 200,000 people gather around the Reflecting Pool between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. They overflow a space five city blocks long. **The Crowd Assembles (Photograph)**

August 28, 1963: The weather in Washington, DC is hot in August. People find relief together. The crowd behind them looks towards the Lincoln Memorial. **Keeping Cool (Photograph)**

August 28, 1963: The final speaker today is Martin Luther King Jr., head of the SCLC. He has a dream, he says. He urges the crowd to make it a reality, not tomorrow, but today, in “the fierce urgency of now.” **King’s Dream (Photograph)**

August 28, 1963: Camera crews are covering the March. The nation, and much of the world are watching as an integrated crowd gathers to demand racial equality. The message of speakers and religious leaders is broadcast over the airwaves. **Breaking News (Photograph)**

August 28, 1963: In May, children as young as six demonstrated in Birmingham. They were met with violence, and the world saw the worst of America. For this March, planners suggested an age limit: seventeen. But the children are here, and today is different. **Young Folks (Photograph)**

August 28, 1963: The crowd is too big for the space around the Reflecting Pool. It reaches beyond the trees, back to the Washington Monument. **Scene from Above (Photograph)**

August 28, 1963: It has been a long, eventful day, but there is one more thing to do. The sponsors of the March meet with the president in the Oval Office, along with other civil rights activists. They discuss racial inequality and the civil rights bill. **Leaders Meet after the March (Photograph)**

August 28, 1963: Civil rights leaders tell to Kennedy that life in America is not easy for black people, and any solution must include equality in jobs, protected by a Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC). Roy Wilkins emphasizes the “interracial character” of people seeking equality. A. Philip Randolph says emphasis needs to be placed on the inclusion of the Fair Employment Practice Bill, and Walter Reuther says today was far more than a march. President Kennedy responds, and shares his ideas about the role of education in the Negro community. **Next Steps (Audio recording)**

August 28, 1963: The March has ended. The president has met with its leaders. Now, at 6:15 p.m., he gives his statement to the press. Tomorrow’s papers will tell the world his thoughts about

the day's events, and his administration's efforts to further the cause of civil rights. **The President to the People (Statement)**

August 29, 1963: Hymie Sosland, of Kansas City, Missouri, has "appreciation and admiration" for the March and its participants. **To Kennedy from Hymie Sosland (Letter)**

September 1, 1963: Daniel Jaquet writes from Washington, DC. He believes the March "will prove to be one of America's most meaningful days." **To Kennedy from Daniel Jaquet (Letter)**

September 9, 1963: On behalf of President Kennedy, Special Assistant Counsel Lee White responds to Mrs. L. Haynes. He suggests she find a way to "contribute to the improvement of racial relations." **To Mrs. L. Haynes from Lee White (Letter)**

The Bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church

Four girls ages 11-14 are killed. The news shocks the nation.

It is September. In Birmingham, Alabama, the school year is just beginning, and the city is facing a federal court order to admit the first five Negro students enrolling in its public schools. The governor of Alabama, George Wallace, wants to close the schools, saying he fears violence will erupt if the students enter. Birmingham's new mayor, Albert Boutwell, wants the schools to stay open, but he doesn't want troops ordered by either the governor or the president to interfere. He talks with both Wallace and Burke Marshall of the US Department of Justice to keep this from happening. Meanwhile, a lawyer named Albert Shores, who is black and has worked on many civil rights issues, takes the children's case to a federal court. On September 4, a bomb explodes at his home. Rioters take to the streets that night, and Wallace persuades the mayor to close the schools the next day.

When the schools reopen on September 9, Wallace sends the Alabama National Guard to block the Negro students from entering. Meanwhile, in Huntsville, six-year-old Sonnie Hereford integrates the first public school in the state. The next day, President Kennedy issues a proclamation stating that all interference with the students being able to enter the schools "cease and desist." He also seizes control of the Guard through an executive order, and commands the troops to leave. Most of the white students leave along with them. Over the next week, protests for and against integration spring up around Birmingham. In the city's West End, white teenagers protest for and against integration, and some are attacked by opposing groups. Governor Wallace flies to Baltimore where he announces that he will run for president in the 1964 Maryland primary.

At the end of the week, on Sunday, September 15, as people gather to worship, a bomb rocks the 16th Street Baptist Church where only months before, Martin Luther King Jr. and Fred Shuttlesworth had led workshops on nonviolence.

