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THE FIRE WITHIN: THE BALDWIN MEETING AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE  
KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION'S APPROACH TO CIVIL RIGHTS

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2004

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of History  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
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2007

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the Kennedy Administration's decision to propose comprehensive civil rights legislation in June, 1963. The work focuses on the relationship between the Kennedy brothers, particularly on Robert F. Kennedy's position as his brother's main adviser and his influence on the president's final decision to go forward with legislation. It begins by exploring the Kennedy's childhood, then traces the brothers' approach toward civil rights during the campaigns of 1952 and 1960, and concludes with an assessment of the Kennedy administration's civil rights policy during his presidency. The thesis puts special emphasis on a May, 1963 meeting between Robert Kennedy and an eclectic bi-racial group of intellectuals led by the novelist James Baldwin arguing that the meeting profoundly altered Kennedy's understanding of civil rights, ultimately transforming the Kennedy legacy regarding civil rights.

For my parents, Dr. Roberto and Linda Saucedo, whose endless love and support continues to inspire me.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank first and foremost the members of my committee: Dr. Richard C. Crepeau, Dr. J. Spencer Downing, and Dr. Edmund Kallina, Jr. Their insights and guidance proved invaluable to the completion of this work. In particular I would like to acknowledge Dr. Downing, who served as a mentor throughout my undergraduate and graduate years in the UCF History Department. I had the distinct pleasure of sitting in his first class at UCF, and I hold him in the highest regard. Others in the History Department who I would like to thank include Nancy Rauscher and Carole Gonzalez, I am grateful for all of their help these past five years. I would also like to express gratitude to those professors who contributed to my graduate experience including Dr. Robert Cassanello, Dr. Sean Adams, Dr. C.E. Adams, and Dr. J. Scott Perry, whom I consider the finest professor I have ever met.

I would also like to thank my fellow graduate student Paola Rodriguez for all of her help in developing this thesis. I am indebted to the staff and archivists at the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum in Boston, Massachusetts, including Stephen Plotkin, Sharon Kelly, and Michael Desmond. Finally I would like to thank my mom, dad, Scott, and Misha who provided unlimited love and guidance throughout this process.

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“The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in a time of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality.”

-Dante Alighieri

## INTRODUCTION

On May 24, 1963 Attorney General Robert Francis Kennedy and his assistant Burke Marshall sat down in the Kennedy family's New York City apartment with novelist James Baldwin and an eclectic group of white and black actors, playwrights, activists, and professionals. Nearly two hours of heated discussion, accusations, and emotional outbursts ended when Baldwin and his associates abruptly walked out, ending a dialogue which on its surface appeared to have accomplished little. Both sides, one representing the highest political office in the land, the other representing the new face of activism, had failed to reach an agreement on the direction that the movement needed to take. There was no indication that either side fully understood the magnitude of what the other had been struggling to accomplish. Baldwin's friends openly mocked the attorney general's assertion that the federal government had been at the forefront of gradual change, while Kennedy scoffed at the group's suggestion that the White House had no grasp of the reality and scope of the inequality that plagued African-Americans on a daily basis.

The attack dogs and water hoses of Birmingham, the riots at the University of Mississippi, and the violence directed towards the Freedom Riders had all passed, yet the federal government had failed to produce direct initiatives and legislation that many black activists hoped would spawn widespread social change. In the eyes of civil rights proponents, the Kennedy administration had merely survived each of these crises, and their failure to follow suit with comprehensive civil rights legislation demonstrated the White House's lukewarm commitment to their cause. To these activists, the 1960 presidential campaign rhetoric championing the need for executive moral leadership had lost its luster. The participants in the

Baldwin meeting came away feeling the same frustration that national civil rights leaders had felt throughout JFK's presidency. Following the meeting, Baldwin maintained that a significant gulf existed between the reality of the civil rights struggle and the administration's understanding of that struggle.<sup>1</sup> What the novelist did not realize at the time, however, was that something had moved Robert Kennedy that day in New York. Fueled by resentment and frustration resulting from the encounter, RFK set out to create substantive change. Soon after, he began restructuring the Justice Department's hiring process. More important, he began urging his brother to adopt effective civil rights legislation. Indeed, the Baldwin meeting profoundly influenced the path that the attorney general would take in order to advance the cause of black equality.

For decades, historians have debated the Kennedy administration's handling of the civil rights movement. Scholars have been particularly concerned with explaining why it took the president three years to finally accept the necessity for comprehensive civil rights legislation. In examining the Kennedys' approach to the civil rights movement, historian Bruce Miroff writes, "[the movement] did not need guidance from Kennedy; it needed him, rather, to clarify and interpret its efforts to those whose prejudice might be tempered or overcome by respect for the nation's leaders. It needed him, in short, to bear witness to its fundamental righteousness."<sup>2</sup> Yet, Kennedy failed to provide that moral support until late in his presidency.

During the administration's first years, the Kennedy administration merely reacted to situations created by civil rights activists, relying on executive orders and litigation to dispel civil rights crises. In practice, the federal government was not a proactive force for civil rights. From the 1961 Freedom Rides to the integration of the University of Mississippi in 1962, the

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<sup>1</sup> *New York Times*, 26 May, 1963, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Miroff, *Pragmatic Illusions: The Presidential Politics of John F. Kennedy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1976), 225.

Kennedys consistently allowed the crisis of the moment to dictate their course of action. They always advocated a minimalist position for federal intervention, only reluctantly taking action when presented with no alternative avenue of mitigation. Yet by June 1963, the Kennedy brothers had come to the realization that the civil rights movement was no longer confined to the South, as it had found a voice in the poverty stricken northern urban ghettos. These people, burdened by the effects of *de facto* segregation on housing and jobs were more than willing to take up the cause for civil rights that their brethren in the South had begun. Circumstances demanded an expedient response from the White House. Within months, the Kennedy administration dramatically reversed their previous practice of responding to individual situations to taking the lead in pressing for comprehensive, national civil rights legislation.

This thesis examines the transition in Kennedy administration thinking. Furthermore, it argues that the meeting with Baldwin was the crucial turning point in that transition. To put this argument in context, the first chapter traces the historiography of the Kennedy administration's role in the civil rights movement. Although scholars have debated numerous reasons for Kennedy's shift from complacency to action, none have given sufficient or proper attention to the seemingly innocuous meeting between Robert Kennedy and the bi-racial group of intellectuals.

The second chapter focuses on the relationship between Robert and John Kennedy. In order to have a better understanding of the factors that helped the president conclude that the time was right to create comprehensive civil rights legislation, one must understand the importance and weight of Robert Kennedy's opinion articulated to his brother during moments that required critical decisions. It was an influence and bond that had its origins in their

childhood, and continued to evolve and solidify throughout their political careers. Its strength came from their upbringing, with a foundation based in core family values, social status, religion, and above all the expectations placed on them by their father. Chapter Three then explains how that relationship was solidified during John's senatorial and presidential campaigns of the 1950s.

Chapter Four analyzes President Kennedy's civil rights policy during the first three years of the presidency. This chapter places particular emphasis on the Kennedy's consistent lack of executive initiation in favor of a policy of appeasement. The fifth chapter closely examines the spread of the civil rights movement into the urban North, and how it helped to cultivate an emerging radical critique of the systemic inequalities that faced blacks throughout the nation. This chapter explains the growing importance of figures within the black community such as James Baldwin, and what role they would have in re-energizing the movement. The final two chapters discuss the Baldwin meeting, the personal impact it had upon on Robert Kennedy's understanding and outlook towards the movement, and how it influenced JFK's decision to speak to the nation on the need for civil rights legislation.

The Robert Kennedy who quietly urged his brother to go on television and make his "moral crisis" speech on June 11, 1963 had a distinctly different ideological outlook toward black civil rights from the attorney general who responded with anger at the relentless will of the Freedom Riders two years earlier. This work demonstrates that much of that change can be traced to the Baldwin meeting. Their discussion may have seemed ineffective on its face, but it actually had a profound effect on Robert Kennedy, both politically and personally. That transformation played a significant role in his recommendation that his brother take a legislative

stand in support of civil rights, a decision that would permanently alter the Kennedy administration's policies on racial inequality.

# CHAPTER 1

## HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION

### Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement

In his article “Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement,” Steven Lawson notes that interest in the civil rights movement can be attributed to “cycles of nostalgia that prompt Americans to recall the historical era of their youth. Memories dredged up turbulent and unsettling times, yet they also harked back to inspirational moments when ordinary people exhibited extraordinary courage.”<sup>3</sup>

The historiography of the civil rights movement reflects similar cycles of nostalgia. Central to those cycles is the tension between focus on particular individuals and specific events, as this thesis does, and broader analyses relying on techniques of social history to interpret the movement as a whole.

In the early 1970s Thomas R. Dye’s *Understanding Public Policy* applied elite theory—the idea that dominant minorities, drawn from the upper socioeconomic classes of the country, exercise political hegemony over relatively powerless majorities—to the civil rights movement.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding civil rights policies, Dye postulates:

The politically active ruling minority is subject to relatively little direct influence from the masses who are characterized as apathetic, passive and ill-informed. Elites use their positions of influence to manipulate public opinion to advance their own interest. Thus public policy generally reflects elite interests, not mass demands.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Steven F. Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement,” *The American Historical Review* 96, 2 (1991), 457.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas R. Dye, *Understanding Public Policy* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972).

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 46-47.

Of Dye's many conclusions, perhaps the most relevant is his contention that elected white officials only responded to black demands for equal opportunity when confronted with intense protest campaigns that precipitated a growing political and social crisis that bordered upon violence. Thus, by acquiescing to those demands, the political elites were able to preserve their political system and their positions of power within it.<sup>6</sup>

Early histories of the civil rights movement echoed Dye's interest in elites, and set out to explain how particular individuals or small groups in the black community created the crises that pushed white elites into action. In the 1960s and 70s, historians tended to focus on major leaders and figureheads of the national movement, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. As Lawson points out, these historians saw the struggle for civil rights as a political movement aimed at achieving permanent legislative and judicial change.<sup>7</sup> Authors such as August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, as well as Helen Jacobstein concentrated on men who played various roles in the push for legislative change to achieve black equality.<sup>8</sup>

August Meier and Elliot Rudwick's *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement 1942-1968* examines the creation of Congress Of Racial Equality chapters in local towns and cities that did not receive the same amount of national exposure as places like Montgomery. The authors demonstrate how CORE's national leaders, such as James McCain and Gordon Carey, influenced local leaders in their push for equal public accommodations. Lawson contends that historical works of the 1970s were written to analyze how national civil rights organizations

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 77. Similar conclusions are reached in Cotman's test case of Dye's elite theory upon the Birmingham crisis of the spring of 1963; John W Cotman, *Birmingham, JFK, and the Civil Rights Act of 1963: Implications for Elite Theory* (New York: P. Lang, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 456.

<sup>8</sup> Helen L. Jacobstein, *The Segregation Factor in The Florida Democratic Gubernatorial Primary of 1956* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1972); August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Carl Brauer, *John F. Kennedy and the Second Reconstruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

strived to achieve legislative victories, and Meier and Rudwick's book fits into that category.<sup>9</sup> Although the book suggests that local organizations were critical to CORE's successes, it was national leaders who drove the push for legislative change.

Helen L. Jacobstein's *The Segregation Factor in the Florida Democratic Gubernatorial Primary of 1956* illustrates how the racial climate within Florida was a major factor in determining the election of the politically moderate LeRoy Collins as the Democratic candidate for governor. The author discusses Collins's political strategy during his candidacy to solicit the black vote in a state which was still hostile to desegregation of its public institutions. While Jacobstein focuses on white politicians, she gives attention to the black community's significant role in the political process. Written in 1972, this work manifests the growing importance of the Black Consciousness Movement in Afro-American historiography. As Robert L. Harris explains, such interpretations saw African American history as "no longer an appendage to the main currents of American History. It expressed a distinctiveness that would not be overwhelmed or submerged to the American saga."<sup>10</sup> Jacobstein's work reflects this idea of black distinctiveness, in that she is able to present African-Americans as integral to changing American politics, even in a system dominated by whites.

In the 1980s historians began to shift their focus away from national organizations toward local community grass roots efforts. Drawing upon the methods of social history, historians sought to explain how activists in smaller towns organized and fought for equality at the community level. These historians suggested that the movement's importance lay not only in the narrow goal of achieving legislative victory, but rather in the broader effort to create new social

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<sup>9</sup> Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now," 456.

<sup>10</sup> Robert L. Harris, Jr. "Coming of Age: The Transformation of Afro-American Historiography," *The Journal of Negro History* 67, no. 2 (1991), 109.

identities for African-Americans.<sup>11</sup> William H. Chafe's case study of Greensboro, North Carolina *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* illustrates this approach.<sup>12</sup> Chafe traces the roots of protest in Greensboro back several generations, showing how each subsequent generation had an effect on the following group of protesters.

David Colburn's *Racial Change and Community Crisis: St. Augustine, Florida, 1877-1980* takes a similar approach in examining race relations within a city over many decades, illustrating how interactions between the black and white communities helped pave the way for the demonstrations of the 1960s.<sup>13</sup> Colburn examines the interaction between the white and black communities of St. Augustine throughout the period of segregation. The author observes the initial attempts to organize protest demonstrations by local African-American leaders that were met with stiff resistance by the white community. Only when national figures, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Fred Shuttlesworth, came to the city to give Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) support did protests seem to work. However, Colburn shows that the momentum that had been gained by the mere presence of these men was almost immediately lost when SCLC left the city to continue their work elsewhere. The author discusses how the impetus of the floundering protest was placed back on the local activists to ensure its success. Colburn's focus on the persistent drive by St. Augustine's local activists mirrors the transition in focus that was being made within academic writings of the 1980s away from national figures and organizations.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 457.

<sup>12</sup> William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford Press, 1981).

<sup>13</sup> David R. Colburn, *Racial Change and Community Crisis: St. Augustine, Florida, 1877-1980* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

Steve Lawson notes that community histories such as this are important in that they reveal the conflict within and between black and white communities. He also suggests that they demonstrate that “blacks were not simply victims of separate but unequal policies; rather, they retained a measure of social, economic, and political autonomy that under proper conditions could fuel demands for equality and power.”<sup>14</sup> Colburn specifically focuses on the local level of activism in order to illustrate not only the black community’s desire for legislation that would end segregation, but more importantly for their desire for social change that would redefine the structure of race relations and racial equality within the city of St. Augustine.

Leedell W. Neyland’s article, “The Tallahassee Bus Boycott in Historical Perspective: Changes and Trends,” illustrates a similar shift away from national objectives towards a communal awareness at the grass roots level. Neyland examines how the leadership roles of local ministers and businessmen in the Tallahassee movement played a vital function in establishing an awareness of African-American solidarity. The author contends that the boycott’s success should not only be measured in the short term objectives of desegregation of the bus systems, but in the “lasting values found in the acquisition of new attitudes, the development of greater social consciousness.”<sup>15</sup> Other works on the boycott, such as Gregory Padgett’s “The Tallahassee Bus Boycott,” describe how community leaders initiated and drove local protests. The boycott, he argues, “permanently transformed the social, political, and economical institutions of the city.”<sup>16</sup> Works such as Padgett and Neyland’s demonstrate that civil rights activism in local cities and

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<sup>14</sup> Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now,” 466.

<sup>15</sup> Leedell W. Neyland, “The Tallahassee Bus Boycott in Historical Perspective: Changes and Trends,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in Florida and the United States: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Charles U. Smith (Tallahassee: Father and Son Publishing, 1989), 56.

<sup>16</sup> Gregory B. Padgett, “The Tallahassee Bus Boycott,” in *Sunbelt Revolution: The Historical Progression of the Civil Rights Struggle in the Gulf South, 1866-2000*, ed. Samuel C. Hyde, Jr. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003), 190.

towns did not consist of isolated events distinct to only one individual region. Instead, they illustrate how local actions, even seemingly small-scale one, laid the foundation for the large scale national movement that would emerge during the 1960s.

In the 1990s authors such as James M. Fendrich, Adam Fairclough, and James W. Button continued to emphasize the role of local activist groups.<sup>17</sup> Fendrich and Fairclough's works examine student involvement in local movements. Button's study focuses on protest attempts in smaller communities that did not receive national exposure. Fendrich's *Ideal Citizens: The Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement* further explored the correlation between the Tallahassee bus boycotts and the formation of student organizations and committees. The work is a social history that places less emphasis on local leaders than on the ordinary citizens and students who contributed to achieving legislative and social change. Similarly, Fairclough's article, "The Preachers and the People: The Origins and Early Years of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1955-1959," presents the impact of student sit-ins and demonstrations during the late 1950s in communities throughout the South. Fairclough argues that the work of African-American youths was critical in mobilizing the support of older generations of African-Americans for organizations such as SCLC.

Button's *Blacks and Social Change* shows how small communities, such as those located on the southeastern coastline, achieved desegregation of both public schools and accommodations through local activism without the support of national civil rights organizations.

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<sup>17</sup> James M. Fendrich, *Ideal Citizens: The legacy of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: State of New York Press, 1993); Adam Fairclough, "The Preachers and the People: The Origins and Early Years of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1955-1959" *Journal of Southern History* 53, no. 3 (1986); James W. Button, *Blacks and Social Change: Impact of the Civil Rights Movement in Southern Communities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

Button argues that economic opportunity was a prime factor in mobilizing black protesters in these communities. It was during this period of the late 1980s when scholarship began to connect racial injustice and discrimination with poverty.<sup>18</sup> Button claims that these communities were unable to mount substantial protests or demonstrations until economic opportunities offered by programs at Cape Canaveral brought an influx of African-Americans into the region, bolstering support for local movements.

Even as scholars were working to connect local and national movements, other historians sought to trace the civil rights movement's ideological foundations. Some looked to the movement's deep roots, noting the "legal, theological, and political legacies left by leaders and organizations of the 1930s and 1940s."<sup>19</sup> Works written during the latter half of the 1980s reexamined the ideological roots of civil rights activists such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and their impact on local activists and the legacy of the movement itself.<sup>20</sup> David Garrow's *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Leadership Conference* examines the career of Dr. King and his struggle to incorporate his faith and nonviolent ideology to a national movement that was constantly evolving. In *Bearing the Cross*, activist Ella Baker recalls, "The

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<sup>18</sup> Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now," 463.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 457.

<sup>20</sup> David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Leadership Conference* (New York: W Morrow, 1986); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963-1965* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998); David Levering Lewis, *King: A Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978); Stephen Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982); Ben Green, *Before His Time: The Untold Story of Harry T. Moore, America's First Civil Rights Martyr* (New York: New York Free Press, 1999); James C. Clark, "Civil Rights Leader Harry T. Moore and the Ku Klux Klan in Florida," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (1994); Jake C. Miller, "Harry T. Moore's Campaign for Racial Equality," *Journal of Black Studies* 31, no. 2 (2000); Caroline Emmons, "Somebody Has Got To Do It: Harry T. Moore and the Struggle for Africa-American Voting Rights in Florida," *Journal of Negro History* 82, no. 2 (1997); Gary R. Mormino, "GI Joe Meets Jim Crow: Racial Violence and Reform in World War II Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (1994); Steve F. Lawson, David R. Colburn, and Darryl Paulson. "Groveland: Florida's Little Scottsboro," in *The African American Heritage of Florida*. ed. by David R. Colburn and Jane L. Landers (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1995).

movement made Martin rather than Martin making the movement.”<sup>21</sup> Works such as Garrow’s not only trace the ideological foundations of the modern civil rights struggle, but they also serve to humanize leaders such as Dr. King as they attempted to continually adapt to the changing goals and direction of the movement.

In recent years, scholars of civil rights history have begun to examine the external influences on the struggle by non-governmental institutions. Likewise, they have looked at the internal dynamics of local movements, including gender relations, within civil rights organizations. Lawson suggests that community studies reveal the ordinary people that embody the movement and lay at its foundations. Yet, a major problem evident in historical writings on civil rights before the 1990s is that they tended to overlook gender differences in favor of grouping both men and women together in racial solidarity.<sup>22</sup> This approach emerged at a time when historians such as Jacqueline Jones began challenging the traditional view of race and gender. Jones puts forth the idea that scholars should not study the two as separate dichotomies, rather that the focus should be on the point where race and gender intersect.<sup>23</sup> In recent years, literature published by authors such as Raymond Mohl and Glenda Rabby has challenged this idea of racial solidarity and explored the intersection of gender and race.<sup>24</sup> Through their studies of the internal dynamics of gender within the movement, the authors have been able to examine the roles of female participants at the focal points of local movements.

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<sup>21</sup> Garrow, *Bearing The Cross*, 625.

<sup>22</sup> Lawson, “Freedom Then, Freedom Now,” 467.

<sup>23</sup> Jacqueline Jones, “Race and Gender in Modern America,” *Reviews in American History* 26, no. 1 (1998).

<sup>24</sup> Raymond Mohl, *South of the South: Jewish Activists and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1960* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2004); Glenda A. Rabby, *The Pain and the Promise: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Tallahassee, Florida* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999).

Raymond Mohl's *South of the South: Jewish Activists and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1960*, not only focuses on the role of Jewish people in the broader civil rights movement, but also women's involvement in leading South Florida's local civil rights organizations. His study of black and Jewish coalitions that fought for social equality examines a group of Jewish women who faced intense hostility and discrimination both as a result of their gender and religion, in addition to their alliance with African-American organizations. In a similar fashion, Glenda A. Rabby's *The Pain and the Promise: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Tallahassee, Florida* examines the decade of activism following Tallahassee's bus boycotts. Rabby differs from her predecessors by emphasizing the significant leadership roles played by both student and women activists, such as the sisters Loretta and Lurlene Stephens.

The historiography of the civil rights movement has evolved over the last four decades. The initial work of historians of the 1960s that analyzed the role of prominent individuals and organizations in their efforts to achieve legislative change underwent a dramatic shift in the 1980s when the focus centered upon the study of grass root level activism. Recent works in academia have enabled historians to continue their examination of community activism with a more specialized look at both external and internal dynamics within these movements. The historiography of civil rights activism can be defined by distinct shifts and categorized into paradigms which have influenced historians since the 1960s, while contributing to a much larger body of historical work that helps scholars to better comprehend the events and ideologies behind the movement as a whole.

Yet despite the trend towards community based social history, the examination of prominent elites and individuals and their influence on the movement continues to remain at the

forefront of civil rights studies. An inquiry into presidential politics and the civil rights movement in the 1960s requires the engagement of the principles of Dye's elite theory as it pertains to the political and ideological struggle between prominent civil rights leaders and the executive branch. The study of the Kennedy administration and its approach to civil rights gives the historian the opportunity to apply these principles in order to better gauge civil rights leaders' attempts to take an active role in shaping and defining executive policy and eliciting permanent social change for African-Americans.

### Historiography of the Kennedy Administration

Although there is a robust historiography devoted to John F. Kennedy's administration, most work related to civil rights gives equal weight to both the president and his brother Robert. As the point man for executing the White House's civil rights policy, Robert F. Kennedy carried the president's complete confidence. Indeed, all major civil rights policy decisions were made with the consent of both brothers. Thus, the historiography of civil rights in the Kennedy administration is largely a historiography of the Kennedy brothers.

Historians have followed at least three major approaches in writing about the Kennedy administration. The initial wave of scholarship, which occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, consisted of memoirs by various aides and acquaintances who knew the Kennedys on a personal level. These works tended to offer favorable assessments of Kennedy and his policies, often portraying a calm and collected oval office that exuded moralistic fortitude and vision. With this type of work dominating the field, the next wave of historians began to produce scholarship that provided a counter analysis of the Kennedy presidency. These tended to be sharply critical of the president's policies and leadership. Several authors argued that instead of calm fortitude, a distinct lack of leadership plagued Kennedy's administration, especially evidenced in critical junctures. These scholars countered claims of moral leadership in civil rights, maintaining that the White House in fact acted solely out of a fear that the issue would threaten to undercut its own political agenda in such areas as foreign policy. These authors argued that the Kennedys exploited civil rights activists in order to win the presidential election, and once in power did little to support the movement. The third wave of scholarship attempted to find a middle ground between these opposing interpretations. These works conceded that

Kennedy did not provide strong leadership for civil rights, but argued that he pursued a pragmatic, rather than antagonistic, approach to the subject.

