

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 Sorensen. “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 Sorensen: 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)**