In a city nicknamed "Bombingham" with neighborhoods like "Dynamite Hill," this is only the latest attack on black residents by segregationists. But this one is different. Four

young girls are dead: Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson and Denise McNair. Later that same day, two more black teenagers are shot and killed. King, now in Birmingham, requests an urgent meeting with Kennedy. By the next morning, the shocking news has reached most Americans. The president issues a statement expressing “deep outrage.”

Kennedy meets with King and other civil rights leaders on September 19 and with Birmingham’s white business leaders and representatives of the mayor’s office on September 23. Something must be done about Birmingham before control is lost completely. In a statement to the press following the meetings, Kennedy outlines his plan to send two personal representatives, Kenneth Royall and Earl Blaik, to investigate and mediate disagreements between the Negro and white citizens of Birmingham.

Three of the bombers, all members of the Ku Klux Klan, are convicted of the murders decades later.

December 18, 1962: Reverend J. L. Ware, of Trinity Baptist Church, sends a telegram to President Kennedy. Four days ago, Bethel Baptist was bombed again – the third time in six years. Both churches have black congregations. Reverend Ware warns that if the president does not act soon, “God only knows what shameful holocaust may result.” **Church Bombings are Nothing New (Telegram)**

January 17, 1963: On behalf of President Kennedy, Lee White replies to the Reverend J. L. Ware. He explains that the Department of Justice and the FBI are helping local authorities track down the Bethel Baptist Church bombers of December 14, 1962. **It Is Being Investigated (Letter)**

September 4, 1963: Mrs. Norman Barrington is a teacher in Auburn, Alabama. She sends President Kennedy a newspaper article about Governor Wallace’s use of armed guards to force integrated schools to close. She asks the president to do something. **What is Best for Alabama (Letter)**

September 5, 1963: Arthur Shores lives here. Last night, a bomb blew out every window in his house and injured his wife. Shores is a lawyer. He has been helping black children and young adults enroll in white schools since the early 1950s, and he is involved in a case in Birmingham right now to allow five Negro students to enter all-white schools. This is the second time his home has been bombed. **Up on Dynamite Hill (Photograph)**

September 5, 1963: Martin Luther King Jr. and Fred Shuttlesworth send a telegram to President Kennedy. Riots erupted last night after Arthur Shores' home was bombed, and at least one person was killed. King and Shuttlesworth promise to continue advocating nonviolence, but they're getting worried. **Violence and Lawlessness (Telegram)**

September 9, 1963: On the radio, President Kennedy says that even though the people of Alabama are "willing to face the difficult transition" of integrating their schools, their governor refuses to allow it. The president states that the "governor knows that the US government is obligated to carry out the orders of the US court." **The President's Statement (Statement)**

September 10, 1963: The State of Alabama has been ordered to allow five black children into three public schools, but the governor has sent the Alabama National Guard to bar the doors. The president commands everyone involved to "cease and desist." That includes the Guard.

Proclamation 3554 (Proclamation)

September 10, 1963: Governor Wallace ignores Proclamation 3554, which commands him to remove the National Guard troops he has summoned to block children from entering Birmingham schools. President Kennedy issues an executive order. It empowers him to seize control of the National Guard. He dismisses the troops, sending them back to their bases. **Executive Order 11118 (Executive Order)**

September 12, 1963: Fred Shuttlesworth sends a telegram to President Kennedy. Even with the Proclamation and Executive Order, racial violence surrounding the enrollment of black students in Birmingham public schools seems to be escalating. **Keep These Children Safe (Telegram)**

September 12, 1963: In the opening remarks of his press conference, the president describes progress in school desegregation across the South. Following the president's opening remarks, on

school desegregation, a reporter asks if a “milestone” has been reached. **School Progress Report (Video)**

September 15, 1963: On a pleasant 70-degree morning, churchgoers make their way up the front steps of the 16th Street Baptist Church, a vital part of Birmingham’s black community for almost 100 years. Meanwhile, on the opposite side of the building, under another set of stairs, someone has placed twelve sticks of dynamite. **16th Street Baptist Church (Photograph)**

September 15, 1963: Today is Youth Sunday at 16th Street Baptist Church. Four young girls will lead the congregation in prayer. Right now they are in the basement bathroom getting ready. But there is also a bomb under the stairs. **Four Young Girls (Photograph)**

September 16, 1963: On behalf of the Detroit, Michigan Urban League, Francis A. Kornegay urges the Commander in Chief to take control of Birmingham. **To Kennedy from Francis A. Kornegay (Letter)**

September 15, 1963: Martin Luther King Jr. is now in Birmingham. A church was bombed this morning. Four children are dead. And now two black teenagers have been shot, one of them killed. King sends a telegram to the president. **Use Your Power (Telegram)**