The first efforts to understand Kennedy's administration came from the president's friends and advisers such as Theodore Sorensen, Harris Wofford, and Arthur Schlesinger.<sup>25</sup> Their books portray the Kennedy brothers as champions and staunch defenders of civil rights. These authors argue that whereas their predecessors paid minimal attention to the civil rights struggle, the Kennedys were constantly evolving and came to embody the moral compass that was necessary for effective federal intervention. Unlike later historians, these authors describe the Kennedy brothers as aware of the civil rights problem from the outset, asserting that this awareness developed further as they attained more political power. Both Schlesinger and Sorensen point out that although JFK was not an active defender of civil rights during his time in Congress, he did vote in favor of every civil rights bill that came to the floor. Sorensen writes that although he did so "more as a matter of course than of deep concern," the young Senator was conscious of the inequality that existed, and that this understanding at such an early point in his political career shaped his responses to crises he faced as president.<sup>26</sup>

These authors also endeavored to demonstrate a personal connection between the Kennedy brothers and the movement. They argued that as members of a family of Irish immigrants who faced discrimination in the early twentieth century, the Kennedys could sympathize with the plight of African-Americans. Sorensen writes that the Kennedy brothers' speeches, "invoked comparisons to the discrimination suffered by their Irish grandparents,"

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<sup>25</sup> Harris Wofford, *Of Kennedy's and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980); Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row); Theodore Sorensen, *The Kennedy Legacy* (New York: MacMillan, 1969); Arthur Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978); Arthur Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965).

<sup>26</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 471.

although, he concedes, “they did not really experience in their own lives the agony or prejudice that Bob would later feel in the lives of others.”<sup>27</sup> Another example can be seen in the case of the Coretta Scott King phone call. On the eve of the election, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was incarcerated for demonstrations in Atlanta and was detained in a federal prison. Hearing of the news, Kennedy aides suggested that the presidential candidate make a call as a gesture of good will to Dr. King’s pregnant wife. Schlesinger writes that one of the main factors in his making the call was compassion. In their article, “John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Civil Rights,” Donald W. Jackson and James W. Riddlesperger suggest that analyses such as those by Schlesinger were done to create the perception that “the call was symbolic of Kennedy’s empathy with the civil rights movement.”<sup>28</sup> These Kennedy apologists attempted to show that the Kennedys’ heritage and upbringing provided a moral commitment that was in place from the first days of the presidency, and eventually led to the proposed legislation of 1963.

Early scholarship of the Kennedy administration expressed nearly unquestioning approval of the administration’s civil rights policies. Works by Henry Golden, Carl Brauer, and R. E. Gilbert tended to associate Kennedy’s accomplishments on issues pertaining to foreign and domestic policy with those of civil rights.<sup>29</sup> The most prominent, Brauer’s *John F. Kennedy and the Second Reconstruction*, focused on the impact that presidential politics had on the civil rights movement at a national level. Brauer argues that the Kennedy administration’s policies and

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<sup>27</sup> Sorensen, *The Kennedy Legacy*, 218; Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 286. Schlesinger also quotes a speech given by JFK in 1961 in which the president discusses how the Irish were discriminated against, yet overcame that hostility to the point where there was an Irishman in the White House. Kennedy says that if that can be accomplished, then blacks can achieve the same kind of results.

<sup>28</sup> Donald W. Jackson and James W. Riddlesperger, *Presidential Leadership and Civil Rights* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995).

<sup>29</sup> Carl Brauer, *John F. Kennedy and the Second Reconstruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); Harry Golden, *Mr. Kennedy and the Negroes* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Group, 1964); R.E. Gilbert “Moral Leadership in Civil Rights: An Evaluation of John F. Kennedy” *Political Communication and Persuasion*, 6 (1989) 1-19.

tactical strategy to confront the issue of civil rights played a critical role in the legislative gains made by African-Americans. He writes that Kennedy was the first president “who genuinely committed his administration to broad action taken specifically to improve the position of the Negro.”<sup>30</sup> He also places the president at the forefront of the movement, as a figure whose influence inspired realistic social change through executive action and moral rhetoric. Brauer describes John Kennedy’s inaugural address as representative of that leadership. “The speech moved a generation,” he writes, “Years later it was still being cited by many who were young when they heard it, as a turning point in their lives.”<sup>31</sup>

Many of the early histories were defenses of the administration’s record against critics who had fervently voiced their objections to the lethargic pace of executive action. For example, Schlesinger maintains that it took Kennedy almost three years to propose a comprehensive civil rights bill not because the president and his advisers were oblivious to the outrage being expressed by a large sector of the populace. Instead, Schlesinger claims, Kennedy acted out of brilliant strategic political intuition that allowed for a civil rights plan that would garner maximum results. Both JFK and RFK, he argues, recognized that at no time prior to the riots in Birmingham was the political landscape prepared for such a bold initiative, and to propose such legislation would have been a futile gesture that would accomplish little.<sup>32</sup>

The following decade saw a distinct analytical shift that presented a direct challenge to the traditional views offered by the first generation of Kennedy historians. The authors called

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<sup>30</sup> Brauer, *Second Reconstruction*, 316. This passage is also quoted in Jackson and Riddlesperger, 111. The authors are suggesting that although Kennedy did not always follow a pro-civil rights policy in areas such as appointments of judges and the failure to pass a federal housing order, Brauer’s overall assessment of the administrations policy must be looked at as a catalyst that would bring about legislative change.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>32</sup> Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 286-287.

into question the myth of the president and his staff's interest and willingness to rectify the problem of black equality. Works by Nick Bryant, Victor Navasky, Malcolm Smith and Henry Fairlie portrayed the administration's response to civil rights crises as one of necessity and reluctance, in which the federal government was forced into using their influence to maintain peace.<sup>33</sup> This shift coincided with the historiographical shift away from focus on political figures toward civil rights organizations and leaders occurring within civil rights scholarship. These authors point out that public expressions of concern for the civil rights movement were usually empty rhetoric voiced primarily to give the administration maximum political leverage. Bryant provides a damaging account of the John Kennedy's strategy of appealing to African-American audiences in the weeks leading up to the Democratic National Convention while warmly accepting segregationist governor John Patterson's endorsement. Bryant argues that this sort of political maneuvering typified the Kennedy machinery, which attempted to gain the confidence and support of both sides in order to ensure its own political success.<sup>34</sup> Smith echoes this idea in his work, *John F. Kennedy's 13 Great Mistakes in the White House*, arguing that, "By exploiting a heart-rending problem for his political gain, and by failing then to honor the promise, the President betrayed the Negroes."<sup>35</sup>

Fairlie and Navasky take similar critical approaches in their synopsis of the Kennedy administration's civil rights record. *The Kennedy Promise: The Politics of Expectation*, Fairlie's

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<sup>33</sup> Nick Bryant, *The Bystander: John F. Kennedy and the Struggle for Black Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); Victor Navasky, *Kennedy Justice* (New York: Atheneum, 1971); Henry Fairlie. *The Kennedy Promise: The Politics of Expectation* (Garden City: 1973); Malcolm E. Smith, *John F. Kennedy's 13 great mistakes in the White House* (New York: Suffolk House, 1980).

<sup>34</sup> Bryant, *The Bystander*, 145.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, 166-167.

scathing assessment, criticized not only the president and his advisers, but the institution which allowed him to hold such a high office. He writes:

When the display of leadership is so convincing, and the reality of leadership is so slight, the people will cease to understand the working of their political institutions. John Kennedy proclaimed in measures and in messages that he wished to do so much; but he in fact achieved so little. If a leader of such exceptional vigor, commanding an administration of such unusual talents, could not achieve his purposes, there must be something at fault with the political institutions which balked him... The poetic images of dazzling popular leadership on which he relied were so dazzling that his neglect of the solid world of things in which politics must make their useful adjustments was hardly contemplated.<sup>36</sup>

Although Navasky's work was not so vitriolic, it nevertheless sought to expose the emptiness of Kennedy's campaign rhetoric. Focusing on Robert Kennedy's Justice Department, Navasky assails the attorney general's conservative approach to resolving civil rights crises rather than initiating direct action. In *Kennedy Justice*, the author contends that Robert Kennedy's Justice Department utilized a strategy in which "confrontation was to be avoided and mediation rather than coercion was the way to achieve social change. They thought they could reason and negotiate with men like [segregationists] Ross Barnett and George Wallace."<sup>37</sup>

Much of the work that emerged in the mid 1980s sought to find a middle ground that would neither praise nor vilify the Kennedys' civil rights record. According to Jackson and Riddlesperger, these revisionists portrayed the administration as:

Pragmatists who adopted the civil rights movement as a matter of political expedience and necessity... [W]hen JFK moved slowly on civil rights, it was because he feared that pushing too hard might jeopardize other items on his agenda. When he pursued civil rights actively, he used the highest moral rhetoric, but for political reasons more than a moral commitment.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Fairlie, 344.

<sup>37</sup> Navasky, *Kennedy Justice*, 99-100.

<sup>38</sup> Jackson and Riddlesperger, *Presidential Leadership and Civil Rights* 113-144.

Authors such as Richard Reeves, Bruce Miroff, Taylor Branch, Irving Bernstein, and James Hilty applied this idea of a pragmatic approach to their analyses.<sup>39</sup> Although each author varies in his praise and criticism for Kennedy's presidency, they all agree that the Kennedys primarily comprehended issues in political terms. Miroff, for example, claims that the administration simply approached every problem as a political situation to be rectified by means of pragmatic liberal leadership. The racial crisis, therefore, was no different from the communist threat; it was an issue to be confronted by merely "placing emphasis upon tangible products."<sup>40</sup> Kennedy, Miroff argues, did his best to eliminate his own personal interpretations, especially because he had limited knowledge of the racial problems plaguing the country, by placing the bulk of the responsibility on his subordinates, especially his brother, Robert.

Authors such as Miroff emphasize that neither JFK nor RFK had patience for moralistic crusaders, nor did they have personal emotional investment in issues that would cause them to alter their political philosophy. Richard Reeves, echoing this notion writes that Kennedy "had no particular feelings and great voids of knowledge about the day to day lives and cares and prejudices of his fellow Americans...Kennedy usually knew what he had to know."<sup>41</sup> The revisionists see his presidency as defined by its ability to react, not anticipate. Jackson and Riddlesperger write, "When discrimination encroached on other policy areas, Kennedy wished to avoid making civil rights a focal point at the expense of the higher priority...civil rights conflicts

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<sup>39</sup> Bruce Miroff, *Pragmatic Illusions: The Presidential Politics of John F. Kennedy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1976); Irving Bernstein, *Promises Kept: John F. Kennedy's New Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63* (New York: Simon Schuster, 1988); Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993); James W. Hilty, *Robert Kennedy: Brother Protector* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000); Taylor Branch, *Pillar Of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-63* (New York: Simon Schuster, 1998).

<sup>40</sup> Miroff, *Pragmatic Illusions*, 224.

<sup>41</sup> Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 62.

were to be avoided rather than confronted by the national government.”<sup>42</sup>If a civil rights crisis developed, then the Kennedys attempted mediation. Failing that, or if a particular crisis escalated to the point of violence, then the administration reacted accordingly.

These historians do not miss Kennedy’s attempts to exercise executive power as he sought to push the movement into conventional political channels. Discussing the president’s handling of civil rights, Miroff observes, “The issue was out of his control...Parallel to Kennedy’s public stance were his active efforts to gain control over it...he attempted to force that struggle back into the traditional channels of American politics...each time in the long run he failed.”<sup>43</sup>Indeed, his and his brother’s efforts were primarily aimed at maintaining the status quo. At no time prior to 1963 did the Kennedys attempt to use the powers of the executive office to anticipate and defuse a civil rights crisis before it had the chance to escalate. In his work on Robert Kennedy, James Hilty surmises that the Kennedy brothers were benefactors of the social changes that were happening around them. He writes:

In both life and death the Kennedys often got credit for more than they achieved. John and Robert lived in changing times and stood at the epicenter of the tumultuous sixties, but they were reactors to, rather than initiators of change. Splendid opportunists, they carefully gauged events to leverage positions, maximize advantages, and minimize weakness. Their principal objective was political power and prestige; their often soaring eloquence raised expectations and promised greatness for their country and themselves.<sup>44</sup>

This study draws upon the diverse historiography of the Kennedy administration to present a more complete view of the brothers’ decision-making process. Rather than arguing that they were always proactive, simply reactive, or merely pragmatic, this thesis argues that the Kennedy’s exemplified a complex, but very human, development in their thoughts and actions.

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<sup>42</sup> Jackson and Riddlesperger, *Presidential Leadership and Civil Rights* 115.

<sup>43</sup> Miroff, *Pragmatic Illusions*, 227-228.

<sup>44</sup> Hilty, *Brother Protector*, 3.

The decision to push for comprehensive legislation provides convincing proof of that development. Before we can arrive at that point, however, we must begin by examining the relationship between the Kennedy brothers that developed from an early age to understand how that bond would shape their approach to civil rights policy.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THE EARLY YEARS: THE SEARCH FOR AN IDENTITY**

In order to comprehend the impact of decisions in matters concerning civil rights and the relationship between the Kennedy brothers, one must begin by examining the varying paths that brought them to the White House. Although both brothers would have some exposure to the inequalities that existed between races, it was not until the presidential campaign of 1960 that they would begin to realize the depth to which that division extended. The Kennedys initial approach towards civil rights emerged as a result of political necessity, meant to attain victory in the election, but never developed further, and as a result was incorporated into the civil rights policy of the presidency. Facing a national campaign in 1960, the brothers recognized that unlike previous senatorial campaigns, the regional divisions and attitudes towards race relations would play a pivotal role in deciding the outcome of the election. The advent of widespread activism promoting civil rights for African-Americans forced the Kennedy camp to adopt rhetoric that would cater to both traditional segregationists and advocates of social change. This approach of appeasement would set the standard for how the administration would attempt to resolve civil rights issues in the years following the election. The problem the Kennedys faced in trying to formulate and develop a strategy and political platform, was that they themselves had little experience in dealing with the inequalities that resulted from segregation. Their youth had not prepared them for the scope of the problem, nor did it provide any experience to fall back upon during times of crisis. Thus, the pragmatic approach that they adopted reflected the views of politicians who did not comprehend the depth of the problem, and who were unwilling to commit themselves out of the fear of possible political repercussions.

## Bobby Finds His Place

The Kennedy boys, including older brother Joe Jr., John, and to a lesser extent Robert, were groomed for politics from an early age. Their father, Joseph P. Kennedy, was intent on utilizing his substantial wealth to gain political influence. Although he personally coveted the presidency of the United States for himself, Joseph was stymied throughout the 1940s by Democratic Party leaders, including Franklin D. Roosevelt, who hesitated to relinquish much power to a man seen as power-hungry, ethically questionable, and who had seemed to sympathize with the Nazis in the 1930s during his tenure as Ambassador to the United Kingdom. Having failed in his own political endeavors, Joseph steadfastly used his wealth and political leverage to ensure that one of his own family members would eventually hold the office of the president. Speaking to a group of friends about the futures of his sons, the Kennedy patriarch admitted that he had decided that his aims could be best accomplished through his boys, and that he had already begun developing plans to have Joe Jr. run for President of the United States, John to become a president of a university, and Robert to become a lawyer.<sup>45</sup> In order to ensure these expectations were met, Joseph had his children attend the best private schools and universities and set up trust funds worth millions of dollars in each of their names.

Growing up in the illustrious shadows of his older brothers, whose numerous accomplishments between them included published books, war medals, and academic achievement, RFK struggled to find a purpose and place within his large family. As the third

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<sup>45</sup> Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, 30-37. Thomas discusses the failed attempts to win favor in the Roosevelt administration; Herbert S. Parmet, *Jack: The Struggles of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Dial, 1980); Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, 56. Schlesinger writes that following the death of Joe Jr. in the war, Joe Sr. was so embittered over his sons death and the repeated snubs for high ranking political appointments from FDR, that he told Harry Truman, "Harry, what the hell are you doing campaigning for that crippled son of a bitch that killed my son."

Kennedy son, Robert consistently fought for the praise and recognition that Joseph lavished on his two older brothers. He desired nothing more than to gain the attention and admiration of the men of the family, and as a result he spent much of his early life emulating Joe Jr. and John. When both of his brothers joined the military and won recognition for their service in World War II, Robert begged his father to allow him to put off attending university in order to join the Navy. Joseph, however, was adamant that his son would complete his education before entering the service. Robert eventually acquiesced to his father's wishes and agreed to attend Harvard. While there he began writing letters to his dad asking him to discuss political and social issues so that he could at least share in a part of the father-son relationship that Joseph had with his two eldest sons. In one of those letters he wrote, "I wish dad that you would write me a letter as you used to with Joe and Jack about what you think about the different political events and the war as I'd like to understand what's going on better than I do know."<sup>46</sup> He was frustrated by his older brother's vast knowledge and comprehension of world politics, and he wanted to attain a similar level of understanding. His father, impressed by his son's willingness to learn, began a correspondence with Robert, even offering words of advice and encouragement for the direction of his studies and career.

Through this episode, RFK was already demonstrating two critical traits that would help shape his work later in life. First was his unwavering loyalty and incessant need to find praise and recognition from his father. He would later demonstrate this same attitude and approach toward his brother, John. Reflecting on the strict Kennedy code of loyalty, family friend K. Lemoyne Billings would comment, "[Joseph Sr.] built within the family a real loyalty to each

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<sup>46</sup> Hilty, *Brother Protector*, 43. A discussion of Robert's relationship with his father is also found in Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, p.95-98.

other...Mr. Kennedy always said that the family should stick together.”<sup>47</sup> As a result, Robert began to mold his own outlook towards both his father and brother in order to comply with this standard. Kennedy adviser Ed Guthman writes that as Robert was willing to revise his personal identity in order to gain the praise of his father as a youth, so too would he incorporate a similar revision to accommodate and adapt to his brother’s expectations during his presidency.<sup>48</sup> The second trait that RFK showed was his willingness to listen and to educate himself on issues and ideas that were unfamiliar to him.

The tough moralistic attitude that RFK would one day bring to the Justice Department developed at an early age. During his first two years of high school his mother, a devout Catholic, placed him in Portsmouth Priory, a private Catholic school run by Benedictine monks. Robert thrived in this setting, attending morning and evening prayer and mass four times a week. This was in sharp contrast to John’s experience. Although his mother had enrolled John at Canterbury, a Catholic school, the young Kennedy detested the school’s strict discipline and pleaded with his father to transfer him to the less stringent Choate Academy, a Protestant preparatory school. Robert, however, blossomed both socially and spiritually in Catholic school. He began to take an interest in sports and developed a strict personal moral code of conduct from which he rarely strayed. He never drank or smoked, was openly dissatisfied with his sibling’s lewd romantic affairs, and refused to listen to or laugh at his peers’ crude jokes. Journalist Jack Newfield would later reflect, “[Robert’s] central values were toughness and morality,

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<sup>47</sup> Nigel Hamilton, *JFK: Reckless Youth* (New York: Random House, 1992), 216. Hamilton adds, “Mr. Kennedy now encouraged his children as they grew up to count upon one another, not outsiders.”

<sup>48</sup> *In His Own Words*, Edited by Edwin O. Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), xv.

determination and discipline.”<sup>49</sup> From an early age Robert saw the world in moralistic terms, showing disdain for those he perceived as excessive and decadent.

Joe Jr.’s death in combat forced both Robert and John to reexamine their roles within the family. The loss of his first born crushed their father, who withdrew emotionally from the family for a time. John was conscious of the fact that his father’s lofty expectations and plans for Joe Jr. were to be placed on his shoulders. RFK, whose parents saw him as their most fragile son, dealt with the tragedy by exuding the toughness that had been preached to all of the Kennedy children since birth. He isolated himself and turned to his faith. He went through a period of introspection in which he questioned whether or not his father shared the same level of emotional attachment to him as he did with Joe Jr. and John.<sup>50</sup>

During this time of self evaluation, Robert decided that his new role within the family was that of mediator and protector. Unlike Joe Jr., John was a free spirit willing to openly challenge his father’s will whenever he felt overburdened by his expectations. Joseph Sr., used to directing his sons, resented these challenges. As he would later do during his brother’s campaigns, Robert acted as a buffer between the two, always ready to appease and placate a heated situation. A guest of the family in Hyannis Port recounted that shortly after Joe Jr.’s death, John brought some friends from his PT boat to the house for dinner. Joseph had a strict house rule that family and guests were allowed only one drink before dinner, but John and his friends were repeatedly sneaking alcohol out of the kitchen. RFK was aware that his father was

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<sup>49</sup> Jack Newfield, *RFK: A Memoir* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2003), 42.

<sup>50</sup>O’Donnell and Powers, *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye*, 43-44; Hilty, *Brother Protector*, 40-42.

still emotionally distraught over the loss of his son, and desperate to avoid conflict, ran straight to John and began openly chastising and berating the entire group for their behavior.<sup>51</sup>

Arthur Schlesinger suggests that this time period was critical to the transformation of Robert's character. He writes, "The code of Kennedys discouraged undue emotion...Robert was in effect remaking his personality...in his determination to overcome doubts of his own worth and to win the love of the most important person in his life."<sup>52</sup> Robert's biographer James Hilty writes that his "personality and behavior were shaped by his abiding sense of moral certainty, by his attempt to gain his father's approval, and by his struggle to accomplish something as significant as his brother's colorful achievements. His earnest nature made him feel like an outsider."<sup>53</sup> Robert described himself in the harshest of terms, emphasizing that his poor academic record and inability to gain his father's favor symbolized that he had little status within the family. Even his own siblings viewed him as a failure. When asked about her younger brother, Eunice Kennedy told an interviewer, "Bobby? Forget it. Let's talk about the other boys."<sup>54</sup>

Robert Kennedy's role as protector and mediator fulfilled his desperate search for a place within his family. He was willing to invest everything he had to support his family and further its goals—a trait that would be essential to his future political career with his brother. Evan Thomas writes that this role as protector allowed him to attain a unique position within his family, "though at a cost: his independence of spirit would be sublimated, his more sensitive and

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<sup>51</sup> Joan Blair, *In Search of JFK* (New York: Berkeley Publishing, 1976), 345-346. This story is found in most biographies on John and Robert including Thomas, 43; Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, 57; Hilty, 45.

<sup>52</sup> Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, 61.

<sup>53</sup> Hilty, *Brother Protector*, 37.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Collier and David Horowitz, *The Kennedys: An American Drama* (New York: Summit Books, 1984), 73.

winning qualities covered over in a hard defensive shell.”<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, this new role helped lay the foundation for the bond with John that had been lacking throughout their childhood.

Following his graduation from law school and at the request of his father, Robert became the campaign manager for John’s 1952 senatorial campaign. Joseph, obsessed with fulfilling his dream of having one of his sons attain political power in Washington, continuously attempted to dictate the campaign’s direction. His efforts only served to frustrate and strain the relationship with his son. RFK’s arrival as manager diffused the familial tension while allowing both brothers to break free from their father’s will and set their own political course.<sup>56</sup> Exercising his new found assertiveness, Robert took the majority of the responsibility for running the campaign away from Joseph, forcing the Kennedy patriarch into an unaccustomed, more subdued, role.<sup>57</sup>

Robert’s new position also gave him his first unvarnished exposure to the machinery of American politics. The onus fell on him as manager to deal with critics of the candidate, favor-seekers, and freeloaders who were attempting to boost their own political careers on his brother’s coattails. He ran interference to ensure that John’s reputation and message were not sullied or lost in campaign politics. During a meeting at campaign headquarters, Robert told staffers, “I don’t want my brother to get mixed up with politicians...I don’t care if anyone around here likes

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<sup>55</sup> Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, 46.

