
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)**