September 16, 1963: Roy Wilkins of the NAACP sends a telegram the White House at 12:45 a.m. He accuses the State of Alabama of murder, and asks the president to “tell us now” if a strong civil rights bill is on the way. If it is not, Wilkins is prepared to take action. **Tell Us Now (Telegram)**

September 16, 1963: Yesterday’s bombing shook the nation. In St. Louis, Missouri, Don Hesse draws a political cartoon depicting the event, asking an important question. He signed copy to the president. The cartoon will run in the *Globe Democrat* tomorrow. **No Color Line Up There (Political Cartoon)**

September 16, 1963: On behalf of the president, Press Secretary Pierre Salinger delivers an official statement about the “cruel killing of innocent children.” He does not mention the bombers, but calls on every citizen to take action. **Who is to Blame? (Statement)**

September 16, 1963: Martin Luther King Jr. sends a telegram to President Kennedy. Along with several black leaders from Birmingham, he asks for an “immediate conference.” **Meet With Us? (Telegram)**

September 17, 1963: Phyllis Rodwell is a student at Junior High School 43 in New York, New York. She is saddened by “this terrible thing” that happened in Alabama. Perhaps the president can do something about it **To Kennedy from Phyllis Rodwell (Letter)**

September 17, 1963: Along with his classmates at Junior High School 43 in New York, New York, James DeShane writes to President Kennedy. He is very clear about what he thinks the president should do. **To Kennedy from James DeShane (Letter)**

September 17, 1963: The students of Junior High School 43 in New York, New York, have written to the president. James Jones is “concerned” about Alabama. He has a “small suggestion” for President Kennedy. **To Kennedy from James Jones (Letter)**

September 18, 1963: Lee White responds to Martin Luther King Jr.’s request. The president will meet with him and leaders of Birmingham’s black community tomorrow at 5:00 p.m.

Confirming King’s Meeting (Telegram)

September 19, 1963: Martin Luther King Jr. begins the meeting. He has come to the White House with civil rights Leaders and leaders of Birmingham’s black community. He describes the situation in Birmingham and makes three suggestions. He asks the president to do something before “the worst race rioting we’ve ever seen” breaks out. Reverend Ware describes in detail what life in the city is like for black people. The president responds to the concerns of the black leaders of Birmingham, and he describes his next steps. **The President Meets with Black Leaders (Audio)**

September 19, 1963: In his official statement to the press, President Kennedy lays out a plan to get Birmingham, Alabama past an event he calls “tragic.” It will take listening to local leaders, both black and white; working with citizens through his on-the-ground representatives; and bringing the bombers to justice. **Rebuilding Birmingham (Statement)**

September 19, 1963: Reverend C. Herbert Oliver is the secretary of Birmingham’s Inter-Citizens Committee, which has been documenting cases of police brutality for more than three years. He sends the president a list. **One Attack Among Many (Telegram)**

September 21, 1963: Minister Lovett feels his city of Birmingham – its image, and its white citizens – are suffering. He believes he has the answer. He writes to the president and tells him what it is. **To Kennedy from Wallace W. Lovett (Letter)**

September 21, 1963: Neil Sivert, a resident of Birmingham, Alabama, writes to the president in confidence. He hopes President Kennedy can “prevail on the Negroes.” He think they may be standing in the way of their own progress. **To Kennedy from Neil Sivert (Letter)**

September 23, 1963: “What can you do to ease the situation?” the president asks repeatedly. At the White House, leaders of Birmingham’s white community, including staff from the mayor’s office, explain why any action would be difficult. It would be easier, they agree, if the president could help remove certain “outside agitating influences.” **The President Meets with White Leaders (Audio)**

September 23, 1963: President Kennedy has now met with three leadership groups about the situation in Birmingham. In an official statement, he briefly describes what he has learned and what he will do next. **The President’s Meetings (Statement)**

October 4, 1963: Reverend C. Herbert Oliver sent a telegram on September 19 to the president on behalf of the Inter-Citizens Committee. He has also been cooperating with the president’s representatives in Birmingham. He would like a response. **Please Reply (Letter)**

October 21, 1963: Martin Luther King Jr. is the problem. That’s what Denson N. Franklin believes. He writes to his senator, John Sparkman, Democrat of Alabama, to ask him to speak with the president. Maybe President Kennedy can “keep King out of Birmingham for awhile.” **To Senator Sparkman from Denson N. Franklin (Letter)**

November 6, 1963: On behalf of the president, Lee White responds to Reverend C. Herbert Oliver. He explains what the Kennedy administration is doing about the circumstances the reverend has described. **Message Received (Letter)**