<sup>56</sup> Heymann, *RFK: A Candid Biography*, 38. Heymann quotes John as being somewhat lukewarm at first to the idea of Robert joining him and the significance of the role he would play within the campaign. Upon hearing the news, John commented to staff member Paul Fay Jr., “It’s damn nice of Bobby wanting to help, but I can’t see that sober, silent face breathing new vigor in the ranks. The best plan is to make it known to the press. One picture of the two brothers together will show that we’re all in this for Jack. Then you take Bobby out to the movies or whatever you two want to do.” Despite this initial reaction by JFK, Robert quickly proved his worth by revitalizing the campaign with a determined drive that had been previously lacking.

<sup>57</sup> Guthman, *In His Own Words*, 67. The 1952 campaign was a critical period for the relationship of John and Robert, however it was not one in which the brothers paid attention to the problem of black inequality. Upon being asked how the black population played a role in the campaign, Robert responded, “There’s not a great number of Negroes in Massachusetts, anyway. In 1952, in that election, I don’t think that it was as much of an issue or much of a question. We spent some time in those areas, in those wards. But it was mostly—I think, probably, like the Democratic Party generally—looking at how many votes we would receive rather than what you were going to do afterward.”

me, as long as they like Jack.”<sup>58</sup> The experience served him well, developing the hard-nosed, no-nonsense approach that would be invaluable to him later in his career.

On a personal level, Robert became even more protective of his brother because he saw firsthand how sick John was. In 1947 the elder Kennedy brother was diagnosed with Addison’s disease, an illness caused by the failure of the adrenal glands which leads to circulatory collapse and weakness. RFK had become aware of the seriousness of his brother’s illness the previous year when their father had sent his sons on a tour of the Far East. While in Okinawa, John was rushed to the hospital with a temperature of 106 degrees. A petrified Robert sat at his brother’s bedside and watched as a priest administered the last rites.<sup>59</sup> Biographer Evan Thomas writes that, “In the 1952 Senate race, Kennedy’s health was his greatest campaign vulnerability. Had voters known how truly sick the handsome war hero was, his political career could have been a nonstarter.”<sup>60</sup> Both Robert Kennedy and his father understood that John’s illness could cripple the campaign, and resolutely worked to hide the disease’s physical effects from the public. They kept the crutches John needed the majority of the time out of sight from media gatherings, and they had him sit under a sun lamp in order to give him a false tan. Joseph ensured that cortisone shots, which at the time were seen as an effective treatment for the disease, were on hand at all times.

Devout loyalty overcame major personality differences between the brothers. As personal friend and adviser to both Kennedys, Ed Guthman recalled the brothers as being complete opposites in terms of their characteristics and mannerisms. He writes, “John was urbane,

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<sup>58</sup> Kenneth P. O’Donnell and David F. Powers, *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye: Memoirs of John Fitzgerald Kennedy* (Boston: Little Brown, 1972), 87.

<sup>59</sup> An in depth discussion on JFK and Addison’s disease, utilizing Kennedy’s medical records, can be found in Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (Boston: Little Brown, 2003), p. 81, 123.

<sup>60</sup> Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, 60.

objective, controlled, a man of reason; Robert was brusque, subjective, intense, a man of emotion.”<sup>61</sup> John assessed most situations in a calm collected manner, analyzing issues from various political perspectives, whereas Robert tended to react with emotion and impatience. These differences allowed the brothers to develop an understanding and trust in all matters, personally and politically. Despite contrasting personalities, Robert F. Kennedy would serve as John’s closest adviser and contribute to the majority of crucial decisions that would be made during the campaign and later during the presidency. Kennedy adviser Kenneth O’Donnell described RFK as being the essential balance that allowed the president to make critical decisions at times when no other voice within the administration was willing to take a definitive stand on an issue. He writes, “The best description of Bobby Kennedy is one that says at most...times, especially when his older brother was depending on his firm support, he was wise, calm, restrained, full of courage and understanding, and very realistic in getting to the hard facts of the situation.”<sup>62</sup> John was conscious of the balance that his relationship with his brother provided. Shortly after his election to the presidency, he approached Robert and asked him to become his attorney general. He said to him, “I need to know that when problems arise I’m going to have somebody who’s going to tell me the unvarnished truth, no matter what...I want somebody who is going to be strong...and I need you in this government.”<sup>63</sup> JFK knew that he could turn to his brother when he needed to hear a blunt and realistic assessment of an issue.

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<sup>61</sup> Guthman, *In His Own Words*, xv.

<sup>62</sup> O’Donnell, *Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye*, 282.

<sup>63</sup> Richard D. Mahoney, *Sons and Brothers* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1999), 86. During this meeting between RFK and JFK, John brought up the impending struggle for civil rights that would face the attorney general, he told Robert, “I don’t want somebody who is going to be fainthearted. I want somebody who will join me in taking whatever risks...and who would deal with the problem honestly.”; O’Donnell, *Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye*, 283. O’Donnell writes that John rarely admitted to those around him his reliance and affection for Robert. One exception occurred during the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which JFK was discussing his brothers role in writing the conciliatory reply to Khrushchev’s first offer to remove missiles from Cuba, when as O’Donnell describes, “the President paused thoughtfully for a moment, and said, “Thank God for Bobby.””

“John really wanted Bobby by his side, helping him to make the decisions on everything.” explained author Jeff Shesol, “Because there was only one person in the world that John Kennedy trusted unequivocally, and that was Robert.”<sup>64</sup> It was a relationship that would prove crucial to the stability of the administration. Commenting on the bond that existed between the Kennedy brothers, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson would say, “Don't kid anybody about who is the top adviser, Bobby is first in and last out...Bobby is the boy he listens to.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *RFK*, Written and directed by David Grubin (PBS Home Video: American Experience and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, 2004), DVD. Interview with Jeff Shesol. Another quote from the film that illuminates the trust between the brothers was by Ronald Steel, who says that after the election, “There was a recognition for the first time, by Jack, a need for Bobby, rather than simply a use of Bobby.”

<sup>65</sup> *The Kennedys*. Written and Directed by Phillip Whitehead (PBS: Home Video and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, 2003), DVD.

## The Kennedys and African-Americans

Growing up in Massachusetts, neither Robert nor John Kennedy were confronted or exposed to the inequality that existed between races. Upon reflection, RFK said, “I don’t think it was a matter that we were extra concerned about growing up...we grew up with the idea that there were a lot of people who were less fortunate...separating the Negroes as having a more difficult time, that was not a particular issue.”<sup>66</sup> The reality of their situation was that relatively few numbers of blacks lived in their home state at the time, and even fewer had the opportunity to interact with the brothers.

The Kennedy’s social status and wealth afforded them few chances to develop any sort of lasting friendships or relationships with African-Americans. With the exception of an acquaintance with his personal valet, George Taylor, at no point during his schoolboy years at Choate and Harvard did John have any significant interaction with blacks. While at a campaign stop during the 1960 presidential race, JFK was asked by a black dentist in San Francisco how many black people he was friends with. Embarrassed, Kennedy replied, “Doctor, I don’t know five Negroes of your caliber well enough to call them by their first names, but I promise to do better.”<sup>67</sup> Ted Sorensen notes that before the election of 1960, “[Kennedy] simply did not give much thought to civil rights...and had no background or association of activity.”<sup>68</sup> Until his career as a politician began in the late 1940s, the treatment of blacks and the inequalities of the

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<sup>66</sup> Guthman, *RFK In His Own Words*, 66; David C. Heymann, *RFK: A Candid Biography of Robert F. Kennedy* (New York: Dutton, 1998), 278. Heymann quotes RFK making a similar, if not as eloquent statement to Lavern Duffy. Duffy claims that Robert said, “Honestly, before I became attorney general I didn’t give a shit about civil rights. It never touched my life.”

<sup>67</sup> Bryant, *The Bystander*, 24-25.

<sup>68</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 471.

system of segregation lay on the periphery of John F. Kennedy's social stratosphere, he was simply never exposed nor placed in a position that would allow him to bear witness to racial injustice.

In a similar fashion, Robert's childhood was exempt from exposure to black inequality. Although he would later claim that several of his best friends during his childhood were African-American, it was not until his years in university that he would be directly confronted with racial discrimination.<sup>69</sup> One episode in particular took place during his final year at the University of Virginia Law School. As head of the Student Legal Forums, it was RFK's responsibility to schedule guest speakers. He used his father's connections to invite illustrious speakers to come to Charlottesville, including Joseph McCarthy, Arthur Krock, John F. Kennedy and even Joseph himself, who delivered a controversial speech on the failures of the Truman Doctrine. In the spring of 1951, Robert invited Dr. Ralph Bunche, the under-secretary to the United Nations and a Nobel Prize winner for Peace, to come to the campus and address the law students at UVA. Bunche, an African-American, told Robert that he would gladly accept the invitation, however he stipulated that under no circumstance would he give his speech to a segregated audience. Kennedy petitioned the student council for a resolution that would allow the audience to be integrated. The council rejected the resolution, claiming that it would violate a Virginia law which banned such meetings. Infuriated by the decision, RFK called the council's decision "morally indefensible", claiming that the council themselves were "gutless." Taking the initiative

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<sup>69</sup> Guthman, *In His Own Words*, 66-67. Heymann, *Robert Kennedy*, 44. Heymann notes an incident which occurred while Robert was playing for Harvard's football team in 1947. The University of Virginia objected to playing a scheduled game against Harvard because the Ivy League school had a black player on the team. At that point no white southern school had played a game against a team that had black players. RFK joined his teammates, which included Ken O'Donnell, in protesting the game unless their teammate was allowed to stay in the same hotel as the rest of the team.

he pleaded his case to the university president, and with his backing along with the dean of the law school and several professors, Bunche was granted permission to address an integrated audience, the first of its kind in the history of the school.<sup>70</sup> At this point in his life, the question of social equality for Robert Kennedy was simply one that was approached in terms of moralistic principles, no different from any other injustice that he witnessed.<sup>71</sup> There was no great examination of black civil rights, nor was there any particular effort on his part to involve himself in an exploration of the issues that surrounded racial inequality. Civil rights activist Roger Wilkins would later say of the Kennedy brothers, “They didn’t know black people. They didn’t know black pain. They were not comfortable with black people...So, there was no reason to expect them to be wise or passionate about it.”<sup>72</sup>

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The years between 1950 and 1952 helped to define Robert’s role as protector for his brother, both politically and personally. His active role as campaign manager helped prove his worth to his father, his brother and himself. It was a pivotal period that through his loyalty and relentless fortitude, helped gain a level of respect and trust from Joseph and John that would prove invaluable during the bid for the White House eight years later. The contrasting personalities of the brothers played a crucial factor in the political success that would ensue following the senatorial victory of 1952. Yet, it was RFK’s transformation that allowed the relationship to find a complimentary balance. Hilty writes that although Robert was seen by most

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<sup>70</sup> Guthman, *In His Own Words*, 68; Hilty, *Brother Protector*, 53-54.

<sup>71</sup> Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, 66. A similar demonstration by RFK of judging situations in moralistic terms was seen when he quit the Harvard Spee Club as a result of discrimination shown by the club towards another Irish-Catholic student.

<sup>72</sup> *RFK*, Written and directed by David Grubin. Interview with Roger Wilkins.

as ruthless, he had in fact evolved the exact kind of personality that could keep John's sardonic approach in check. He notes that Robert "could be vexedly absurd yet coldly deliberate, wildly irrational yet profoundly logical, extremes that the public nature of his political education only magnified."<sup>73</sup> Upon reflection, Joseph Kennedy felt that the political success of the 1952 campaign was to be attributed to the very different men that his sons had become. He described the evolution of Robert's personality when he said, "Bobby feels more strongly for and against people than Jack—just as I do...He hates the same way I do...he has the capacity to be emotionally involved, to feel things deeply, as compared with Jack and that amazing detachment of his."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Hilty, *Brother Protector*, 5.

<sup>74</sup> Nick Thimmesch and William O. Johnson, *Robert Kennedy at Forty* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1965), 24-25; Also see Richard D. Mahoney, *Sons and Brothers: The Days of Jack and Bobby Kennedy* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1999), 36; Hamilton, *JFK: Reckless Youth*, 128-135; Barbara Leaming, *Jack: The Education of a Statesman* (New York: W.W. Norton, 200), 21. In her work, Leaming examines the relationship between Joseph and Jack. She writes that throughout his early years, Jack was vexed with a similar longing to be noted and recognized by his father. The frequent comparisons with himself and older brother Joe had left him frustrated, being that he was the weaker physically of the two and perceived as being less capable in his studies. He spent his entire childhood trying to prove his worth to his father and family, yet upon entrance to Choate at the age of fifteen, the school where Joe Jr. had established himself, Leaming points out that Jack simply gave up in that pursuit. Although personally he never stopped desiring to prove himself as the better Kennedy, he created a façade of indifference. Leaming writes, "He did not abandon his sense of himself as superior, only the effort to persuade others that it was so. Thenceforth, Jack publicly cast himself as the happy-go-lucky boy, whose absence of ambition and responsibility his father endlessly bemoaned." While Robert openly sought his father's favor, John became more resigned in that endeavor. This nonchalant attitude appears to be what Joseph is referring to in this quote.

### CHAPTER 3

## THE CAMPAIGN: PROMISES OF A BETTER FUTURE

The presidential election of 1960 was one of the closest in the history of the United States, with John F. Kennedy winning the national popular vote over Republican candidate Richard M. Nixon by a mere 118,574 votes.<sup>75</sup> The fiercely contested campaign pitted two very different candidates against a backdrop of a racially segregated society on the brink of social and cultural change. At the outset of the campaign, both Kennedy and Nixon recognized that the election would most likely be decided in critical states, such as Illinois and New York, which had the largest amounts of electoral votes.<sup>76</sup> While Kennedy focused his efforts on gaining the suburban and Protestant vote, Nixon was more concerned in winning the farm and Catholic vote.<sup>77</sup> The voting public's perception at the time was that the previous presidency of Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower had been defined by general inaction in both domestic and foreign policy.<sup>78</sup> Thus, two of the main issues facing the candidates centered on the state of the economy and foreign relations with the Soviet Union in the wake of anti-communist sentiment of the 1950s. However, two other issues that would play a prominent role in the campaigns for both candidates, as well as the final election tally, involved the religious affiliation of JFK and the struggle for African-American civil rights.

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<sup>75</sup> Alice V. McGillivray, *America at the polls, 1960-2000 John F. Kennedy to George W. Bush: a handbook of American presidential election statistics* (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 2000), 23.

<sup>76</sup> Edmund F. Kallina, *Courthouse Over Whitehouse: Chicago and the Presidential Election of 1960* (Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1988), 63. Included in this list of critical electoral states were Illinois, Texas, New York, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and California. States such as New York, California, and Illinois were critical battlegrounds for the black vote as well. These states had large voting blocs who were mobilized by the black press in the weeks leading up to the election through endorsements and favorable reporting of JFK.

<sup>77</sup> Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1960* (New York: Atheneum, 1988), 266.

<sup>78</sup> *Presidential Campaigns: The John F. Kennedy 1960 Campaign Part I: Polls, Issues, and Strategy*, Microforms from Major Archival and Manuscript Collections. Edited by Paul L. Kesaris, vi.

The economy under President Eisenhower had seen steady and modest annual growth, yet it also had to endure three recessions and a growing division between the upper and lower classes. Historian Robert Fried describes this time period as one of “rampant consumerism” that resulted in “pockets of poverty throughout the public sector.”<sup>79</sup> Kennedy aide Arthur Schlesinger mirrored this point in a memorandum to JFK, in which he stated the need to address the existence of “public poverty in the midst of private plenty.”<sup>80</sup> Soviet relations also played an important role in the campaign, with the Kennedy camp charging that the lackluster gains in foreign relations by the previous administration had resulted in the existence of a “missile gap” between the United States and the Soviet Union. The launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik in 1957 did little to quail JFK’s criticism of Eisenhower and his failure in allowing the communist nation to gain an advantage in the technology race that many perceived as a threat to U.S. domestic security.<sup>81</sup>

From the outset of the campaign, John F. Kennedy’s religion was the subject of widespread debate. Never in the history of the presidency had a Catholic been elected, and many critics openly questioned whether a Roman Catholic president would be able to properly separate church and state.<sup>82</sup> Although anti-Catholic sentiment would eventually cost JFK numerous voting districts on the day of the election, it would also serve as a tool to garner votes as well, as the Kennedy’s were able to paint those who based their opposition towards the candidate on religion

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., vi.

<sup>80</sup> *John F. Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers*. 12 May, 1959. Box 996. Memorandum from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

<sup>81</sup> *Presidential Campaigns: The John F. Kennedy 1960 Campaign Part I: Polls, Issues, and Strategy*, vi.

<sup>82</sup> Thomas J. Carty, *A Catholic in the White House? Religion, Politics, and John F. Kennedy’s Presidential Campaign* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 2-6. In his work, Carty concludes that although the Catholic issue lost JFK a significant amount of votes in southern Protestant states such as Georgia, the overpopulation of Protestants in these states served to dilute the overall effect, and in the end Kennedy was able to win those states based on party loyalty usurping anti-Catholicism.

alone as acting out of bigotry and ignorance.<sup>83</sup> The Catholic issue would remain an important topic throughout the course of the campaign, one that Kennedy would repeatedly address in an effort to distinguish himself as a candidate who would place the priorities and security of the country first and foremost.<sup>84</sup>

The issue that the Kennedy camp was most uncomfortable and ill prepared to confront, however, was that of black civil rights. Prior to 1960, no presidential campaign had addressed civil rights as a major issue, therefore the Kennedys had no precedent to follow, and as a result they chose to incorporate a strategy that consisted of a policy of appeasement to both proponents of black equality and segregationists. Both Robert and John were aware of the impact of the African-American community on the outcome of the election, both in actual votes as well as the perception of the segregationist South. If they were to appear soft on segregation, they risked losing the southern vote, however if they appeared in favor of it they risked alienating an entire voting bloc of African-Americans. It was an uneven balance that they sought to maintain throughout the primaries and the general election. Yet the promises of the campaign, and the events involving the King phone calls in the days leading up to the general election helped to create a level of expectation for progress in civil rights that would burden the Kennedy presidency, and set a precedent for which the administration was not prepared to champion.

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<sup>83</sup> Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grossett and Dunlap, 1978), 226. Nixon writes, "At every possible juncture and on every possible occasion Kennedy's associates were pushing the religious issue, seeing to it that it stayed squarely in the center of the campaign, and even accusing me of deliberate religious bigotry."

<sup>84</sup> *John F. Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers*. Box 1049. September 12, 1960. Speech to the Ministerial Association. Houston, Texas.

### Waning Support in the Black Community

The issue of civil rights was unfamiliar territory for Robert Kennedy, and as campaign manager it was his job to help create an encompassing platform for his brother to run on that would include some sort of statement on the issue. Throughout the 1952 campaign, the subject of black inequality had not been a major factor in John Kennedy's election to the Senate. However, facing the possibility of a national election, the focus on the future of civil rights was becoming more prevalent. Preparing for the campaign, Robert admitted that he approached civil rights in a similar way to that of his predecessors. He commented:

Those running for office [in the 1950s] for the Democratic Party looked to just three or four people who would deliver the Negro vote. And you never had to say you were going to do anything on civil rights...it was mostly just recognition of them...you could receive the vote quite easily.<sup>85</sup>

This process of appeasement and recognition was, in Kennedy's estimation, the ideal formula to win the black delegates vote for the Democratic nomination, and then the black voting districts in the general election. What this strategy in fact demonstrated, however, was his lack of understanding on the issue and the growing complexity of the movement. At its outset, the campaign began with the idea that it would handle the civil rights issue by running on JFK's voting record in Congress coupled with favorable, albeit cautious, rhetoric that would appeal to black voters.<sup>86</sup> They hoped that by doing so, they would be able to circumvent any direct conflicts from segregationists and civil rights proponents alike.

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<sup>85</sup> Guthman, *In His Own Words*, 67.

<sup>86</sup> *John F. Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers*. Box 1028. 1960 Campaign Statements: Record of Senator Kennedy on Civil Rights and Race Relations; *Robert F. Kennedy Pre-Administration Papers*. Box 37. October 1960. Political Files: Media Campaign.

Although the Kennedys had not initially anticipated the black vote to play a major role in the election, criticism directed at JFK from major civil rights leaders and activists forced the campaign to strengthen their platform. Unimpressed by John's senatorial record, black journalist Chuck Stone wrote:

Kennedy has the ability to talk out of both sides of the face simultaneously... There's one thing money can't buy. That is a liberal and forthright attitude toward Negroes and their fight for equality. Senator Kennedy does not have this attitude. Senator Kennedy has been equivocating on civil rights so long, he wouldn't know a forthright statement on racial equality if it were dragged across his breakfast table. Search his Senate speeches. Has he ever condemned the South's barbaric attitude? Has he ever shown deep concern about the second-class citizenship? In the present spectrum... Senator Kennedy is unquestionably the worst of the lot for the American Negro.<sup>87</sup>

The problem with relying on Kennedy's voting record in the Senate to appease potential black voters, was that his support towards civil rights had fluctuated based on the circumstances surrounding each individual vote. This pattern of voting caused many civil rights activists to claim that his support was merely one of convenience.

Although JFK had voted favorably for minor civil rights legislation during the first five years of his term in the Senate, his reputation came into question during the congressional debate of the Civil Rights Act of 1957. These debates cost Kennedy a great deal of black support, as activists aggressively criticized his decision to vote with southern senators in favor of a jury trial amendment. Civil Rights leaders vehemently opposed the amendment, claiming that it would enable southern juries to be packed with racists, thus preventing blacks their entitlement to a fair trial. In his explanation of why he voted for the amendment, JFK admitted that he had examined the issue solely in legal terms. He had met with Ivy League law professors, who had assured him

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<sup>87</sup> Malcolm E. Smith, *John F. Kennedy's 13 Greatest Mistakes in the White House* (New York: Suffolk House, 1980), 160.

that the amendment would have no legal ramifications on civil rights.<sup>88</sup> Dismissing this explanation, civil rights and northern activists saw Kennedy as simply playing politics and ignoring the moralistic consequences of his vote. The passage of the jury trial amendment ensured that southern senators would vote in favor of the Civil Rights Act. Consequently as a result of the amendment, the Act as a whole was severely limited in its real world application. *New York Times* columnist James Reston openly questioned Kennedy's unabashed attempt to gain southern allies, when he wrote that the Senator was aware that the South "would not take kindly to any Presidential candidate who insisted on rejecting the jury trial principle."<sup>89</sup> His detractors believed that Kennedy's voting record and active interest in playing both sides of the civil rights issue was based on his intent to gather support from both Democrats and Republicans in order to make a bid for the presidency. Historian Nick Bryant writes that Kennedy emerged from the 1957 debate "looking opportunistic and unprincipled...he underestimated the growing militancy of black allies...who viewed any form of compromise as a breach of faith."<sup>90</sup> These criticisms would linger throughout the initial stages of JFK's presidential campaign, and would eventually force him to take a more active role in the debate over black equality.

### A Shift in Strategy

Once the campaign had begun, Robert Kennedy stepped in to his familiar role as campaign manager and immediately confronted the critics who had set out to discredit his brother. RFK understood that his preliminary campaign strategy would not withstand the barrage of attacks on John's civil rights voting record. One of the most biting attacks that forced the

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<sup>88</sup> *Congressional Record* August 1, 1957 pp.13305-13307.

<sup>89</sup> *New York Times* August 3, 1957.

<sup>90</sup> Bryant, *The Bystander*, 79.

campaign to take a firmer, more deliberate tone in favor of racial equality resulted from an editorial by Jackie Robinson in the *New York Post*. Robinson, a well respected civil rights pioneer and hero in the eyes of the black community, launched a scathing attack on JFK's presidential qualifications. He openly criticized the Senator's guarded token position on the sit-in movement, his association with segregationist governor John Patterson, his role in the 1957 civil rights debate, as well as his lack of African-American audiences on the campaign trail. Robinson concluded the editorial bluntly stating, "Senator Kennedy is not fit to be President of the United States."<sup>91</sup> This damaging diatribe from one of the most influential black leaders of the day was a clear signal that the campaign needed to adopt a stronger, more comprehensive civil rights platform.

Following this editorial, JFK began a series of speeches that attempted to demonstrate the need for strong executive leadership on civil rights in the White House.<sup>92</sup> His first speech in support of this leadership came the day after Robinson's editorial was printed. At a dinner in Minneapolis, Kennedy came out in support of meaningful executive action. He told those in attendance that the time had come for the Democratic Party to come out definitively in favor of

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<sup>91</sup> *New York Post* June 3, 1960. Among Robinson's criticisms, the comment on Patterson was derived from a breakfast that took place on July 25, 1959 between JFK and the segregationist governor at Kennedy's Georgetown apartment; Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (New York: Putnam, 1977), 306. Patterson was well known for his cruelty towards blacks and desire to end the civil rights movement, but also for his resolve to fight the mob. Their relationship developed out of a similar desire to confront the mob, however when the two met in 1959 most observers simply noted that Kennedy was meeting privately with a white supremacist.

<sup>92</sup> *John F. Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers*. Box 910. June 24, 1960. Luncheon in honor of African Diplomatic Corps. Washington D.C.; *John F. Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers*. Box 1028. July 10, 1960. NAACP Rally, Los Angeles; *John F. Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers*. Box 910. June 17, 1960. National Democratic Club Luncheon, New York City.

black Americans. He promised that if elected, he would bring about strong moral leadership and would “fight until every black citizen has achieved equal access to all of American life.”<sup>93</sup>

Despite this shift in rhetoric, the Kennedy camp still lacked the overwhelming support it needed to win the nomination. On the eve of the Democratic Convention, RFK met with Harris Wofford and asked the civil rights activist to join the campaign as an adviser on race relations, making him the point man for developing the new platform. What worried Robert the most going into the convention was the lack of strong support from blacks within the Democratic Party. He later said, “We had to make more of an effort because Negroes were not tied to John F. Kennedy as they would be ordinarily to a Democratic leaders.”<sup>94</sup> In his memoirs, Wofford recalls Kennedy bluntly telling him, “We’re in trouble with Negroes. We really don’t know much about this whole thing. We’ve been dealing outside the field of the main Negro leadership and we have to start from scratch.”<sup>95</sup> The recruitment of Wofford paid immediate dividends, as he was able to draw up a memorandum that spelled out the specific areas in which JFK could make ground towards gaining the vote of black Democrats. In this brief, Wofford declared that Kennedy must be able to provide direct and active leadership that would be both substantive and symbolic. He wrote, “The president must by his own example—by meeting with Negro and white leaders, by the appointment of qualified Negroes to high office, and by more dramatic symbolic actions in moments of racial crisis—convey this sense of urgency and conviction.”<sup>96</sup> Most importantly

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<sup>93</sup> *John F. Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers*. Box 909. June 4, 1960. Jefferson-Jackson Dinner, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

<sup>94</sup> Guthman, *His Own Words*, 69.

<sup>95</sup> Wofford, *Of Kennedys*, 47.

<sup>96</sup> *Robert F. Kennedy Pre-administration Papers*. Box 34. Undated. A similar memorandum had been sent to RFK from Ted Sorensen that included many of the points of improvement that Wofford had on his own list; *Democrat National Committee Files*. Box 142. August 3, 1960. Based on one of Wofford’s recommendations, JFK announced from his home in Hyannis Port that his campaign was creating a civil rights section that would be led by Wofford and Lawson.

though, was a series of meetings that Wofford set up between John and black delegates to the Democratic Convention. These meetings allowed Kennedy to better gauge the issues seen as most pertinent in the struggle for equal rights, and thus he was able to incorporate those ideas into his civil rights plank for the convention.<sup>97</sup>

Whether or not JFK truly believed the proposals he was putting forth in his campaign speech, the fact was that this approach helped rebuild many of the relationships and ties with black leaders that had been fractured as a result of the events of 1957. Robert Kennedy was willing to admit that at this point in the political process both he and his brother lacked a solid understanding of racial inequality. This hindered their ability to create a definitive strategy that would help bolster black support for the Kennedy campaign and win the nomination. By bringing Wofford into the fold, they were able to subtly exploit and play to the passions of civil rights advocates in order to attain political victory.<sup>98</sup>

John F. Kennedy had raised the stakes of the election through his heightened rhetoric, and in doing so had brought the issue of civil rights to the forefront of presidential politics and placed himself in the position of being viewed by many political pundits and the populace alike as the

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<sup>97</sup> Smith, *JFK's 13 Greatest Mistakes*, 162. Amongst the major features promised in the platform included a pledge to use federal power to "assure equal access for all Americans to all areas of community life, including voting booths, schoolrooms, jobs, housing, and public facilities." It also stated that "every school district affected by the Supreme Court's school desegregation decision should submit a plan providing for at least first-step compliance by 1963."

<sup>98</sup> Miroff, *Pragmatic Illusions*, 152-154. The Wofford appointment was indicative of the political maneuvering that was so common in Kennedy politics. Throughout the campaign and presidency, John Kennedy relied on the advice of task forces and groups of advisers who reported to him on the specific issues which they were deemed experts. Bruce Miroff writes that these task forces essentially told Kennedy what he wanted to hear, as they were hand selected because of their similar political ideology to that of the president. Miroff argues that these appointments in reality were nothing like the 'myth' that had been created by Kennedy sympathizers who claimed the task forces were an eclectic array of minds who provided the president with opposing points to his own liberal pragmatism. He writes that these task forces and their reports were "window dressing" and that when their advice was "politically awkward, he managed to overlook it." Wofford was essentially brought on to serve in a similar capacity, except in his case he had relatively little in common with Kennedy's views on civil rights, but was treated in a similar dismissive manner by the president regardless.

new moral compass for the country. Wofford's strategy paid off, helping to garner enough votes to earn JFK the Democratic presidential nomination. Yet at the same time, that same strategy inadvertently elevated the level of expectations for strong executive moral leadership in favor of civil rights to heights that no president had dared to attempt. These expectations far surpassed any that the Kennedys would be prepared to deal with upon entering office the following year.

### The King Calls

The courtship of the black vote would prove to be one of the defining points in determining the election of 1960, as both candidates were forced to tread lightly when dealing with a society that was racially segregated. Yet, the entire process of campaigning also demonstrated how little the Kennedys comprehended the magnitude of the race issue. To them, the black vote simply represented a political bloc that was necessary to achieve victory. During the election year, the South was still strongly Democratic, and the brothers had to find a delicate balance which would enable John to garner both the black and white vote without offending the opposing sides. On one hand, Kennedy was pressured by prominent liberals such as Henry Steele Commager, John Kenneth Galbraith, and James M. Burns to make a strong commitment to civil rights. On the other side, several southern Democratic governors threatened to back Nixon if Kennedy was to publicly show support to civil rights figures such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>99</sup>

To ease the demands of civil rights proponents, John offered campaign promises such as the elimination of federal housing projects, and continued to increase his civil rights rhetoric

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<sup>99</sup> David Niven, *The Politics of Injustice: The Kennedys, the Freedom Rides, and the Electoral Consequences of a Moral Compromise* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 13-15.

following the Democratic Convention.<sup>100</sup> When discussing the civil rights movement, JFK had boldly proclaimed, “[the next president] must exert the great moral and educational force of his office to help bring equal access to public facilities from churches to lunch counters and to support the right of every American to stand up for his rights, even if on occasion he must sit down for them.”<sup>101</sup> However, in an effort to maintain the balance of the segregated South, Kennedy also continued to court the vote of white segregationists. In a move that shocked and perplexed many civil rights supporters, he selected Texan Lyndon B. Johnson as his vice-presidential running mate.<sup>102</sup> Segregationist leaders interpreted this move as an indication that the Kennedy presidency would be more apt to incorporate civil rights into the national agenda at a slower pace than their campaign rhetoric had suggested.

As a result of Kennedy’s attempts to secure support from both sides of the racial spectrum, neither presidential candidate had the overwhelming support of the black vote by mid-October of the election year. In his memoirs, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. commented, “I did not feel at that time that there was much difference between Kennedy and Nixon...I could find something in the background of both men that I couldn’t particularly agree with.”<sup>103</sup> After months of campaigning, however, the decisive moment that would help to define each candidate in the eyes of many voters would take place in the final weeks before the election. The catalyst

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<sup>100</sup> *John F. Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers*. Box 910. Speech to the National Democratic Club Luncheon in New York. June 17, 1960

<sup>101</sup> *John F. Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers*. Box 909. Speech in Baltimore, Maryland. May 13, 1960; Excerpts from the speech can also be found in Miroff, *Pragmatic Illusions*, 230.

<sup>102</sup> Burton Hersh, *Bobby and J. Edgar Hoover* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2007), 14. Hersh writes that it was Joseph Kennedy who brought LBJ onto the ticket against the wishes of RFK and JFK. He writes, “[Joseph] presented the upset Lyndon ‘his own version of the future, whereby ‘these boys’ are not ready to run the country, which means that ‘you and I, Lyndon’ are going to have to run it for them.’” He then offered LBJ \$1 million to settle his campaign debts, which the new vice president nominee accepted.

<sup>103</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Intellectual Properties Management, 1998), 148.

that helped one candidate emerge as the victor stemmed from the controversial events surrounding the arrest of Dr. King in Atlanta, Georgia. The phone calls made in response to King's incarceration by both JFK and RFK helped to separate the two candidates in the eyes of minority black voters, and thus altered the course of the election.

On the morning of October 19, 1960 Dr. King reluctantly joined a massive sit in demonstration in downtown Atlanta, and was subsequently arrested along with the student demonstrators. Wofford, without authority from the Kennedy camp, brokered a deal with the presiding judge that would allow the demonstrators to be released on Monday, October 24. King, however, was denied his release on the grounds of a violation of the terms of a suspended sentence resulting from a minor traffic offense in which he had been cited for driving without a Georgia driver's license the previous spring. A judge in DeKalb County, Georgia issued a warrant for King's arrest on the basis that his sit-in arrest had violated the terms of his probation from the traffic offense.<sup>104</sup> King was transferred to a prison in DeKalb, a stronghold of the Ku Klux Klan, where he was sentenced by the judge to four months of hard labor. Upon hearing the news of Dr. King's incarceration, black novelist John A. Williams wrote, "The death of Martin King in the state public work camp was imminent."<sup>105</sup> King's wife, Coretta, was five months pregnant at the time of the sentencing, and physically broke down in the courthouse upon hearing the fate of her husband. She later recalled her emotional state as being one of desperate fear, coupled with the recognition that her baby would be born while her husband was in jail.<sup>106</sup> Wofford drew up a statement of protest for Kennedy to issue, however Robert rebuffed the idea, fearing political fallout at such a critical point in the campaign.

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<sup>104</sup> Wofford, *Of Kennedys*, 16.

<sup>105</sup> John A. Williams, *The King God Didn't Save* (New York: Coward-McCann), 27.

<sup>106</sup> Wofford, *Of Kennedys*, 16.

Two days after the ruling in DeKalb, Coretta Scott King called Wofford and told him that overnight the situation for her husband had taken a turn for the worse. In the middle of the night, Dr. King had been awoken, removed from his jail cell, shackled, and driven throughout the night to rural Reidsville state prison. Wofford immediately called Kennedy's brother-in-law and director of the campaign's civil rights sector, Sargent Shriver Jr., and explained the situation regarding King's transfer and his wife's concerns.<sup>107</sup> Author David Niven suggests that by going directly to Shriver, Wofford intended to circumvent the voices of opposition within the Kennedy camp and "prevent the campaign from forming a committee to ponder the electoral ramifications of the act."<sup>108</sup> Essentially he was trying to avoid having to gain the approval of RFK. Shriver tracked Kennedy down in a motel in the Chicago airport and waited until the two of them were alone. He then told Kennedy:

Why don't you telephone Mrs. King and give her your sympathy? Negroes don't expect everything will change tomorrow, no matter who's elected. But they do want to know whether you care. If you telephone Mrs. King, they will know you understand and will help. You will reach their hearts and give support to a pregnant woman who is afraid her husband will be killed.<sup>109</sup>

The call lasted only two minutes, but its political ramifications would have a lasting effect on the image of Kennedy within the black community.

Once he had Coretta King on the phone, Senator Kennedy greeted her, and said, "I know this must be very hard for you. I understand you are expecting a baby, and I just wanted you to know that I was thinking about you and Dr. King. If there is anything I can do to help, please feel

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<sup>107</sup>Clifford M. Kuhn, "'There's a Footnote to History!'" Memory and the History of Martin Luther King's October 1960 Arrest and Its Aftermath," *The Journal of American History* 84 (1997), 585.

<sup>108</sup> Niven, *The Politics of Injustice*,

<sup>109</sup> Wofford, *Of Kennedys*, 18.

free to call me.”<sup>110</sup> After he hung up, JFK left the hotel suite he was staying in and boarded his campaign plane that was headed for Detroit. While on the plane, he mentioned to his adviser Pierre Salinger that he had talked with Mrs. King. Salinger immediately informed the Senator’s campaign manager and brother, Robert Kennedy.

Robert was outraged and disgusted with Shriver, Wofford, and Martin. Infuriated, he called them into his office and berated them. Wofford recalls Kennedy yelling “You bomb-throwers probably lost the election...you’ve probably lost three states...the civil rights section isn’t going to do another damn thing in this campaign.”<sup>111</sup> He lectured the two men on their insubordination, as well as for pushing his brother into a potentially explosive controversy with only weeks remaining before Election Day. His order for the civil rights section was quite explicit; they were to create no literature or press releases on the matter. Yet, when Louis Martin described King’s midnight transfer to Reidsville, RFK answered quizzically, “How could they do that? Who’s the judge? You can’t deny bail on a misdemeanor.” Martin explained to him that the judge wanted to make an example out of Dr. King. Frustrated by the possibility of a backlash against his brother, he talked to his aide John Seigenthaler and asked him what he could do to draw fire away from JFK.<sup>112</sup>

Already Robert was re-establishing his familiar role as protector. The call itself was not what upset RFK, nor did he disagree with the gesture. In his eyes the peculiarities that were evident in the handling of the King case were inexcusable. However, his mindset was solely focused on the success of his brother, and therefore any problem that jeopardized that success

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<sup>110</sup> *Jet Magazine*, November 10, 1960, p.4; Coretta Scott King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 203; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 362.

<sup>111</sup> Wofford, *Of Kennedys*, 18-20; Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, 217; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 364.

<sup>112</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 365.

was intolerable. His role as protector usurped any injustice that was affecting a high profile civil rights leader. John had the luxury of viewing the issue in purely moralistic terms. To JFK, what was happening to Dr. King and his wife was unjust, and therefore should be addressed. Robert, on the other hand, had to place the issue in proper perspective, weighing the possible outcomes that taking a direct stand could have in the eyes of fellow politicians and the voting public on his brother's bid for election.

That night, John was getting off of his campaign plane in New York when a reporter from the *New York Times* asked him if he had indeed called Mrs. King earlier that day. Kennedy responded that she was a friend of his, and that he was concerned about the situation. This confirmation allowed the *Times* to break the story of the call to Coretta Scott King.<sup>113</sup> Picking up on the story, the *Atlanta Constitution* ran a front page article that included Mrs. King's recollection of the event. In the article, she was quoted as saying, "It certainly made me feel good that he had called me personally and let me know how he felt. I had the feeling that if he was that much concerned, he would do what he could to see that Mr. King is let out of jail." Regarding Vice President Nixon's response to the situation, Mrs. King said, "He's been very quiet."<sup>114</sup>

Following Dr. King's arrest, the Kennedy brothers had discussed possible avenues which they could pursue in order to have him released. They recognized that inaction could be more harmful than action, yet they also understood that they could risk losing southern white support. Politically, the incarceration of a prominent black civil rights leader cast the southern Democrats in a bad light. Neither Kennedy brother wanted to allow Richard Nixon and the Republicans the

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<sup>113</sup> *New York Times*, 27 October 1960; Wofford, *Of Kennedys*, 20; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 366. Kennedy made the statement that he and Coretta were friends, although they had never met or spoken prior to the call.

<sup>114</sup> *Atlanta Constitution*, 27 October 1960.

opportunity to point that fact out to the voting public. They agreed that the best scenario would be to have King set free in the most discreet manner possible.

JFK contacted Georgia Governor Vandiver and discussed the issue. Vandiver was aware of the embarrassment that King's imprisonment had caused his state, and he agreed to make some phone calls for Kennedy. The governor got in contact with the Secretary of the State Senate, George D. Stewart. Stewart and the judge in charge of the King case, Oscar Mitchell, were good friends and former classmates. Stewart discussed the matter with Judge Mitchell, who in turn agreed to have King released with the stipulation that he could say one of the Kennedy brothers had called him and asked him to do it. As a segregationist judge, Mitchell did not want to appear weak, and a Kennedy call would be the perfect political cover. Upon hearing of the judge's request, Vandiver phoned John Kennedy, who consented and ordered his brother to make the call to the judge to demand King's release.<sup>115</sup>

The following morning, Louis Martin was awoken by a phone call from Robert. RFK told him, "Louis, I wanted you especially to know that I called that judge in Georgia today, to try to get Dr. King out." By making the call to Vandiver, Robert was demonstrating a clear pragmatic approach to the crisis. He was wary of the political repercussions that could result from his brother's actions, and realized that it was necessary to take steps that would ensure minimal damage towards the national perception of the Democratic candidate. As Harris Wofford reflected on the matter, "If King had remained in jail, the Senator's call to Mrs. King might have seemed a symbol without substance- the worst fate for any symbolic act."<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, 103.

<sup>116</sup> Wofford, *Of Kennedys*, 22.

Martin Luther King Jr. was released from prison on October 27, and although he would not openly endorse Kennedy, his father Martin Luther King Sr. publicly rescinded his pledge to vote for Richard Nixon.<sup>117</sup> In a speech to the congregation of Ebenezer Baptist Church, King Sr. said, “It took courage to call my daughter-in-law at a time like this. He has the moral courage to stand up for what he knows is right. I’ve got all my votes and I’ve got a suitcase, and I’m going to take them up there and dump them in his lap.”<sup>118</sup>

The next day the *New York Times*, *Atlanta Constitution*, and *Chicago Tribune* all featured front page stories about King’s release from prison. Each article discussed Judge Mitchell’s statements regarding pressure to release King coming from a member of the Kennedy family; the *Constitution* even quoted Mitchell’s remarks about that pressure coming from a brother of the Senator from Massachusetts.<sup>119</sup> While attention from the mainstream white media quickly turned to other issues following King’s release, African American newspapers who openly endorsed the Kennedy-Johnson ticket saw an opportunity to separate their candidate from Nixon. These papers effectively utilized the phone calls to bolster their support of a candidate whom they could now portray as being compassionate enough to personally aid a major civil rights figure and his family in a time of crisis.

The coverage which was given by these newspapers for the Kennedy calls helped to shape the image of the presidential candidate within black communities as a man who was willing to not only take the moral high ground, but also have the character to back up his rhetoric with action. In stark contrast, the image of Richard Nixon was that of a man of inaction, a candidate who did not hold the plight of black people in high regard. By his own accounts,

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<sup>117</sup> Martin Luther King Sr., *Daddy King: An Autobiography* (New York: Morrow, 1980), 176.

<sup>118</sup> *New York Times*, 29 October 1960; Wofford, *Of Kennedys*, 23; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 366.

<sup>119</sup> *Atlanta Constitution*, 28 October 1960.

Nixon had considered making a public statement supporting King during his imprisonment but had been advised not to comment. In his personal memoirs, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, “I always felt that Nixon lost a real opportunity to express support of something much larger than an individual, because this expressed support for the movement for civil rights. It indicated the direction that this man would take, if he became president.”<sup>120</sup> The Kennedy phone calls would serve as a catalyst to clearly separate the two candidates on the issue of civil rights. Several years after the election, Richard Nixon would recall the events of October, 1960 saying, “I thought my civil rights record was good. I thought I had won many friends among Negroes, but then the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. case came up. The Democrats whipped up a fury in Negro areas. I was painted a villain.”<sup>121</sup>

Only two days after the *Times* had broken the story of the call to Coretta King, the pro-Kennedy black newspapers the *Afro-American*, *Chicago Defender*, and *Pittsburgh Courier* all ran inserts discussing the Democratic candidate’s civil rights record. The insert led off with a quote from the executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Roy Wilkins. He said, “The Senator’s record, taken as a whole... must be regarded...as one of the best voting records on civil rights and related issues of any Senator in Congress.”<sup>122</sup> This was in sharp contrast to Wilkins heavy criticism of Kennedy following his 1957 vote for the jury trial amendment. However, the change in rhetoric demonstrates the desire

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<sup>120</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Intellectual Properties Management, 1998), 148.

<sup>121</sup> *New York Times*, 27 March 1962.

<sup>122</sup> *Afro-American*, 29 October 1960.

of the black community to unify around a common political figure who on the surface appeared to be capable of pushing forward the agenda for the advancement of black rights.<sup>123</sup>

Following the lead of the *Courier*, the *Afro-American* ran a series of articles pertaining to the Kennedy calls and the subsequent reaction from civil rights leaders. Based in Maryland, the paper's national edition had major distribution centers within the battleground states of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New Jersey. On November 5, the paper ran a front page spread entitled "It's Kennedy: *Afro's* Choice for President." This article openly endorsed the Kennedy-Johnson ticket, citing Kennedy's stellar civil rights voting record in Congress, as well as plans for future civil rights legislation. The article stated, "Kennedy sees the presidency as an opportunity to turn into a living reality the American vision of a free society in which no man has to suffer discrimination based on race...no presidential candidate has made a more forthright statement on Civil Rights."<sup>124</sup>

For many black voters, the Kennedy calls came to represent something more significant than the simple actions that they were. In the eyes of the black community, they represented a beacon of hope that promised their segregated society an opportunity for equality in the near future. The calls themselves, however, had little to do with morality or human suffering. Instead, at their core they represented the principles and foundation that lay at the heart of the Kennedy campaign strategy. They were politically opportunistic moments that were capitalized and then exploited by the Kennedy camp. The evolution of Robert's perception of racial inequality had yet to broaden to a true understanding of what the civil rights movement really meant. The

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<sup>123</sup> *John F. Kennedy Pre-Presidential Papers*. Box 536. August 2, 1957. JFK letter to Roy Wilkins. Following his vote for the jury trial amendment Kennedy met with Wilkins over lunch. Realizing that Wilkins disagreed with his vote, Kennedy wrote him a personal letter the following day telling the civil rights leader that he looked forward to working more closely with Wilkins and the NAACP and hoped they would have a closer working relationship.

<sup>124</sup> *Afro-American*, 5 November 1960.

frustration and incessant desire for equality felt by African-Americans at this point did not exist in the world of the Kennedys. RFK approached problems of race in the same moralistic manner that he had the incidents at Harvard and UVA Law.<sup>125</sup> He simply saw an unjust situation and set out to rectify it, more conscious of the moral ramifications than the social ones. The only difference in this approach, was that during the 1960 campaign he had to be mindful of the implications that such action would have on the political aspirations of his brother. Both John and Robert felt that the incarceration of King was unjust, but their reaction to that event was calculated in a manner that would yield the most positive results for the Democratic nominee.

Like the Wofford platform at the party convention and the heightened rhetoric in favor of black equality, the Kennedy phone calls served to raise the level of African-Americans expectations of the incoming administration to lead with a firm and authoritative moral edge that had yet to be seen in the White House. In the end, the Kennedy approach to winning the election paid off, but concordantly created a new set of problems in the arena of civil rights that would not be as easily solved through the inherent pragmatic approach to politics that they had previously relied on.

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<sup>125</sup> Refers to the previously discussed football incident at Harvard and the Student Legal Forum's invitation to Dr. Bunche, *see chapter 2*.

## CHAPTER 4 THE PRESIDENCY: A LEGACY OF INACTION 1960-1962

### The Freedom Rides

Weeks after the inauguration, the newly appointed Attorney General Robert Kennedy met with Dr. King and suggested that it was too soon to ask for any sort of civil rights legislation.<sup>126</sup> In his memoirs, Harris Wofford wrote of the president's continual inaction in constructing civil rights legislation, "What disappointed me most was not so much the President's recurring decision to wait...as the way he made the decision- each time hurriedly, at the last minute, without careful consideration of an overall strategy."<sup>127</sup> Following the election, however, events had already begun to unfold that would immediately test the administrations civil rights policy.

The first major civil rights crisis that the Kennedy administration encountered came during the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) Freedom Rides of 1961. Feeling that the movement had an ally in the White House, CORE director James Farmer announced that a small integrated group would ride buses into the segregated South, and peacefully gain entry to segregated bus terminals, thus forcing the issue of desegregation within those terminals. As a result of a December 1960 Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation in bus and train terminals involved in interstate transportation, Farmer thought that the Freedom Rides could create a crisis that would leave the federal government in a position in which they would have to take action.<sup>128</sup> The itinerary for the trip included leaving Washington D.C. on May 4, and

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<sup>126</sup> Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, 128; Wofford, *Of Kennedys*, 216.

<sup>127</sup> Wofford, *Of Kennedys*, 124.

<sup>128</sup> Niven, *The Politics of Injustice*, 40.

arriving in New Orleans on May 17, the anniversary of the historic *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision.<sup>129</sup>

Two days after the Freedom Rides began, Robert Kennedy delivered an address at the University of Georgia during the celebration of Law Day. Kennedy's speech was indicative of how his office would confront the civil rights crises when he said:

We know that the law is the glue that holds civilization together. And, we know that if one man's rights are denied, the rights of all are endangered. In our country the courts have a most important role in safeguarding these rights. The decisions of the courts, however much we might disagree with them, in the final analysis must be followed and respected...Respect for the Law, in essence that is the meaning of Law Day and every day must be Law Day or else our society will collapse.<sup>130</sup>

His words would be tested a week later, when the Freedom Riders arrived in Anniston, Alabama on May 14. Their bus was firebombed by a white mob, while the riders themselves were dragged into the street and maliciously beaten. Although the Kennedy brother's immediate reaction to the violence was one of shock, they were also aware of how that violence would reflect on the new presidency.<sup>131</sup> The attorney general thought that attempts by civil rights leaders such as King and Farmer were meant to antagonize and embarrass his brother's administration. As a result, RFK called Wofford, who now served as JFK's special assistant on civil rights, and told him, "Tell them to call it off! Stop them! Get your friends off those buses...It's embarrassing us before the world, Stop it!"<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> David Lewis, *King: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 137-138; Niven, *Politics of Injustice*, 43.

<sup>130</sup> *Rights For Americans: The Speeches of Robert F. Kennedy*, edited by Thomas A. Hopkins (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1964), 18; *New York Times*, 7 May 1961.

<sup>131</sup> RFK, Written and directed by David Grubin. Interview with Nicholas Katzenbach. The assistant attorney general talks about the attitude of the new Justice Department led at the outset of the new administration, and their reaction to the violence towards the Riders, "I don't think any of us, going in to the Justice Department, despite our views on Civil Rights, really appreciated how really mean it was in the South and how dangerous it was."

<sup>132</sup> Wofford, *Of Kennedys*, 125; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 412-450.

After the attorney general had arranged for a replacement bus for the Freedom Riders, a new group of activists continued the journey to Montgomery, Alabama.<sup>133</sup> There they were met with even more brutal white mob violence than had been seen in Anniston. RFK's closest aide, John Seigenthaler, drove by the scene in order to gather information and report back to Washington. He attempted to help a black woman escape the mob, and was subsequently knocked unconscious by a white man wielding a metal pipe.<sup>134</sup> Despite this instance of brutality, the president continually disregarded suggestions by his aides to send federal troops to intervene. Instead, he chose to adopt a more passive route and had Robert initiate legal proceedings in federal court to stop Alabama's injunction against the rides. At the same time, he also telephoned southern congressmen and governors, ensuring them that the administration would not support the Freedom Rides, but would provide them with the protection that the law stipulated.<sup>135</sup> The Kennedy brothers were implementing their typical political strategy of playing both sides of an issue in order to appease each party involved. The president thought that the agenda of civil rights was being forced upon him, and he was not prepared to publicly deal with it during the initial year of his presidency. Although he was frustrated by the developments in Alabama, he did issue a public statement on the matter saying:

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<sup>133</sup> *RFK*, Written and directed by David Grubin. Interview with Roger Wilkins. In speaking of the replacement Freedom Riders and their persistence, Wilkins notes, "Black people in the South had gotten the sense of their efficacy as people and as citizens. To have Bob Kennedy's Justice Department tell them what to do would have been taking a major step backward. Who are you going to listen to, are you going to listen to the black people of the South or are you going to listen to the kid from Massachusetts, well that's an easy answer."

<sup>134</sup> Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy*, 297; *RFK*, Written and directed by David Grubin. Interview with John Lewis and John Seigenthaler. Lewis states, "Robert Kennedy became educated in a real hurry. And I tell you the thing that sealed it for him, perhaps more than anything else. After John Seigenthaler was beaten. Someone that he knew." Seigenthaler echoes this notion, saying, "I think everything he [RFK] thought the administration of justice and law enforcement was supposed to be about had been violated. That was an outrage, that it was a stain on law enforcement to let that happen."

<sup>135</sup> Niven, *Politics of Injustice*, 84.

The situation which has developed in Alabama is a source of the deepest concern to me as it must be to the vast majority of the citizens of Alabama and other Americans. I have instructed the Justice Department to take all necessary steps based on their investigations and information...I hope that state and local officials in Alabama will meet their responsibilities. The United States Government intends to meet its.<sup>136</sup>

Having come out with a definitive statement on the Freedom Rides, JFK and his brother privately hoped that further confrontation could be avoided. Against the attorney general's wishes, however, Martin Luther King went to Montgomery to personally offer his support to the Riders. Once there, he led a worship service at the First Baptist Church with a group of the Freedom Riders and over 1,500 sympathizers. With only fifty U.S. marshals protecting the church, a mob of over 3,000 whites began burning cars and throwing crude fire bombs at the building.<sup>137</sup>

Once again the president considered the possibility of sending federal troops into Alabama. RFK on the other hand, feared that the situation would dissipate into a scene of violence, and therefore advised his brother not to send the Army. In an attempt to temper the escalating crisis, the president ordered unmarked federal marshals carrying tear gas to move in and disperse the mob. Alabama National Guardsmen were called in by Governor John Patterson only when the governor had heard that there was a possibility of intervention from federal troops. Many of the Alabama Guardsmen were as racist as the white mob that they were trying to prevent from entering the church. As a result, King and those trapped inside the church were forced to stay there throughout the night. The crisis ended the following morning when the

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<sup>136</sup> *John F. Kennedy Public Papers of the President 1961*. p. 198. May 20, 1961. Statement by the President concerning interference with the Freedom Riders in Alabama.

<sup>137</sup> Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, 130.

Justice Department negotiated safe passage out of the Church for the riders and their supporters.<sup>138</sup>

What the Freedom Rides proved to the Kennedys, was that the focus of any civil rights movement should not be on public displays of protest or resistance that could lead to unwanted confrontations between the federal government and southern state and local officials. The Kennedy brothers were just as willing as state officials to avoid having to be forced into using the military to enforce civil rights. Instead, the administration made it a point that the focus should not be on inflammatory demonstrations. They continued to stress that the proper path to black equality must be achieved through gradual means. Discussing the course that the president wanted to set, historian Bruce Miroff writes:

[JFK] wanted to see racial justice attained, he was not so sure he wanted it attained along the lines that the civil rights movement was developing...what mattered to him was that their actions were unpredictable, perpetually threatening to immerse him in situations for which his pragmatic approach was ill prepared.<sup>139</sup>

To the Kennedys, the only clear way in which they could dictate the pace of the movement while avoiding possible confrontations, was by placing an emphasis on black voter registration.<sup>140</sup> On June 16, RFK met with a group of civil rights leaders and made the case to them that public demonstrations such as the Freedom Rides were not a productive way to create social change. In place of such protests, Kennedy offered the full support of the Justice Department to protect and uphold the rights of civil rights activists who wanted to register to

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<sup>138</sup> *New York Times*, 22 May 1961, p.1; Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 240-250; Guthman, *In His Own Words*, 86-91.

<sup>139</sup> Miroff, *Pragmatic Illusions*, 226-227

<sup>140</sup> Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 330; *RFK*, Written and directed by David Grubin. Interview with Harris Wofford. Wofford states that following the Freedom Rides, "Bob was angry that they were upsetting everything by doing this. He wanted civil rights movement to focus on winning the right to vote. And he didn't like his more stately agenda being upset. But once upset, then Bobby went into action."

vote.<sup>141</sup> He would later be quoted as saying, “I felt strongly about the fact that voting was at the heart of the problem. If enough Negroes registered, they could obtain redress of their grievance internally, without the federal government involved in it at all.”<sup>142</sup> Regardless of what the Kennedys deemed appropriate civil rights activism, what the events in Montgomery did do was to set the precedent for the initial years of the presidency, in which the White House was willing to rely on the action of state officials to resolve confrontations within their own states. If challenged by those state officials, as in the case of the Freedom Rides and later in the standoffs at the Universities of Mississippi and Alabama, then they would reluctantly take federal action in the most discrete way possible. In their first test of civil rights, the Kennedys had deliberately sidestepped the strong moral commitment that had been promised throughout the presidential campaign. Neither brother had grasped the severity of the problem of black inequality. Reflecting on Robert’s attitudes towards the Riders and their persistence in their journey, journalist Jack Newfield said, “I think he [RFK] was slow and late getting it, about the Civil Rights Movement. Robert Kennedy was saying what most of the establishment said in that period, it’s a good idea but it’s the wrong time.” The Freedom Rides would be the first in a line of passive responses from the White House that would serve to continually frustrate and anger civil rights activists throughout the tenure of the Kennedy presidency.

### The Integration of Ole Miss

Following the events in Alabama, the president was hesitant in his willingness to make a strong public commitment towards civil rights legislation, as he did not want to risk alienating

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<sup>141</sup> Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, 132.

<sup>142</sup> Guthman, *In His Own Words*, 201.

southern Democrats who were running for re-election in Congress in the fall of 1962, and who would support his own presidential re-election campaign.<sup>143</sup> For civil rights leaders, the momentum that had been carried from the Freedom Rides was disrupted by events in the city of Albany, Georgia. Under the direction of King, a coalition between his SCLC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and CORE designed a campaign whose ultimate goal was to end segregation in Albany. Their plan was to organize as many large scale sit-ins and demonstrations as possible in order to cause such disruptions in the day to day functioning of the city that Albany officials would be forced to integrate facilities such as bus and railroad stations.<sup>144</sup> Despite the unrelenting commitment of activists, Albany officials refused to budge, and inevitably the movement was abandoned. King was infuriated by the Kennedy administrations lack of involvement in the Albany movement.<sup>145</sup> An emissary of black ministers sent by King to discuss the failing effort in Albany arrived at the White House on August 6 and was abruptly turned away. With city commissioners threatening to enforce the city's segregationist laws more forcefully if protests continued, King implored the White House to make a resolute statement in support of the activists. Kennedy remained silent on the issue, as the

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<sup>143</sup>Stewart Burns, *To the Mountaintop: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Sacred Mission to Save America: 1955-1968* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004), 173.

<sup>144</sup> David L. Lewis, *King: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 147; *New York Times*, 16 August 1962, 1.

<sup>145</sup> *John F. Kennedy Public Papers of the President 1962*. The President's News Conference of August 1, 1962. One of the only public statements made by JFK in favor of the activists during the Albany movement was made during this news conference. Kennedy remarked, "Let me say that I find it wholly inexplicable why the City Council of Albany will not sit down with the citizens of Albany, who may be Negroes, and attempt to secure them, in a peaceful way, their rights...We are going to attempt, as we have in the past, to try to provide a satisfactory solution and protection of the constitutional rights of the people of Albany, and will continue to do so. And the situation today is completely unsatisfactory from that point of view."

Albany campaign had already been deemed a failure and the administration was looking to avoid a possibly explosive confrontation with Albany city officials over civil rights.<sup>146</sup>

Throughout the month of August, 1962 and well into September, a rash of black church bombings and violence against SNCC voter registration volunteers spread throughout the South. On September 10 in Ruleville, Mississippi, a group of white men fired shots into two homes which provided shelter for volunteers in the SNCC registration campaign. The use of fear tactics such as these shootings by racist whites succeeded in forcing SNCC volunteers out of the city.<sup>147</sup>

Days after the Ruleville shootings, President Kennedy held a press conference in which he addressed the use of fear tactics by racist whites in the South, as well as the efforts to register voters in Albany. In his speech, JFK directed his focus towards the “cowardly and outrageous” southern terrorists saying:

I don't know any more outrageous action which I've seen in this country for a good many months or years than the burning of a church- two churches- because of the effort made by Negroes, to be registered to vote...I commend those who are making the effort to register every citizen. They deserve the protection of the United States Government, the protection of the states...And if it requires extra legislation, and extra force, we shall do that.<sup>148</sup>

In his work *Parting the Waters*, Taylor Branch suggests that this speech was Kennedy's strongest statement on civil rights since his election. He writes, “Given a shining opportunity to address the issues at the center of the administrations civil rights strategy- violence and voting

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<sup>146</sup> *New York Times*, 7 August 1962, 2; Bryant, *The Bystander*, 324-326. Bryant discusses an amicus brief filed by the Justice Department on August 8 that opposed the permanent injunction that the Albany City Commission had filed to prevent further protests within the city. Bryant writes that the Kennedy administration was aware that the brief would be overturned upon appeal, and the sole purpose of the brief was that “the administration clearly wanted to put itself on legal record in support of civil rights demonstrators.”

<sup>147</sup> Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 79-81.

<sup>148</sup> *John F. Kennedy Public Paper of the President 1962*. 13 September 1962. The President's News Conference of September 13, 1962; *New York Times*, 14 September 1962, 1; *The Kennedy Presidential Press Conferences*. Edited by George W. Johnson (New York: Earl M. Coleman Inc., 1978), 387.

rights- Kennedy responded unequivocally.”<sup>149</sup> Dr. King was very pleased to hear the president finally take a stance for their cause. If JFK was beginning to show support for the victims of the attacks, then it might be possible for him to further push the idea for civil rights legislation. At a prayer service at the ruins of one of the bombed churches, he spoke about the meaning behind Kennedy’s words, saying, “We appreciate the strong and forthright words from the President of our nation. We need his moral support. We are praying that these words will be translated into powerful action.”<sup>150</sup>

Yet, despite the powerful rhetoric, Kennedy continued to balk at the opportunity to issue any sort of civil rights legislation. Dr. King had been hoping that either the planned federal celebration for the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation on September 22 in Washington DC, or possibly a second ceremony on the January 1 celebration would be the perfect stage for the president to end all segregation. On May 17, 1962 King formally delivered a draft of his own proposed second Emancipation Proclamation to the White House. Much to his dismay, his idea to adapt Lincoln’s own executive order to the needs of the African-American race one hundred years later by abolishing all southern segregation statutes was met with silence by the president.<sup>151</sup> As the events involving civil rights activists continued to dominate a national debate in the black and white press, President Kennedy’s hesitation towards issuing legislation steadily increased, evident by his reluctance to address neither publicly nor privately King’s draft proclamation.

Dr. King turned his attention to RFK, hoping that the Justice Department would be more willing to provide assistance to civil rights activists. Yet as the point man for the administration’s

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<sup>149</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 639.

<sup>150</sup> *New York Times*, 15 September 1962, 12.

<sup>151</sup> *New York Times*, 6 June 1962, 1.

civil rights agenda, the attorney general continually aggravated King with his refusal to allow the civil rights leader to dictate Kennedy policy. RFK was steadfast in his strategy to encourage voter registration over direct activism. Harris Wofford recalled that while the two men could not see eye to eye in terms of the goals, pace and direction of the movement, they still held a mutual understanding that they were facing a similar foe in segregation. Wofford commented:

The tension between King and Bob was inevitable. Here was this uncontrollable force, a moral force, a person who was as much his own man as Robert Kennedy was. Bob liked to control his agenda, and King's business was to overthrow people's agendas. King, I think, worried about Bobby. He worried that he wasn't morally committed enough. He didn't sense the passion in Bobby. On the other hand he had great hope that Bobby's readiness to use power would be turned to Civil Rights.<sup>152</sup>

John Seigenthaler shared a similar view of the relationship that developed between Kennedy and King. He reflected, "Bob recognized the need for dramatic manifestations of civil rights work, but also the need for a very basic and pragmatic approach to the political problem...their was a shade of difference in their approach, but each recognized the good faith of the other."<sup>153</sup>

At this point, however, Robert Kennedy was unwilling to provide the full extent of his power as the attorney general. The hostility of white southerners towards the Freedom Riders shocked RFK, and as a result the Justice Department as a whole began to back off criminal prosecutions against those who violated voting rights of blacks in the South, fearing similar demonstrations of violence. In a meeting with civil rights leaders, Burke Marshall warned that as a result of limited federal powers, the Justice Department could no longer provide protection guarantees to registration programs in the South. King and other civil right activists were frustrated with the Kennedy administration, claiming that they had led them down a path towards

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<sup>152</sup> *RFK*, Written and directed by David Grubin. Interview with Harris Wofford.

<sup>153</sup> *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*, Edited by George Plimpton (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 110.

voter registration simply because they were aware that in this area they had minimal authority and power.<sup>154</sup>

The same month as the centennial celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation, a civil rights crisis came to a head in Oxford, Mississippi. On January 21, 1961 an African-American student named James H. Meredith applied for admission to the University of Mississippi. Despite meeting all required qualifications for attendance, Ole Miss officially denied his admission. Meredith immediately brought suit against the academic institution in a federal district court with the help of lawyers representing the NAACP. By early September 1962, federal courts ruled that Meredith had the legal right to attend the university. State officials in Mississippi, led by Governor Ross Barnett, strongly objected to the courts decision. Barnett declared that all state officials, himself included, should be willing to go to jail if necessary to prevent Meredith's admission.<sup>155</sup> The governor even appeared on statewide television asking his constituents to join him in opposing the federal government's policy of destroying the white race, or as he called it "racial genocide."<sup>156</sup> What began to unfold was an inevitable clash regarding the limitations of federal intervention with the functions of individual states. President Kennedy faced the daunting task of blending the will of the federal government with that of the individual states. As a result, the White House became even more cautious towards becoming entrenched in a legal and ideological struggle with officials in Mississippi.

Regardless of their hesitation, the Kennedy administration was steadfast in their determination to not to allow state officials the opportunity to dictate the outcome of the conflict at Ole Miss. On September 20, Attorney General Kennedy secured a safe escort of U.S. Marshals

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<sup>154</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 640.

<sup>155</sup> *New York Times*, 19 September 1962, 19.

<sup>156</sup> *New York Amsterdam News*, 22 September 1962, 1; Brauer, *Second Reconstruction*, 181.

and Justice Department attorneys for Meredith to the campus.<sup>157</sup> Upon arrival at the university, Barnett (who had been appointed by the Ole Miss Board of Trustees as a special registrar to deal with Meredith) was given a federal injunction by a Justice Department attorney which directed the registrar to admit Meredith. Ignoring the injunction, the governor proceeded to deny the young black man admission.<sup>158</sup> Barnett's actions left RFK with few options. The following day the Justice Department filed a contempt of court citation against the university's chancellor, registrar, and dean, and obtained permission from the Court of Appeals to take over the case for Meredith in order to ensure the execution of the law.<sup>159</sup> While Barnett attempted to maintain a political front of a southern leader who was unwilling to lose credibility with his constituents and southern colleagues by bending to pressure from federal demands, Kennedy continued to do everything in his power to avoid direct intervention. The administration was wary of evoking the memory of President Eisenhower sending the military into Little Rock, Arkansas in order to desegregate schools in 1957. In this situation, both Kennedy brothers wanted to "appear to be exercising minimum power."<sup>160</sup>

On September 30, RFK finally brokered a deal with Barnett that would allow Meredith to register. He was able to do so by threatening the governor, telling him he would release tapes of earlier negotiations between the two that the attorney general had secretly recorded throughout September. These tapes showed that Barnett had been working with the Kennedy administration

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<sup>157</sup> *Atlanta Daily World*, 23 September 1962, 1.

<sup>158</sup> *New York Times*, 21 September 1962, 13.

<sup>159</sup> *New York Times*, 21 September 1962, 1.

<sup>160</sup> Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 357; *Theodore C. Sorensen Papers*. Box 9. September 27, 1957. Although he remained silent during the Little Rock crisis, JFK did make one comment to a reporter regarding the issue. He said "The Supreme Court's ruling on desegregation of schools is the law of the land—and though there may be disagreement over the President's leadership on this issue, there is no denying that he alone has the ultimate responsibility for deciding what steps are necessary to see that the law is faithfully executed."; A further discussion on JFK's response to Eisenhower's decision to send troops to Little Rock is found in Bryant, *The Bystander*, 83.

throughout the entire standoff. Not wanting to lose face in front of mounting political pressure, Barnett consented to Meredith's entry to the university, which ultimately led to mob violence and the death of two people.<sup>161</sup>

Despite the dramatic events and violent outbursts in Oxford, the Kennedys continued to prefer indirect action through political process, which they believed would better serve the movement by means of gradual change. In his work, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*, Richard Reeves comments:

From the President's perspective, the problem with civil rights was that the Negroes and their white friends were pushing the most fundamental kind of attack on the status quo. Their righteous expectations, in that view, were based on an unrealistic political premise, thinking that the President alone had the power to persuade millions of free people- the whites- to do something they did not want to do.<sup>162</sup>

Most important in the minds of African-Americans in the wake of Ole Miss, however, was the national exposure which the events had brought in forcing the hand of the administration to take any type of action, regardless of whether it was direct or indirect. In a front page editorial in the *Chicago Defender*, Lloyd L. General commented, "[Meredith] was still being denied by bigots, but he had won battle after battle and he stood ready to face whatever struggles that lay ahead...in doing so he had thrust upon the federal government its obligation to protect the rights of its

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<sup>161</sup> *John F. Kennedy Public Papers of the President 1962*. September 30, 1962. Report to the Nation on the Situation at the University of Mississippi. After RFK brokered the deal with Barnett, Kennedy reported the events at Ole Miss to the nation. During this address JFK stressed that the federal government had been forced to intervene. He said, "I deeply regret the fact that any action by the executive branch was necessary in this case, but all other avenues and alternatives, including persuasion and conciliation, had been tried and exhausted." An hour after the address, rioters attacked the dorm Meredith was staying in, resulting in the deaths of a reporter and a local repairman. The violence ended with the arrival of the U.S. military; Guthman, *We Band Of Brothers*, 200-206. Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, 198; *The Presidential Recordings of John F. Kennedy: The Great Crises, Volume Two*. Edited by Timothy Naftali and Phillip Zelikow (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 250-314.

<sup>162</sup> Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 356.

citizens.”<sup>163</sup> At the same time, though, some felt that the administration’s reaction to the crisis in Oxford was setting a dangerous model for federal government intervention in response to civil rights confrontations. The *Chicago Defender* wrote, “The Justice Department’s failure to act with dispatch against Gov. Barnett’s bold defiance of Federal court orders has set an unhealthy precedent for those who wish to thumb their noses at the law.”<sup>164</sup> This precedent which the newspaper spoke of reflected the continued reliance on political maneuvering to pacify the problem of civil rights which allowed the administration to avoid complete chaos and violence to erupt on a much larger scale.

A result of the crisis however, was the recognition by JFK of the extent to which southern segregationists were prepared to go in order to maintain their social structure and traditions. In a report that was issued by the Mississippi legislature discussing the events at Ole Miss, federal marshals were blamed for instigating and planning physical torture against the students of the university. The president was stunned by the report and the interpretation of the violent clashes, and began to question how southerners truly envisioned the consequences of segregation. He commented to Ted Sorensen, “It makes me wonder whether everything I learned about the evils of Reconstruction was really true.”<sup>165</sup>

For the Kennedys, the situation in Oxford had deteriorated to a point in which they were uncomfortable in having to take such direct action. As RFK would later say, “I was trying to avoid basically having to send troops and trying to avoid having a federal presence in Mississippi...Barnett was trying to accomplish avoidance of integration...if he couldn’t do that,

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<sup>163</sup> *Chicago Defender*, 28 December 1962, 1.

<sup>164</sup> *Chicago Defender*, 11-17 May 1963, 8.

<sup>165</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 4; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 671.

then he would be forced to do it by our heavy hand.”<sup>166</sup> Rather than take the initiative by calling in federal troops in a public show of force, the Kennedys preferred to continue their policy of private negotiations and political appeasement to resolve crises such as this. Neither the president nor his brother was pleased with the circumstances that had brought about the confrontation in Oxford which forced their intervention. The deliberate and dramatic defiance by African-Americans such as Meredith forced the president to respond. These actions were continually frowned upon by both the president and attorney general, who viewed political maneuvering in pragmatic terms. Direct challenges by activists placed the Kennedys in an awkward position in which the events dictated their decision making rather than vice versa, a position which the brothers were uncomfortable with. The administration recognized that whether they wanted it or not, the reality was that civil rights had become an integral part of their political agenda. Yet as their hesitation during the crisis of Ole Miss demonstrates, they were still not prepared to make a full federal commitment towards the cause of civil rights, nor were they in complete agreement on how best to deal with such situations.

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African-Americans had high hopes that Kennedy would follow up on his campaign promise to put forward civil rights legislation. However, after three years of inaction in both the creation of that legislation and the administrations lack of commitment in aiding civil rights activists in the South, the black community had become disillusioned, realizing that real change in the form of federal aid would most likely not come. The *Chicago Defender* summarized these feelings in an editorial in which the author commented, “I have believed all along that Mr. Kennedy is insincere on civil rights; that he thinks the Negro can be fooled by political

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<sup>166</sup> Guthman, *In His Own Words*, 160.

appointments, White House parties and pretty words. From a look at the record, it would appear that the honeymoon between JFK and the Negro is turning sour.”<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> *Chicago Defender*, 11-17 May, 1963.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **THE NORTH: WHEN I PULL THE TRIGGER...KISS IT GOODBYE**

#### The South Exposed at Birmingham

The spring of 1963 brought about a new crisis that once again thrust the civil rights movement into the national forefront. Following the failure in Albany, Martin Luther King and Fred Shuttlesworth organized a series of protests in Birmingham, Alabama in early April. Similar to the events in Georgia, these demonstrations were largely unsuccessful as a result of the passive containment strategy of city officials, including Police Chief Bull Connor and Mayor Albert Boutwell. Birmingham police avoided direct confrontations with activists, and the bulk of the protests were localized within African-American neighborhoods. Civil rights organizers in the city became increasingly frustrated by the lack of gains. Up to this point, the presence of the national press had been virtually nonexistent in the city. King and Shuttlesworth realized that they needed the media to become actively involved if they were going to relate the message of the civil rights struggle to the nation and evoke some sort of emotional response which could provide the outrage necessary to force the federal government into action. As a result, Shuttlesworth traveled to Washington D.C. and appeared before the National Press Club in order to encourage the media to go to Birmingham and cover the events and efforts of the protesters.<sup>168</sup> On May 2, after lackluster results and few arrests, King and Shuttlesworth made the bold decision to flood department stores and lunch counters with thousands of child protesters. Bull

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<sup>168</sup> Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001) , 356.

Connor's men responded to the demonstration by turning high pressure hoses and police dogs on the children.<sup>169</sup>

The national media captured images of the excessive police brutality towards the Birmingham protesters, prompting President Kennedy to comment upon seeing pictures of the violence on the front page of the *New York Times*, "I think it's a terrible picture in the paper...It's an intolerable situation...we worked as hard as we possibly could given the laws we had. We have not done enough for a situation so desperate...I quite agree if I was a Negro I'd be sore."<sup>170</sup> The photographs made the president uncomfortable with the direction that the crisis in Birmingham had taken, yet he came away with no concrete plan that would help to rectify the situation. His pragmatism dictated that the situation in Alabama be resolved, but more as a political strategy than as a moralistic stance. He was more concerned with how the Soviet Union would perceive the pictures of violence, and how that would effect Cold War foreign relations as a result.<sup>171</sup> This view was evident by a comment made during a meeting with a group of lobbyists that morning, in which JFK stated, "There is no federal law we could pass...I mean what law can you pass to do anything about police power in Birmingham?...What a disaster that picture is. That picture is not only in America but all around the world."<sup>172</sup> Historian Nick Bryant writes that Kennedy's discussion with the lobbyist group encapsulated the president's narrow view of one of the most extraordinary episodes of the entire civil rights era. Bryant argues that although

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<sup>169</sup> *Afro-American*, 18 May 1963, 1.

<sup>170</sup> Bryant, *The Bystander*, 387.

<sup>171</sup> Michael O'Brien, *John F. Kennedy: A Biography* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2005), 603. O'Brien writes that JFK was wary of the use of the Little Rock Crisis in 1957 by the Soviet Union as propaganda to discredit the Eisenhower administration, and did not want to see a similar outcome as a result of the pictures from Birmingham.

<sup>172</sup> Bryant, *The Bystander*, 388.

the Birmingham protests had been a watershed moment for the country, it was not for the president.

In the days following the attack on the children, the White House was flooded with calls from various organizations and civic leaders urging the president to utilize the powers of his office to the fullest. New York Representative Emmanuel Celler petitioned the president, calling the actions of Birmingham's police "barbarous", and advised Kennedy to exhibit "firm executive action."<sup>173</sup> JFK was unable, however, to grasp the greater scope that the events of Birmingham symbolized, that of the emerging public awareness of the brutality and injustice of segregation. What resulted instead was a subtle shift in tactics by the administration in their approach to civil rights, from that of conflict management to that of proactive conflict resolution.<sup>174</sup> SCLC's Rev. Andrew J Young commented on the effectiveness of this new strategy, "Up to that point, settlements in civil rights had involved the courts, or some kind of presidential order, or something very official. But now you began to get a kind of unofficial, personal reconciliation with both blacks and whites, which was very new."<sup>175</sup>

In an effort to prevent further violence, President Kennedy incorporated this new strategy by sending Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall to Alabama to secretly negotiate a peace between local white and black businessmen. By May 10, Marshall was able to broker a deal between the two sides that would result in the gradual desegregation of lunch counters, rest rooms, and theaters throughout the city.<sup>176</sup> Despite the success in gaining integration in the city, the black press, for the most part unaware of the behind the scenes negotiations by the

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<sup>173</sup> *Afro-American*, 18 May 1963, 5.

<sup>174</sup> Bryant, *The Bystander*, 389.

<sup>175</sup> *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*, 118.

<sup>176</sup> Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, 243.

administration, responded with criticism to the lack of direct public intervention and support by the Kennedy brothers. The *Chicago Defender* wrote:

The Kennedy Administration has reached the moment of truth on the burning issue of civil rights...But tokenism will not satisfy the swelling chorus of indignation which is directed against an Administration which...fails to take action when Negro ministers and teen-aged Negro children are knocked to the ground by high pressure water hoses and bitten by police dogs.<sup>177</sup>

Hopes of a peaceful resolution following the negotiations by Marshall were left in doubt after the bombing of activist Rev. A.D. King's house. No longer willing to adhere to the ideals of non-violence, enraged African-Americans in Birmingham took to the streets and began rioting within their own community. The clashes between black rioters and city police resulted in the stabbing of a white police officer.<sup>178</sup> Although a political shift of power within the city resulting in Bull Connor leaving office allowed the Birmingham agreement to hold, once again the course of action and silence from the White House came under criticism by the African-American press. The *Chicago Defender* wrote, "The President- like his predecessor, General Eisenhower, inevitably waits until the fat is in the fire before making decisive moves. He did it in the James Meredith situation. He did it in Birmingham."<sup>179</sup>

Violence continued to spread throughout the South in the weeks following the Birmingham agreement as riots broke out in Jackson, Mississippi. Angered by white official's refusal to create a bi-racial committee and employ black policemen, blacks in Jackson clashed with police.<sup>180</sup> In order to resolve the situation, the president made a series of private phone calls to Jackson mayor Allen Thompson and negotiated a resolution to defuse the racial tensions

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<sup>177</sup> *Chicago Defender*, 18-24 May 1963, 8.

<sup>178</sup> McWhorter, *Carry Me Home*, 430.

<sup>179</sup> *Chicago Defender*, 8-14 June 1963, 8.

<sup>180</sup> *Newsweek*, 10 June 1963, 27.

within the city. He told Allen, “[blacks] have to look like when they call off these demonstrations that they’re getting somewhere. Now it should be possible in this meeting to work out some language which would save your situation and at the same time not make it look like they’ve all quit.”<sup>181</sup> Although John F. Kennedy recognized that the introduction of new civil rights legislation was inevitable, he still believed that the best way to resolve these situations was through case by case political negotiation, in what the *Afro-American* called the Kennedy “velvet-glove technique.”<sup>182</sup>

### A New Front Emerges

A significant turning point in the path towards the creation of civil rights legislation that directly resulted from the rioting in the South, was the recognition by the Kennedy administration that their policy of appeasement and containment would yield minimal results in creating genuine lasting change for blacks and their pursuit of equality. An important difference that resulted from the Birmingham crisis as opposed to previous events was the impression left on the Kennedy administration, as well as the rest of the nation, of black rioters utilizing violence as an outlet for their mounting frustration. Although the president and his advisers had focused solely on gaining immediate results from the conflict, it was Robert Kennedy who suggested that the administration begin to broaden the scope of their civil rights strategy. Discussing the issue with his brother, Robert said:

The group that has gotten out of hand has been the Negroes, by and large... We feel that based on the success that they had in Birmingham, and the feeling of the Negroes generally, and the reports that we get from other cities, not just in the South, that this could trigger off a good deal of violence around the country now. The Negroes’ saying that they have been abused for all these years, and they are going to have to start

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<sup>181</sup> Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 503.

<sup>182</sup> *Afro-American*, 4 May 1963, 4.

following the ideas of the Black Muslims, not go along with the white people. If they feel, on the other hand, that the federal government is their friend, and is intervening for them, is going to work for them, this could head some of that off.<sup>183</sup>

RFK recognized that the violent response of those in Birmingham was not an anomaly, and that an ideological shift in tactics away from passivism was gaining a strong foothold within the black community that would be difficult to contain.

The Kennedy administration also realized that the problems of racial equality and the threat of black violence were not limited exclusively to the South. The attorney general would note in a speech to the New York City Central Labor Council, “There is no question that segregation in the South is socially, politically and morally wrong. But there is deep-seated segregation in the North, also, and it is just as wrong.”<sup>184</sup> Racial tensions were rising amongst African-Americans throughout northern cities, and would have to be dealt with by the president. The frustration of blacks in the North was evident in the writings and words of prominent figures such as novelist James Baldwin and Dr. Kenneth Clark. In an interview for *U.S. News*, Clark discussed the mindset of blacks in northern urban communities. He commented, “The mood of the Negro today is that he must have the same rights that every other American citizen enjoys—no matter what the cost...he wants those rights now. He is tired of waiting.”<sup>185</sup>

At the center of the rising tensions and impatience that was becoming apparent to the Kennedy administration was the system of *de facto segregation*. This type of segregation had its basis economically, creating a system that trapped blacks in a state of poverty while providing minimal opportunities for advancement. In 1948 the Supreme Court outlawed racially restrictive

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<sup>183</sup> Jonathan Rosenberg, *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Quest for Justice: The Civil Rights Tapes* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003), 98.

<sup>184</sup> Douglas Ross, *Robert F. Kennedy: Apostle of Change* (New York: Trident Press, 1968), 55.

<sup>185</sup> *U.S. News*, 10 June 1963, 38.

housing covenants. Despite this ruling, however, established white ethnic groups, such as the Irish, Italian and Jewish, who controlled housing made private pledges to not sell or lease to blacks in order to maintain racial hegemony within their own neighborhoods. The practice of “redlining” was also an obstacle that blacks seeking housing had to face. Redlining was a form of discrimination in which bankers and mortgage brokers would circle areas on city maps in red pencil which they regarded as too insecure to grant mortgages. Real estate brokers agreed that they would not show potential black homeowners any housing outside of these penciled off areas. Thus blacks were forced to seek housing in dilapidated tenement projects within the red line, paying premium prices with inflated interest rates that could consume a majority of their household incomes.<sup>186</sup>

In a similar fashion, opportunities for employment were also limited. Most northern blacks who worked were usually confined to jobs which had little chance for advancement, jobs such as unskilled industrial laborers. With limited housing available, the arrival of over a million blacks in northern ghettos during the 1960s led to overcrowding and a high rate of unemployment throughout the black community. Historian Robert Weisbrot writes that this type of segregation created resentment in northern blacks, since “no Jim Crow laws advertised their agony or stirred protests that aroused national concern. Instead racism worked in subtler ways to make ghetto residents the forgotten people of the Negro revolution.”<sup>187</sup> This environment of hopelessness and poverty fueled feelings of resentment, anger, and limitless frustration that

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<sup>186</sup> Richard T. Schaefer, *Racial and Ethnic Groups* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2004), 87; Drew S. Days, “Vindicating Civil Rights in Changing Times,” *The Yale Law Journal*, 93(1984), 993. Days writes that the Justice Department began prosecuting fair housing cases with great success that challenged the practice of redlining in the early 1970s.

<sup>187</sup> Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America’s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 154; “*Takin’ It to the Streets*”: *A Sixties Reader*, Edited by Alexander Bloom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 145.

would inevitably be released through means of violence and brutality. James Baldwin, in his work *My Dungeon Shook*, wrote of the social barriers that were thrust upon young blacks in the ghettos. In the essay, written as a letter to his newborn nephew, he observes:

You were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity.<sup>188</sup>

Civil rights activist James Farmer discussed the plight of a new generation of northern blacks in 1963, saying, “Walking in the streets of Harlem, I saw more clearly than I have before how young men who feel that nothing is being done about grievances so deep they can barely articulate them, will finally spring to violence.”<sup>189</sup>

The growing spite that was emerging in northern ghettos and the feeling of desperation was reflected in the shifting attitude of African-Americans away from the policy of non-violent passive resistance that was preached by such leaders as Dr. King. Political historian Theodore Windt describes this shift as part of the natural process of a liberal public protest movement. He writes that during the initial stages of a mass movement, the purpose of the dominant group of protesters is to arouse sympathy and support amongst the power elites, which can include the press and legislators. They appeal to these elites by means of identification, demonstrating a common belief system of values, while at the same time ensuring them that they have no intention of usurping the position of the group in power. Part of this development, however, is the inevitable emergence of radicals who carry a more desperate and inflammatory message that will amplify the desires of the dominant protest group. Windt describes the appearance of

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<sup>188</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 21.

<sup>189</sup> James Farmer, *Freedom—When?* (New York: Random House, 1965), 27.

radicals as being critical to furthering the message of the dominant group while incorporating new tactics and ideals that may have stood on the periphery. He writes, “Even as procedural politics and deliberative rhetoric govern this period, radicals stand in the background rendering ideological analyses and wait for the day when others catch up to them or realize the futility of their rhetoric.”<sup>190</sup>

This process, and the turn by many blacks to radical ideology was reflected in northern urban cities. While the activism of SCLC, CORE, and SNCC dominated the headlines, blacks in the North found few opportunities that would help to expose their own depravity to a nation whose main focus was on the plight of the black equality movement in the South. Baldwin described this shift away from King’s rhetoric of passivism, and of the leader himself:

[King] is a very great man...He really believes in non-violence. He has arrived at something in himself which allows him to do it, and he still has great moral authority in the South. He has none whatsoever in the North. Poor Martin has gone through God knows what kind of hell to awaken the American conscience, but Martin has reached the end of his rope...Martin is undercut by the performance of the country. The country is only concerned about non-violence if it seems as if I’m going to get violent.<sup>191</sup>

In an attempt to vent their frustrations, Baldwin felt that many northern black youths were straying away from the ideals of non-violent resistance, and instead accepting those of the Black Muslim movement. In stark contrast to King, Baldwin suggested that leaders of the Black Muslim’s, such as Malcolm X, had “great authority over any of his audiences. He corroborates their reality; He tells them [blacks] that they really exist.”<sup>192</sup> Clark reflected the changing attitude when he discussed the growing acceptance in the North of the Black Muslim movement saying,

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<sup>190</sup> Theodore Windt, *Presidents and Protesters: Political Rhetoric in the 1960s* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990); McAdam, Doug, “Tactical Innovation and the Pace of Insurgency” *We Shall Overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement*, Edited by David Garrow (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 617-620.

<sup>191</sup> *Chicago Defender*, 1 June 1963, 2.

<sup>192</sup> Kenneth B. Clark, *King, Malcolm, Baldwin: Three Interviews* (Hanover: University of New England Press, 1985), 60.

“Negro youths seem to feel that they can not hope for justice from white Americans... Many of these youngsters who express to us the Muslim philosophy say “We’re not Muslims. But what the Muslims say is true: You can’t trust the white man.”<sup>193</sup> Radicals such as the Black Muslims offered northern blacks a new alternative to the message of pacification of Dr. King and other mainstream civil rights organizations. These radicals would not accept the political and social creed of the mainline civil rights movement, much less “the decorous rhetoric of supplication.”<sup>194</sup>

The emergence of a new radical approach had its roots in the urban ghetto, and its message was carried by the youthful second generation of activists who were beginning to emerge in leadership positions in the North. This new generation openly questioned the strategy of wearing the antagonists down through suffering. The feeling of mistrust and frustration left northern cities in a precarious state of racial tension, a juxtaposition that contrasted the token civil rights gains of the South with the desperation and feelings of futility in the North. Radical activist Julius Lester echoed this sentiment, writing, “The days of singing freedom songs and the days of combating bullets and billy clubs with love are over. ‘We Shall Overcome’ sounds old, outdated. Man, the people are too busy getting ready to fight to bother with singing anymore.”<sup>195</sup>

In response to the growing animosity that was festering amongst northern blacks during the early months of the summer of 1963, the National Urban League proposed a plan to temper hostilities that were developing in what they described as “a tinder-box of racial unrest among

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<sup>193</sup> *U.S. News*, 10 June 1963, 39.

<sup>194</sup> Windt, *Presidents and Protesters*, 166; Staughton Lynd, “The New Negro Radicalism” from *We Shall Overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement*. Edited by David Garrow (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 611.

<sup>195</sup> Julius Lester, “The Angry Children of Malcolm X”, from *We Shall Overcome: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement*. Edited by David Garrow (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 589.

Negroes in Northern cities that was on the verge of taking flame.”<sup>196</sup> While discussing the plan to eliminate ghettos and provide more employment to African-American workers, League executive director Whitney M. Young Jr. publicly criticized JFK for his failure to advance civil rights legislation. Young asserted that the Kennedys “have only reacted, they have not acted. Their attitude has been: How can we keep people from revolting and demonstrating and embarrassing us?”<sup>197</sup> He went on to say that incidents in the South were, “mild in comparison with those...in Northern cities. In these teeming Northern ghettos, hundreds of thousands of Negro citizens, struggling beneath the mounting burden of automation, overcrowding and subtle discrimination are reaching their breaking point.”<sup>198</sup> The *Chicago Defender* mirrored Young’s point, commenting, “A new Negro has arisen on the scene, and he is impatient at...the snail’s pace at which integration is moving, the continued token acceptance...are driving the negro masses to extreme means to attain their equity and full citizenship status.”<sup>199</sup>

More than any other member of the Kennedy administration, RFK was aware of the serious threat that violence from the North could have on race relations throughout the country. On May 19 he and Burke Marshall met with activist Dick Gregory, and voiced his concerns over the possibility of a future escalation in northern urban ghettos. On the flight back from the meeting, Kennedy and Marshall agreed that in order to temper the agitation that was apparent in the black community, legislation would have to be created which would address public accommodations.<sup>200</sup> Reporting to his brother and his inner circle of advisers the following day, RFK told the president that Gregory “thinks we’re going to have a lot of trouble. He thinks that

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<sup>196</sup> *New York Times*, 10 June 1963, 1.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>199</sup> *Chicago Defender*, 1-7 June 1963, 8.

<sup>200</sup> Guthman, *In His Own Words*, 172.

there's a complete lack of understanding...that that's going to be the big problem area; it's going to be the northern cities."<sup>201</sup> Burke Marshall added that the key point made by Gregory was that "the Negro mass in the North, particularly, doesn't see anything except the dogs and hoses." Robert explained to his brother that they had arrived at a critical moment in the movement, as blacks in the North were antagonistic, and coupled with the fact that the leaders of the various civil rights organizations were all competing with each other instead of creating a united front, the situation had the potential to get out of control on a broad scale.

The most compelling factor in RFK's advice that stood out to the group was the suggestion that King had lost his stranglehold of influence over the black populace. The gospel of nonviolence had begun to lose its effectiveness, and for the Kennedy administration, that meant the loss of a containable approach to civil rights. The Gandhian tactics of nonviolence had played a pivotal role in the civil rights protests of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and although they had frustrated the Kennedys for their insistence in pushing forth the agenda of black equality, they had accepted it because they knew that they could, to a certain extent, control it. Nonviolent resistance afforded the administration the freedom to manipulate and work the back channels of the political machinery in the South in order to attain acceptable results that would not be detrimental to the overall agenda of the White House. The advent of black radicalism and the threat of violence, however, added a variable to the equation of civil rights protests which the Kennedys realized they would have no control over. Their pragmatism would be futile in the face of widespread rioting and bloodshed, placing them in the exact position in which they were most uncomfortable. The threat of hostile action within the black community forced the hand of the administration to create legislation in order to placate the growing threat of violence.

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<sup>201</sup> Rosenberg, *Quest For Justice: The Civil Rights Tapes*, 117.

Heeding the advice of his younger sibling, JFK made the tentative decision during the meeting on May 20 to go forward with the creation of a new civil rights bill. Although he had been hesitant to do so, fearing that the introduction of civil rights legislation would hinder his ability to run a successful reelection campaign without losing the support of southern Democrats, the president recognized that the argument being put forth by RFK of growing hostility that threatened to escalate necessitated action on his part. Burke Marshall would recall that, “[RFK] thought it was not just the future of the presidency, but the future of the country that was at stake, and so, he urged the President very strongly to go ahead with the bill.”<sup>202</sup> During the meeting, Robert suggested that legislation which would address public accommodations and school desegregation would be a good option for the president to take, saying, “If we can get those bills by, it would be damn helpful. Good for the Negroes, relax this thing.”<sup>203</sup>

In the wake of the events in Birmingham, the strategy of reacting to individual crises had lost its effectiveness. The natural solution, from the standpoint of the executive branch, was to create the legislation that King and other activists had long been calling for. The timing of the violence in Birmingham, and the media coverage of it, presented the administration with the perfect opportunity to take this course of action. The situation in the North and the willingness to react with aggression by blacks in the South demonstrated the need for a broader resolution that would effectively address the problem of racial inequality. Robert Kennedy would later reflect

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<sup>202</sup> *The Kennedys*. Written and Directed by Phillip Whitehead. DVD. Interview with Burke Marshall.

<sup>203</sup> Rosenberg, *Quest For Justice: The Civil Rights Tapes*, 121. JFK and his advisers decided that the basis of the new legislation would address desegregation through the interstate commerce clause, which had legal precedent from earlier cases, rather than the morally compelling equal protection clause in the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution.; *John F. Kennedy Public Papers of the President 1963*. May 22, 1963 Presidential Press Conference. Kennedy addressed the question of new legislation by saying, “We are considering whether any additional proposals will be made to Congress...I think there may be other things that we could do which would provide a legal outlet for a desire for a remedy other than having to engage in demonstrations which bring them into conflict with the forces of the law and order in the community.”

that the administration had two ways of dealing with the racial crisis, “Either to protect people, or to deal with the substantive problem that caused these difficulties. We didn’t feel that the protection of people was feasible or acceptable under our constitutional system...what was acceptable was to get to the heart of the problem.”<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Guthman, *In His Own Words*, 172-173.

## CHAPTER 6 THE MEETING: THE GULF IS WIDE

### Baldwin and The Fire Next Time

With the expectation that he would come away with a better understanding of the developing racial crisis amongst blacks in northern cities, Robert Kennedy arranged to meet with James Baldwin at the attorney general's home in McLean, Virginia in late May, 1963. Baldwin's work, *Letter from a Region in My Mind*, had been published in *The New Yorker*, and had received high accolades from the black and white community alike. In the essay, Baldwin gave an honest assessment of the social realities which blacks were subjected to from birth. He wrote:

One did not have to be very bright to realize how little one could do to change one's situation; one did not have to be abnormally sensitive to be worn down to a cutting edge by the incessant and gratuitous humiliation and danger one encountered every working day, all day long...Negroes in this country are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open to this world. This world is white and they are black. White people hold the power, which mean they are superior to blacks, and the world has innumerable ways of making this difference known and felt and feared. Long before the Negro child perceives this difference, and even before he understands it, he has begun to react to it, he has begun to be controlled by it.<sup>205</sup>

Having read *Letter from a Region*, Kennedy was moved by the bluntness in which Baldwin described the plight of poor blacks and the dismal level of expectations placed on them as they grew up in urban communities. In 1961, JFK had appointed Robert to head the Presidents Committee on Juvenile Delinquency.<sup>206</sup> During his exploratory studies of the causes of juvenile delinquency, RFK had come across the issue of urban poverty and its effects on the racial crisis. In the month after Birmingham, he sent a memorandum to the president in which he wrote, "in

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<sup>205</sup> Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 39-40.

<sup>206</sup> Bryant, *The Bystander*, 414.

northern slums, the basic problems of jobs, training, and housing may take more than a generation to resolve.” Echoing the writings of Baldwin, Robert thought that the futility that had become so prevalent in urban black communities had its origins in the disparity that was burdened upon black children. He made the suggestion to his brother that the Kennedy administration make a more concerted effort to restore the faith of black youths in the federal government.<sup>207</sup>

RFK continued to be troubled by the possibility that the events in Birmingham provoking black rage might quickly spread to northern cities. The country was not yet aware of the legislation that the Kennedy administration was preparing, and the threat of violence continued to linger over black communities in the North and South. He was intent on exploring possible avenues in which the federal government could reach out to these people and create solutions that would address the root problems within the ghettos. The initiation of the meeting continued to demonstrate the lasting effect that Birmingham had left on the attorney general, that of a personal recognition that the policy of mediation and reaction could not properly combat the growing militancy that was evident throughout the country.

Burke Marshall arranged the meeting between RFK and the novelist at Kennedy’s home at Hickory Hill. As they sat and had breakfast, Baldwin spoke of the burden and inequalities facing blacks in cities throughout the North. Kennedy, always looking for pragmatic solutions, asked him what could be done to alleviate those problems. As Marshall later recalled, “Baldwin hadn’t the foggiest idea.”<sup>208</sup> Robert suggested that Baldwin gather a group of northern black

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<sup>207</sup> *Burke Marshall Papers*. Undated. Memorandum from Robert Kennedy to John Kennedy. Box 8.

<sup>208</sup> Navasky, *Kennedy Justice*, 113.

intellectuals to meet with him in New York City, a setting that would allow them to seek substantive answers.

On May 24, RFK met with an eclectic group of whites and blacks that had been hastily brought together by Baldwin with the expectation of facilitating a discussion on the developing crisis in the northern urban areas and the growing popularity of the Black Muslims.<sup>209</sup> Expecting a group of leading activists and intellectuals from the black community, Kennedy and Marshall were instead met by a group which included Baldwin, his brother David, singer Lena Horne, activist Harry Belafonte, African-American playwright Lorraine Hansberry, Dr. Kenneth Clark, Edwin C. Berry, white actor Rip Torn, King's lawyer Clarence Jones, and a CORE Freedom Rider named Jerome Smith.<sup>210</sup> Baldwin would later say that the diversity of the group was intentional, as he wanted, "as wide and even as rowdy a range of opinion as possible."<sup>211</sup> The novelist also felt that the purpose of the meeting would be for the group to impress on Kennedy "the extremity of the racial situation" in the North and the "anger of quickening urgency, of deepening alienation" felt by the northern blacks.<sup>212</sup>

The meeting lasted two and a half hours, and although it had been originally envisioned by the attorney general to be an informative and intellectual discussion on the issue of race relations, it quickly digressed into an attack by those in attendance criticizing the civil rights policies of the White House. Kennedy began by cautioning the group about the extremism of Black Muslims, at which point he was interrupted by Jerome Smith. Smith told the attorney

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<sup>209</sup> James Campbell, *Talking At The Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (New York: Viking, 1991) , 163.

<sup>210</sup> *New York Times*, 25 May 1963, 1.

<sup>211</sup> *Newsweek*, 3 June 1963, 19.

<sup>212</sup> *New York Times*, 26 May 1963, 1. Also referenced in *Newsweek*, 3 June 1963, 19.

general, “You don’t have no idea what trouble is...when I pull the trigger, kiss it goodbye.”<sup>213</sup>

Smith was referring to the idea that the real problem that whites would have to deal with was not the Black Muslim, but the African-American youth who had seen the kind of brutal treatment by southern whites that he himself had witnessed during his time as a Freedom Rider. Smith had been severely beaten in McComb, Mississippi by a white mob in 1961, and had experienced similar violence on several other occasions. The young Freedom Rider had been such an advocate of nonviolent resistance, that he had been nicknamed ‘Gandhi Two’ by his fellow activists.<sup>214</sup> He was frustrated and jaded by the Kennedy administration’s unwillingness to create civil rights legislation. Baldwin later commented that “[Smith] set the tone of the meeting because he stammers when he’s upset. He stammered when he talked to Bobby...and Bobby took it personally.”<sup>215</sup> To RFK’s surprise, Smith told the attorney general that being in the same room as him made him want to vomit.<sup>216</sup>

After an awkward pause, Kennedy tried to steer the conversation back to the events of Birmingham and Mississippi, or as Baldwin would later call it, “the same old stuff.”<sup>217</sup> However, Lorraine Hansberry interjected by saying, “Mr. Kennedy, he [Smith] is the voice of 20 million Americans and he is the most important man in this room.”<sup>218</sup> Baldwin recalled that after Hansberry’s comment, the group began to become agitated about RFK’s apparent lack of sympathy and comprehension, saying, “It got worse. Bobby didn’t understand what we were trying to tell him; he didn’t understand our urgency. For him it was a political matter...but what

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<sup>213</sup> *Jet Magazine*, 13 June 1963, 6.

<sup>214</sup> Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 127.

<sup>215</sup> *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*, 119.

<sup>216</sup> Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, 244.

<sup>217</sup> *Newsweek*, 3 June 1963, 19.

<sup>218</sup> *Jet*, 13 June 1963, 7.

was wrong [was] something very sinister, very deep, that couldn't be solved in the usual way."<sup>219</sup> Sensing an opportunity to create further discussion and antagonize Kennedy, Baldwin asked Smith if he would ever fight for the United States in a war against Cuba. Smith responded, "Never! Never! Never!"<sup>220</sup> Kennedy was outraged that any citizen would refuse to defend his country, and pointed out to the group that his Irish grandparents had been immigrants and had overcome similar prejudices. Baldwin retorted that his own family had been in the same country for longer than three generations and yet were still stuck at the bottom of the social sphere.<sup>221</sup> Following this remark, Kennedy tried to salvage the meeting by praising the work of the Justice Department lawyers in black voting rights cases. The group responded with laughter, a laughter that Clark commented was, "the laughter of desperation."<sup>222</sup>

After two hours the final comment came from Lorraine Hansberry, who praised black men and the role they had played in the movement, and concluded by saying, "Mr. Attorney General, I am very worried about the state of a civilization which produces that white cop standing on that Negro woman's neck in Birmingham."<sup>223</sup> Hansberry then stood up, thanked Kennedy for listening, and left the room. The rest of the group followed her lead and walked out of the apartment, leaving Kennedy to reflect on the frustration he felt by the experience. He would later observe that those who attended the meeting:

Started sort of competing with each other in attacking us, the President, the federal government... People got madder and madder when they thought about the treatment of Negroes... The way to show that they hadn't forgotten where they came from was to

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<sup>219</sup> *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*, 120.

<sup>220</sup> Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, 244.

<sup>221</sup> Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 506. Reeves quotes Baldwin telling RFK, "Your family has been here for three generations and your brother's on top. My family has been here a lot longer than that and we're on the bottom. That's the heart of the problem."

<sup>222</sup> *Jet*, 13 June 1963, 19.

<sup>223</sup> *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*, 121.

berate me and berate the United States government that had made this position a condition... They didn't really know, with a few exceptions, any of the facts."<sup>224</sup>

Baldwin's own view on the meeting mirrored that of the attorney general, though for him it was RFK who did not fully understand the facts. Following the meeting, the novelist was quoted in the *New York Times* saying that Kennedy did not "understand the full extent of the growing racial strife in the North."<sup>225</sup> He also told *Newsweek* that there was a "gulf" that divided Harlem and McLean, saying, "He [Kennedy] just didn't get the point. He was naïve, he doesn't know pain. He just doesn't know."<sup>226</sup>

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A critical transition in the outlook of Robert Kennedy towards civil rights took place in the weeks following the Baldwin meeting. Journalist Jack Newfield observed that Robert "forged his consciousness out of what he saw and felt... they helped him invent himself through personal engagement... his emotions made him open and vulnerable to the immediate moment."<sup>227</sup> The discussion between the attorney general and the Baldwin group signified the first time in which Kennedy had been confronted by a group of African-Americans who were willing to bluntly portray the despair and dissatisfaction that they felt over their social standing and the policies of his brother's administration. Until that point, the Kennedy administration had advocated a civil rights policy that dealt with problems on a case by case basis. If a crisis regarding race relations or segregation arose, they would take appropriate legal action to temper that particular situation. Victor Navasky writes that this strategy was calculated:

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<sup>224</sup> Guthman, *In His Own Words*, 225.

<sup>225</sup> *New York Times*, 26 May 1963, 1.

<sup>226</sup> *Newsweek*, 3 June 1963, 19.

<sup>227</sup> Newfield, *RFK: A Memoir*, 40-41.

As each crisis surfaced, the [Attorney] General confidently approached it on the assumption that it was a temporary eruption which he and his remarkable team could cool...The trick was to encourage the inevitable integration but never at the cost of disturbing the social equilibrium. His most visible and most significant civil rights activities were responsive, reactive, crisis-managing, violence-avoiding.<sup>228</sup>

The problem facing RFK, was that throughout each of these crises in the Deep South there had never been a sense of urgency or willingness on the part of the federal government to rectify the root problem of racial inequality. There was rarely an effort made to look past the crisis at hand and delve into the overlying social factors that spawned the event. What the Kennedys failed to understand was that the importance placed by civil rights activists on the need for executive legislative action was deliberate. In contrast to the Kennedy strategy of voter registration, these activists understood that more than anything legislation would address the foundations of racial injustice first and foremost, and in doing so mandate social change.

The Baldwin meeting made it clear to the attorney general that there existed a great sense of exigency from within the black populace that was not satisfied by the token gains of political maneuvering. It also demonstrated that the time frame for which the Kennedy administration had to act was diminishing with each failed opportunity to enact legislation. Going into the meeting, RFK thought that the work of the Justice Department had been enough to keep all sides content with what progress had been made. A significant moment for Robert Kennedy came when Jerome Smith told him that being in the same room as the attorney general made him physically ill. Smith had been on the roster of the original CORE Freedom Rides, had participated in the second leg of those rides, and was a well respected member of CORE's New Orleans branch. He had advocated the path of nonviolent resistance, and had been brutally beaten during the second round of Freedom Rides in the fall of 1961 by Ku Klux Klansmen. In essence, Smith was the

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<sup>228</sup> Navasky, *Kennedy Justice*, 97.

model activist who Kennedy had worked so diligently to protect the legal rights of during his first years in the Justice Department. He was not an agitator who willingly preached the new gospel of violence that was so readily gaining a foothold within the black community. Yet he sat face to face with the attorney general and told him bluntly that even for one as qualified and well versed in the tactics of peaceful resistance, time had run out. The pragmatic approach of the Kennedys could no longer coexist with the needs of the black community. The promises of the administration meant nothing unless they were backed by substantive action.

The participants in the meeting interpreted RFK's silence to Smith's anger as being one in which the attorney general lacked understanding of the underlying meanings within the Freedom Riders words. Dr. Clark recounted, "We were shocked that he was shocked and that he seemed unable to understand what Smith was trying to say."<sup>229</sup> To the contrary, RFK understood every word that was being spoken to him, however he was not prepared to hear such a straight forward assessment of the failures of his department. Kennedy aide Nicholas Katzenbach commented, "After Baldwin, he was absolutely shocked. Bobby expected to be made an honorary black. It really hurt his feelings, and it was pretty mean. But the fact that he thought he knew so much –and learned he didn't- was important."<sup>230</sup> Kennedy recognized that for all of the progress that the administration thought they had accomplished in quelling civil rights crisis's, in the eyes of the average black person that had faced the brutality, degradation and hopelessness on a daily basis, the federal government's actions were nothing more than symbolic gestures. Historian William Chafe writes that in the wake of southern civil rights conflicts, most blacks became conscious of the fact that "despite their sacrifice, most of the underlying problems

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>230</sup> Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, 245.

remained, largely because those in power felt no compulsion to alter established patterns once token concessions had been made.”<sup>231</sup> For all of his work in resolving civil rights clashes in the South, Robert Kennedy was finding that his own actions had little to do with finding solutions that would address the very foundations of black inequality and effectively create lasting change.

The attorney general was beginning to grasp the depth of black anger that was evident throughout the country. It was during this time, Evan Thomas writes, that “RFK made the leap from contempt to identification.” A few days after the Baldwin confrontation, he told Ed Guthman that ‘if he had grown up a Negro, he would feel as strongly as the Baldwin group.’<sup>232</sup> He had come to the meeting with expectations of finding pragmatic answers, and instead came away with the reality that his efforts, and for that matter the efforts of his brother’s administration, had simply not been enough.

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<sup>231</sup> William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 214

<sup>232</sup> Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 812.

## CHAPTER 7 THE SHIFT: THE NEW APPROACH TO FEDERAL INTERVENTION

### Federal Employment and the Catalyst

Although he was aggravated with the course that the meeting had taken, Robert Kennedy was able to channel that anger into recognition of the state of frustration that blacks felt. As friend Jack Newfield would observe, “[Robert’s] emotions made him open and vulnerable to the immediate moment. Kennedy was at his best whenever he suspended his reason and trusted his instincts.”<sup>233</sup> Robert’s personality afforded him the opportunity to learn from moments in which he was able to bear witness to human suffering and pain. Author Peter Maas echoed this assessment, saying, “Bob didn’t change except through experience.”<sup>234</sup> While John was a consummate and controlled politician, Robert exuded emotion, a trait that left him vulnerable to personal experience. President Kennedy, for example, became conscious of the horrors of poverty by reading Michael Harrington’s *The Other America*.<sup>235</sup> RFK came to that same understanding only after touring ghettos and meeting children and families who were starving and burdened by their social condition. Newfield writes that “For Robert Kennedy, the sight of one hungry black child had a greater impact than a million words or statistics.”<sup>236</sup> A similar experience presented itself during the Baldwin meeting. Standing face to face with Jerome

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<sup>233</sup> Newfield, *RFK: A Memoir*, 41.

<sup>234</sup> *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*, 103.

<sup>235</sup> Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 1010.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 34; *The Kennedys*. Written and Directed by Phillip Whitehead, DVD. Interview with Marian Edelman. This sentiment is echoed by Edelman, who described a trip to the Mississippi Delta region that RFK took in 1967. Edelman says “He walked in and saw, in a dark back room, a child that was obviously malnourished, with a bloated stomach, that was not very responsive, that was-- and he stooped down and began to try to get the child to respond-- touching and feeling and talking to the child. The child did not respond. He was obviously deeply moved and deeply outraged and conveyed that when he walked back out again into the light of the day.”

Smith, listening to the pain and desperation in the Freedom Rider's voice, Robert began to make the connection between the despair of African-Americans and the lack of substantive action on the part of the federal government. Baldwin would later comment that "[Smith] became the focal point. I think that threw Kennedy. That boy, after all, in some sense, represented to everybody in that room our hope. Our honor. Our dignity. But, above all, our hope."<sup>237</sup>

The Baldwin meeting provided the perfect forum for which RFK's emotions could supersede any calculated political thought. He was fueled by emotion and experience, and the gathering in New York allowed him the chance to examine his own understanding of civil rights and the human element of black suffering that he had at times overlooked during the first years of his brother's presidency. Evan Thomas writes that the attorney general was able to transform "his rage into outrage."<sup>238</sup> He took the anger he felt as a result of the meeting and began to focus on the federal government's token policy of hiring African-Americans.

Five days after the meeting, Robert stormed into a meeting of the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, which was chaired by Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson. He had just read a report that analyzed minority employment of federal employees in Birmingham. Out of a possible two thousand jobs, only fifteen of them were held by African-Americans. The figure represented one percent of federal employees in a city whose black population consisted of thirty-seven percent of the overall population. RFK was infuriated by the report, and became livid when Burke Marshal, who had just returned from the city, told him "I'd gone into every federal office...and you couldn't even find a Negro sweeping the floor." The attorney general openly berated Johnson, challenging his committee's reports that showed hundred percent

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<sup>237</sup> *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*, 122.

<sup>238</sup> Thomas, *Robert Kennedy*, 245.

improvements in minority workforces, calling them “phony statistics.”<sup>239</sup> Kennedy demanded that the federal government begin reanalyzing their minority hiring practices.

What the Baldwin meeting demonstrated to RFK was that the level of animosity within the black community was not a regional problem, but one that was endemic to every part of the country, and one that penetrated all classes of African-Americans. The reality of the problem of black equality, and the sluggishness for which the Kennedy administration had taken in dealing with legislation was creating an even greater sense of frustration from an expectant and hopeful black community that was reaching their breaking point. Two weeks after the Baldwin meeting, the *Afro-American* wrote:

Baldwin and Co. are correct in their conclusion that the Kennedys had not accurately judged the intensity of feeling about discrimination among our people or their burning determination to be free...Now they know we are sick of gradualism, of the denial of human dignity, of segregation, of second-class citizenship and that we fully intend to do something about it in both the North and the South.<sup>240</sup>

The change in Robert Kennedy’s rhetoric was apparent in his speeches and meetings in the weeks following the Baldwin meeting. On a flight to North Carolina just days after the encounter, RFK mentioned to Burke Marshall that the time had come to create true civil rights legislation that would go further than any of its predecessors by getting to the “heart of the matter” and killing Jim Crow segregation.<sup>241</sup> In his commencement address at Trinity College on June 2, Kennedy reflected on the moral crisis that faced the nation when he told the audience, “The current crisis in civil rights for example...is an intensely human problem...Our answer to the extremists must be to move quickly in establishing those reforms which all of us know in our

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<sup>239</sup> Jeff Shesol, *Mutual Contempt: Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy, and the Feud That Defined a Decade* (New York: Norton, 1997), 84-85.

<sup>240</sup> *Afro-American*, 8 June 1963, 4.

<sup>241</sup> Guthman, *In His Own Words*. 172.

hearts, should have been made long ago.”<sup>242</sup> That same week, the attorney general met with a delegation of Democratic senators and told them bluntly:

The nation is in the midst of a civil rights crisis not only in the South but in the North. This is a terribly dangerous situation. These people are looking to the Federal government for the protection of their rights and often there is nothing we can do until we must send in troops to preserve order... We will need new legislation.<sup>243</sup>

The final decision to go forth with civil rights legislation was finalized by the president following a meeting on June 1 in the Oval Office with his closest advisers, which included RFK, Burke Marshall, JFK, Ted Sorensen, and Lyndon B. Johnson.<sup>244</sup> Kennedy presented the question to the group, “What’s going to be the result if we don’t have any further legislation?” To which Marshall cut in, “I don’t think we really have an alternative. You couldn’t go on and not have legislation...it’s absolutely essential that you have legislation.” Historian Nick Bryant writes, “By the end of the meeting, Kennedy had crossed the Rubicon. He knew that further equivocation could engender further violence.”<sup>245</sup> The Kennedy administration had finally committed itself to civil rights legislation, and now needed to find an appropriate opportunity that would allow them to enact such a bold initiative.

Robert Kennedy was aware that in order for his brother to propose a comprehensive civil rights bill, he would need a catalyst that would ease the acceptance and willingness to pass such legislation in both Congress and in the minds of the populace. The images of Bull Connor’s brutality towards the children in Birmingham had shocked and horrified the nation, and the

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<sup>242</sup> *Rights For Americans: The Speeches of Robert F. Kennedy*, 156.

<sup>243</sup> *Newsweek*, 10 June 1963, 27.

<sup>244</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson was invited to the meeting as a result of a speech given on May 30 at the Memorial Day commemoration of Gettysburg. The speech was given a day after the confrontation with RFK during the CEOO meeting. In the speech, Johnson spelled out the moral case for civil rights saying, “Our nation found its soul in honor on these fields of Gettysburg one hundred years ago, we must not lose that soul in dishonor now on the fields of hate.”

<sup>245</sup> Bryant, *The Bystander*, 407.

Kennedys knew that they would need a symbol which would confirm the moral clarity that had been left in the wake of the fire hoses and police dogs. The catalyst they were looking for presented itself in the form of Alabama Governor George Wallace's public declaration to bar all black students from enrolling at the University of Alabama.<sup>246</sup>

Upon his election to the governorship, Wallace had defiantly proclaimed that he would ensure that segregation would continue in the South. He was given the opportunity to back up his words when two black students, Vivian Malone and James Hood, gained admission to the University of Alabama. Disregarding a federal court order that banned interference by state officials, Wallace vowed to block the entrance to the registrar's office.<sup>247</sup> Robert Kennedy had been preparing for Wallace's defiance for months in advance. Earlier that year, he had personally gone to Alabama and met with the governor. However, the meeting had been a total failure, as Wallace openly recorded the conversation between the two men in hopes of tricking the attorney general into saying something disparaging about the Alabama state government.<sup>248</sup>

Hoping to avoid a similar situation of bloodshed that had been seen in Oxford, the White House took the initiative by negotiating with local Alabama entrepreneurs who had business connections with the governor, and who had no intention of having mob violence run rampant in their streets. By choosing to attack his business connections, the Kennedys hoped to put enough economic pressure on Wallace to force him to abandon his proposed public defiance.<sup>249</sup> In order to ensure that state troops could not be used by the governor, JFK federalized the Alabama National Guard. It was exactly the kind of situation both the Kennedy brothers were comfortable

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<sup>246</sup> Guthman, *In His Own Words*, 199.

<sup>247</sup> *New York Times*, 10 June 1963, 1.

<sup>248</sup> *U.S. News*, 6 May 1963, 6.

<sup>249</sup> Brauer, *Second Reconstruction*, 256.

with. They had strategically positioned themselves to be in control of the crisis before it had reached a breaking point, and in doing so had provided the perfect opportunity to introduce the country to the idea of civil rights legislation.

“I don’t think you can get by without it”

The night before Vivian Malone and James Hood were to enroll in the university, Robert discussed the subject of enacting the civil rights bill at a White House meeting, and advised his brother to go on national television and speak to the people about what that legislation would entail. When asked by several advisers whether he was willing to appear before the nation and speak on an issue that was so decisive, President Kennedy responded, “I don’t think so...” to which his brother interjected, “I think it would be helpful...I don't think you can get by now without saying-- having an address on television, at least during this period of time, giving some direction and having it in the hands of the President.”<sup>250</sup> RFK would later recall, “We were going to send up the legislation, and he [JFK] could talk about what we needed to accomplish...I think he pretty much made up his mind, after that conference, that he would speak.”<sup>251</sup>

President Kennedy rarely dealt firsthand with the problems of civil rights, relying instead on the judgment of his brother and his advisers. More than any other, though, JFK trusted first and foremost the opinion of his brother. Ignoring the advice to forego a television address by his closest aides, which included Ted Sorensen and Kenneth O’Donnell, the president decided that he would speak to the nation and capitalize on Wallace’s overt defiance. The lone voice of support came from the attorney general. Robert Kennedy understood more than any other

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<sup>250</sup> *The Kennedys*. Directed by Phillip Whitehead, DVD.

<sup>251</sup> Guthman, *In His Own Words*, 199.

member of the president's inner circle that if civil rights legislation was going to be able to make a significant impact, it would have to be unilaterally accepted by both the United States Congress as well as the general public. Garnering enough support within Congress would require savvy political maneuvering on the part of the administration; however the public's willingness to accept proposed legislation would require a deeper moralistic appeal to the social consciousness of the populace. Anything less than dual support from the government and the public would subject the civil rights bill to a similar fate of previous legislation, in which watered down legislation resulted in little more than token gains. For this reason, the attorney general was steadfast in his belief that it was necessary for his brother to not only speak to the country about the proposals he wanted to make for black civil rights, but to do so with rhetoric that would make an appeal to the moral consciousness of the country. RFK's suggestion was enough for the president to recognize that it was the right choice to make. As Marshall would later reflect:

When President Kennedy sent up that [civil rights] bill every single person who spoke about it in the White House—every one of them—was against President Kennedy sending up that bill; against his speech in June; against making it a moral issue... The conclusive voice within the government at that time, there's no question about it at all, that Robert Kennedy was the one. He urged it, he felt it, he understood it. And he prevailed. I don't think there was anybody in the Cabinet—except the President himself—who felt that way on these issues, and the President got it from his brother.<sup>252</sup>

The first draft of the civil rights legislation speech, written by Ted Sorensen, reflected the ideas and concerns that RFK had been stressing to his brother. Although discarded for the final speech, a section of the initial draft focused squarely on the de facto segregation that was so prevalent in northern cities, saying, "Let no white Northerner delude himself for an instant with the notion that racial discrimination is chiefly a matter for Southern concern...the Northern Negro...must,

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<sup>252</sup> Navasky, *Kennedy Justice*, 99.

like his Southern brother, breathe the stifling air of oppression every day of his life.”<sup>253</sup> The draft portrayed the state of ghettos in which black tenants paid exorbitant rents, faced employment discrimination, and were forced to send their children to overcrowded and understaffed schools in which black youths were more likely to drop out and join their parents in the “seemingly endless treadmill of poverty and neglect and despair.”<sup>254</sup> The section that discussed the plight of northern blacks would be removed from the final draft of the speech in favor of a more universal approach to referencing de facto segregation, in which the president said, “This is not a sectional issue. Difficulties over segregation and discrimination exist in every city, in every State of the Union, producing in many cities a rising tide of discontent that threatens the public safety.”<sup>255</sup> However, it is worth noting that the initial draft of the most important civil rights speech given during the Kennedy presidency mirrored the views and observations of Robert Kennedy, demonstrating the importance and weight of the attorney general’s role as the administration’s civil rights point man at such a critical juncture.

The following day, with four hundred Army troops on alert at nearby Fort Benning, Justice Department officials carrying a cease and desist order from the president, and a federalized National Guardsmen escort, Malone and Hood arrived on the Tuscaloosa campus. Facing this overwhelming show of federal force, Wallace could do nothing more than read a defiant statement against integration and then step aside to allow both students to register.<sup>256</sup> That night, after watching a tape of Wallace’s declaration, the President heeded his brother’s advice and went on national television to speak to the country about the state of racial inequality

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<sup>253</sup> *Robert F. Kennedy Papers of the Attorney General*. Box 9. General Correspondence. June 11, 1963. Draft of Presidential Speech on Civil Rights.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>255</sup> *John F. Kennedy Public Papers of the President 1963*. June 11, 1963. pp. 468-471

<sup>256</sup> *New York Times*, 12 June 1963, 1.

that existed, and the urgent need to rectify a “moral crisis”. In the speech, half of which was done extemporaneously, JFK discussed the social contradiction that existed, saying:

We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it. And we cherish our freedom here at home. But are we to say to the world- and much more importantly to each other- that this is the land of the free, except for the Negroes; that we have no second-class citizens, except Negroes; that we have no class or caste ghettos, no master race, except with respect to Negroes. Now the time has come for this nation to fulfill its promise.<sup>257</sup>

The president evoked the principles in which the country had been established, saying, “This Nation was founded by men of many nations and backgrounds. It was founded on the principle that all men are created equal, and that the rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened.” Based on this idea alone, he continued, “It ought to be possible, in short, for every American to enjoy the privileges of being American without regard to his race or his color. In short, every American ought to have the right to be treated as he would wish to be treated.”<sup>258</sup> JFK concluded his address by commenting on the demonstrations that had been so prevalent during his presidency, saying, “We cannot say to 10 percent of the population that you can't have that right...that the only way that they are going to get their rights is to go into the streets and demonstrate. I think we owe them and we owe ourselves a better country than that.”<sup>259</sup>

John F. Kennedy proclaimed that the country faced a “moral crisis” that could no longer be ignored or kept at bay. In doing so, the president altered the course of federal intervention in the civil rights movement. For the first time since the implementation of segregation, the executive branch was able to firmly offer the black community the moral leadership that they

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<sup>257</sup> *John F. Kennedy Public Papers of the President 1963*. June 11, 1963. pp. 468-471

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

desired. The response to the speech by the black media and the black community throughout the nation was one of admiration and relief. The *Afro-American* proclaimed, “Kennedy’s impassioned plea for Congressional action to insure freedom and racial justice was unquestionably the greatest speech ever made by a Chief Executive. Profound, eloquent and moving.”<sup>260</sup>

For those who had been in attendance at the Baldwin meeting, there was a sense of satisfaction in the wake of the president’s address. To these participants, the urgency that they had hoped to portray to Robert F. Kennedy was reflected in the words of JFK’s speech. It proved to them that while on the surface RFK seemed to barely comprehend their grievances, in fact the attorney general had come away from the meeting with an emerging awareness that was clearly reflected in the president’s rhetoric. Dr. Kenneth Clark would later observe, “We left convinced that we had made no dent or impact on Bobby...but then Jack Kennedy gave that famous civil rights speech, which contained many of the same ideas. So our conclusion that we had made no dent at all was wrong.”<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> *Afro-American*, 22 June 1963, 4.

<sup>261</sup> *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*, 121.

## **CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION**

The Baldwin meeting played an integral role in the evolution of Robert F. Kennedy's understanding of the civil rights movement, and concordantly altered the Kennedy administrations approach to civil rights. As the point man for the administration's civil rights policy, the onus fell upon the attorney general to incorporate the heightened expectations of the black community that had been created during the campaign of 1960 and blend them with the responsibilities of his own office. Throughout the initial years of the presidency this proved to be a difficult task, one in which RFK consistently found himself towing the line between his own moral sense and the obligation he had to ensure that the laws of the land were upheld. It was a complex conundrum, one that was seemingly amplified by his failure to comprehend and relate to the frustration and urgency that was consistently demonstrated by black activists.

The Baldwin meeting therefore acted as a catalyst of change in which RFK was able to witness firsthand the resentment and raw emotion that he had yet to see directly from African-Americans. Until that point, the crises that had preceded the meeting had all been handled from afar, with the administration coordinating and implementing their strategy from the detached environment of Washington D.C. Throughout the Kennedy presidency, the administration consistently avoided direct confrontations with civil rights organizations. When meetings did take place between the Kennedys and civil rights leaders, they were defined by formalities and cautiously proposed ideas. Black activists were weary of the potential power and influence with which the president and his brother held through their political office, and thus were reluctant to push the White House out of fear that they may alienate them from their cause. The Baldwin

meeting provided the first forum in which black activists were able to bluntly portray their frustration and desperation face to face with a high ranking member of the administration. It was a message that reflected the growing animosity and urgency within the African-American community, and it was delivered in an unabashed way. For Robert Kennedy it was precisely the type of approach that was necessary in order to elicit change, a personal attack fueled by passion.

The events leading up to the Baldwin meeting in 1963 demonstrated that the Kennedy brothers, as a result of their upbringing and social status, were completely unprepared to step into a leadership role that would further the cause of black equality. Both John and Robert Kennedy had been raised in a world whose social sphere was separate from that of African-Americans. Through savvy political maneuvering, the brothers had been able to incorporate the issue of civil rights and adapt them for their own purposes. The rhetoric of the 1960 campaign stressing the need for moral leadership, coupled with the promise of racial equality had been enough to win the black vote. However, during the initial years of the presidency the exigency that was consistently demonstrated within the black community for immediate change was a concept that was too unfamiliar to the Kennedy brothers to be dealt with properly. They had neither the understanding of black inequality nor the unjust system of segregation that would allow them to effect positive and permanent change. Instead they chose to react rather than act, allowing activists and demonstrators to dictate the administration's civil rights policy.

The confrontation between Robert F. Kennedy and the Baldwin participants marked the beginning of a transition that would alter the attorney general's mindset towards civil rights. Activist John Lewis would later write about Robert Kennedy, "the man who had been reviled by

so many of us, including me, for his foot dragging...I came to respect enormously... he was willing to listen, and learn, and change.”<sup>262</sup> Harry Belafonte would mirror this sentiment:

In the process of these appeals we found in him an awakening to so many things that he had misunderstood and dismissed. It bothered him that he sat in such a position of enormous ignorance on the subject. Much to his credit his curiosity peaked more intensely to see what we were talking about and wanted him to do and that became his moral center...He listened, and as he listened the more and more he committed himself to our cause.<sup>263</sup>

RFK had seen firsthand the enmity that existed throughout the country within African-American communities. The impact of the Baldwin meeting was a definitive moment in which the realities of the state of the civil rights struggle became a part of his own political outlook, and helped play an integral factor in swaying his brother to take an active role in the creation of legislation. The legacy of inaction from the first three years of the Kennedy presidency came to an end as a result of the final decision by the president and his brother to create federal civil rights legislation.

The personal barriers defined by moralistic idealism and the desire to protect his brother and the public image of the presidency began to erode as RFK became exposed to the social reality of blacks living in the United States. The inability to comprehend the deeper issues that lay at the foundation of the system of segregation, clearly demonstrated by the mishandling of civil rights crises throughout the initial years of the Kennedy presidency, began to evolve into a greater understanding of black suffering that would help shape the federal government’s approach to civil rights in the ensuing years.

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<sup>262</sup> John Lewis, *Walking the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1998), 215.

<sup>263</sup> “The Life and Times of Robert F. Kennedy” *Bobby*, Written and directed by Emilio Estevez (The Weinstein Company, 2007). Interview with Harry Belafonte.

**APPENDIX A**

**PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY ADDRESS TO THE NATION CONCERNING CIVIL  
RIGHTS LEGISLATION  
THE WHITE HOUSE, WASHINGTON D.C  
JUNE 11, 1963**

Good evening, my fellow citizens,

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

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

I hope that every American, regardless of where he lives, will stop and examine his conscience about this and other related incidents. This Nation was founded by men of many nations and backgrounds. It was founded on the principle that all men are created equal, and that the rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated. If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public school available, if he cannot vote for the public

officials who represent him, if, in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place? Who among us would then be content with the counsels of patience and delay?

One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free. They are not yet freed from the bonds of injustice. They are not yet freed from social and economic oppression. And this Nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free.

We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it, and we cherish our freedom here at home, but are we to say to the world, and much more importantly, to each other that this is a land of the free except for the Negroes; that we have no second-class citizens except Negroes; that we have no class or cast system, no ghettos, no master race except with respect to Negroes?

Now the time has come for this Nation to fulfill its promise. The events in Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased the cries for equality that no city or State or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them.

The fires of frustration and discord are burning in every city, North and South, where legal remedies are not at hand. Redress is sought in the streets, in demonstrations, parades, and protests which create tensions and threaten violence and threaten lives.

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

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

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

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

But there are other necessary measures which only the Congress can provide, and they must be provided at this session. The old code of equity law, under which we live commands for every wrong a remedy, but in too many communities, in too many parts of the country, wrongs are inflicted on Negro citizens and there are no remedies at law. Unless the Congress acts, their only remedy is in the street.

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

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

I have recently met with scores of business leaders urging them to take voluntary action to end this discrimination and I have been encouraged by their response, and in the last 2 weeks

over 75 cities have seen progress made in desegregating these kinds of facilities. But many are unwilling to act alone, and for this reason, nationwide legislation is needed if we are to move this problem from the streets to the courts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

My fellow Americans, this is a problem which faces us all - in every city of the North as well as the South. Today there are Negroes unemployed, two or three times as many compared to whites, inadequate in education, moving into the large cities, unable to find work, young people particularly out of work without hope, denied equal rights, denied the opportunity to eat at a restaurant or lunch counter or go to a movie theater, denied the right to a decent education, denied almost today the right to attend a State university even though qualified. It seems to me that these are matters which concern us all, not merely Presidents or Congressmen or Governors, but every citizen of the United States.

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

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

Therefore, I am asking for your help in making it easier for us to move ahead and to provide the kind of equality of treatment which we would want ourselves; to give a chance for every child to be educated to the limit of his talents.

As I have said before, not every child has an equal talent or an equal ability or an equal motivation, but they should have the equal right to develop their talent and their ability and their motivation, to make something of themselves.

We have a right to expect that the Negro community will be responsible, will uphold the

law, but they have a right to expect that the law will be fair, that the Constitution will be color blind, as Justice Harlan said at the turn of the century.

This is what we are talking about and this is a matter which concerns this country and what it stands for, and in meeting it I ask the support of all our citizens.<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> *John F. Kennedy Public Papers of the President 1963*. June 11, 1963. pp. 468-471.

**APPENDIX B**

**EXCERPT FROM ROBERT F. KENNEDY'S SPEECH AT THE 175<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE RATIFICATION OF THE CONSTITUTION  
INDEPENDENCE HALL, PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA  
JUNE 21, 1963**

And what about *this* age? What about Americans we know now, at a time when the inadequate phrase “Civil Rights” has come to reflect an urgent nation-wide struggle for equality by ten and a half percent of our people whose skin is not white?

Clearly, and beyond any possible argument, the Constitution and its Amendments have set forth the basic particulars of “Civil Rights.” Negroes were freed from slavery under the Thirteenth Amendment, and granted the right to vote under the Fifteenth.

The time is long past when any sensible American could tolerate the denials of free voting rights to all races or the existence of “White Only” signs on public facilities—even by the narrowest interpretation, these things are unconstitutional.

And nine years ago the Supreme Court ruled that the old faulty dictum of “separate but equal” schooling for Negroes was unconstitutional too.

But we must now wait, as intelligent modern Americans in a changing society; must we now wait for the Supreme Court to spell out each new particularity of civil rights to us? Whatever color we are, let us hope not.

Now as always, when the Constitution is too narrowly interpreted on a word-for-word basis, it can too easily become a crutch for reaction, a rationalization, and excuse for maintaining the status quo.

This is the very thing that Jefferson feared, so long ago, when he urged us not to regard the wording of a document with “sanctimonious reverence.”

My point is that the Constitution was never meant to specify every detail, every individual right in the relations of man to man in this country.

It was intended to set forth certain duties of government and certain restrictions on government—nowhere in its wording does it pretend to tell us, as individual citizens, how to treat our neighbors.

But what Woodrow Wilson called the *spirit* of the Constitution does, and has always done just that. Interspersed throughout the Constitution and its amendments—written in between the lines, if you will—are the basic moral principles of democratic justice by which we all try to live.

Surely we don’t need a new Court decision to tell us that Negro is entitled to decent housing, and that his right to have such housing must not be denied or abridged because of his color.

Surely we don’t need a new Court ruling to insure the Negro equal opportunities in employment, or equal opportunities to advance from unskilled into skilled and responsible jobs.

These are moral issues, not legal ones, and their constitutionality is a matter of common sense.

Not in its words alone but in what these words imply, in the underlying truths it teaches—that is how the Constitution has always served us as an inspiration and a guide.

And today that is how it points the way clearly to what thinking Americans have known all along: that racial discrimination is not worthy of us; that the stifling air of prejudice is not fit to be breathed by the people of a nation that takes pride in calling itself free.

The shameful scenes of riot and bloodshed in Oxford, Mississippi, last Fall, and in Birmingham, Alabama this Spring, were only symptoms of the trouble—outward manifestations of an inner disease. And the infection is by no means localized.

Let no white northerner delude himself that discrimination is chiefly a matter of southern concern. It may be true that a northern Negro is free to register at a Hilton hotel, but how much pride or pleasure can he take in this when he can't buy three meals a day for his children?

In Detroit, where Negroes account for twenty percent of the population, they account for sixty percent of the unemployed. In Chicago, one out of every four Negroes with families to support is out of work. And the same frustrating, demoralizing facts are to be found in the Negro ghettos of every other northern city.

This is a national crisis, and it is immediate. The federal government is doing and will continue to do its part. Indeed, in the past two and a half years more progress has been made in securing equal rights for all Americans—through executive action, legislation, litigation, persuasion and private initiative—than in any comparable period of our history. Yet a great deal more needs to be done.

But in questions of public morality, Federal action alone is not enough. In an era of great social flux and upheaval, it would be idle for anyone to suppose that real enlightenment can be brought about by governmental edict.

The surface eruptions of an internal disease cannot be cured with bandages. The only way to cure a disease is to attack it at the source; and the sources of this disease, this malignancy that has been allowed to grow within the tissue of our national life, are as minute and various as the cells in any living body.

They are to be found throughout the texture of our society, wherever a meeting takes place between persons of light and dark skin.

That is where the treatment must begin. There must be active and continued work toward interracial understanding at all levels—in states, in cities, in individual neighborhoods within cities, in towns and hamlets and in homes across the length and breadth of this nation.

Leadership must be taken at every level—by clergymen, by educators, by civil authorities, by newspapers, by businessmen and by labor unions. But above all, I believe that the moral health of this country depends on individual citizens, white and Negro, who are able to use their minds, able to see, able to act truthfully in a time of evolutionary change.

For too many years the Negro have been asked to “be patient,” and advised that we must all “move slowly in adjusting civil rights to social custom.”

The day is long gone when those phrases had any validity—if indeed they ever did.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> *Rights For Americans: The Speeches of Robert F. Kennedy*, 166-168.

**APPENDIX C**

**TIMELINE OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT 1910-1968**

## The Civil Rights Movement 1910-1968

- 1910 - Founding of NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People)
- 1917 - John Fitzgerald Kennedy is born.
- 1917-1935 - Harlem Renaissance
- 1923 - *Moore vs. Dempsey*
- 1925 - Robert Francis Kennedy is born.
- 1929 - Martin Luther King, Jr. is born.
- 1931 - The Scottsboro Case
- 1942 - Founding of CORE (Congress of Racial Equality)
- 1944 - *Smith vs. Allright*
- 1946 - *Morgan vs. Virginia*
- 1947 - “Journey of Reconciliation”, predecessor to the 1961 CORE Freedom Rides  
- Jackie Robinson plays for the Brooklyn Dodgers, breaking the color barrier in Major League Baseball.
- 1951 - NAACP activist Harry T. Moore is assassinated.
- 1952 - John F. Kennedy wins election to the Senate.
- 1954 - *Brown v. Board of Education*.
- 1955 - (August) Emmet Till is brutally murdered in Mississippi.  
- (December) Montgomery bus boycott led by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- 1957 - Eisenhower sends troops to Little Rock, Arkansas.  
- King helps establish SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference)
- 1960 - (February) Greensboro, North Carolina Sit-Ins begin

- (April) Founding of SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee)
  - (October) John F. Kennedy phone call to Coretta Scott King.
  - (November) John F. Kennedy is elected president.
- 1961
- (May) CORE Freedom Rides begin in the South.
- 1962
- (October) Centennial Anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.
  - (October) John F. Kennedy sends troops to University of Mississippi to enforce integration.
- 1963
- (Spring) Birmingham Marches led by King and Fred Shuttlesworth.
  - (May 24) Robert F. Kennedy and Burke Marshall meet with the Baldwin group in New York City.
  - (June 11) Integration of the University of Alabama.
  - (June 11) John F. Kennedy makes “Moral Crisis” speech to the American public, committing the federal government to the creation of comprehensive civil rights legislation.
  - (August 28) March on Washington.
  - (September) Birmingham Church Bombing.
  - (November) John F. Kennedy assassinated in Dallas, Texas.
  - (November) Lyndon B. Johnson sworn in as president.
- 1964
- (July) Civil Rights Act of 1964.
- 1965
- (March) Selma: voting rights march to Montgomery.
  - Voting Rights Act of 1965.
  - (August) Riots in Watts, California.
  - Malcolm X assassinated in New York City.
  - (Summer) Riots in Chicago and Cleveland
  - Stokely Carmichael becomes head of SNCC and creates a separatist philosophy of black power, ousts whites from the organization.
  - Black Panther party founded.
  - (Summer) Riots in Detroit, Michigan. U.S. military is brought in to quell the violence, utilizing tanks and the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne.
- 1968
- (April) Martin Luther King, Jr. assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.
  - (June) Robert Kennedy assassinated in Los Angeles, California.

**APPENDIX D**

**EXCERPT FROM *NEWSWEEK*, JUNE 3 1963**

## “Kennedy and Baldwin: The Gulf”

There was so much James Baldwin wanted to tell Robert F. Kennedy. He wanted to talk about the Negro kid in San Francisco who told him bitterly, “I’ve got no country, I’ve got no flag.” About the “cat in the Harlem barber shop” who listens to Black Muslim Malcolm X rather than the moderate Martin Luther King, Jr. because the extremist “articulates the pain and despair best.” About the jobless Negro in Detroit, the Negro children living in “a kind of tinderbox” in Chicago, the Negro anywhere who “feels he is a burden, inferior, wont listen any longer, no longer believes a word you say...”

Perhaps there was just too much to tell. Baldwin, the sad-eyed Negro essayist, novelist, and angry young man, got his chance to deliver the message at two remarkable meetings with the Attorney General last week. But the confrontation was, by one participant’s account, “a gigantic flop.”

Kennedy himself had initiated the talks. As the Administration’s No. 1 civil-rights enforcer, he was worried about rising racial tensions, North and South. Hungry for new ideas, he invited Baldwin down to his Hickory Hill estate at McLean, Va., for a preliminary breakfast. “Look, Jim,” he said, “get some of your best people together in New York and I’ll come up and we’ll talk this whole thing over.”

Pleased, Baldwin rounded up a mixed dozen, short on civil-rights organization men and long on the lively arts (Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne, playwright Lorraine Hansberry, white actor Rip Torn, and Baldwin’s brother David, an actor). His aim: “As wide and even as rowdy a range of opinion as possible.” Kennedy and his civil-rights chief, Burke Marshall slipped into town, and the group sat down in Joseph Kennedy’s Central Park South apartment for two and a half hours of informal talk.

But, as the Negroes saw it, they never bridged what Baldwin called the “gulf” between them—between Harlem and McLean. For one thing, the Negroes wanted to talk about race troubles in the North, about the rising tensions over *de facto* segregation in the black ghettos. But Kennedy, so they said, steered the talk south to Birmingham, Mississippi, “the same old stuff.”...Voices and tempers flared...

That was precisely the message the Negroes wanted to get across—a message of anger, of quickening urgency, of deepening alienation. Baldwin said, “No one can afford to regard this as a failure... We’ve finally opened up a dialogue. No one can expect that dialogue to be polite, but we’ve started.” But plainly he had found the gulf too wide. “He just didn’t get the point,” Baldwin said. “He was naïve, he doesn’t know pain. He jus doesn’t know.”<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> *Newsweek*, June 3 1963, 19.

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