

Robert F. Kennedy

A Biographical Account of Civil Rights Activities

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Robert F. Kennedy, speaking as a public figure, expressed the administration's commitment to civil rights during a 1961 speech at the University of Georgia Law School:

“ We will not stand by or be aloof. We will move. I happen to believe that the 1954 Supreme Court school desegregation decision was right. But my belief does not matter. It is the law. Some of you may believe the decision was wrong. That does not matter. It is the law. ”

Kennedy remained committed to civil rights enforcement to such a degree that he commented, in 1962, that it seemed to envelop almost every area of his public and private life—from prosecuting corrupt southern electoral officials to answering late night calls from Coretta Scott King concerning the imprisonment of her husband for demonstrations in Alabama. During his tenure as Attorney General, he undertook the most energetic and persistent desegregation of the administration that Capitol Hill had ever experienced. He demanded that every area of government begin recruiting realistic levels of black and other ethnic workers, going so far as to criticize Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson for his failure to desegregate his own office staff.

Although it has become commonplace to assert the phrase "The Kennedy Administration" or even "President Kennedy" when discussing the legislative and executive support of the civil rights movement, between 1960 and 1963, a great many of the initiatives that occurred during President Kennedy's tenure were as a result of the passion and determination of an emboldened Robert Kennedy, who through his rapid education in the realities of Southern racism, underwent a thorough conversion of purpose as Attorney General. Asked in an interview in May 1962, "What do you see as the big problem ahead for you, is it Crime or Internal Security?" Robert Kennedy replied, "Civil Rights." The President came to share his brother's sense of urgency on the matters at hand to such an extent that it was at the Attorney General's insistence that he made his famous address to the nation.

During the attack and burning, by a vast white mob, of the First Baptist Church in Montgomery Alabama, at which Martin Luther King, Jr. was in attendance with protesters, the Attorney General telephoned King to ask his assurance that they would not leave the building until the U.S. Marshals and National Guard had secured the area. King proceeded to berate Kennedy for "allowing the situation to continue". King later publicly thanked Robert Kennedy for his commanding of the force dispatched to break up an attack that might otherwise have ended King's life. The relationship between the two men was to undergo great change over the years that they would know each other—from a position of mutual suspicion to one of shared aspirations. For King,

Robert Kennedy initially represented the "softly softly" approach that in former years had disabled the movement of blacks against oppression in the U.S. For Robert Kennedy, King initially represented what was then considered the unrealistic militancy that many in the white-liberal camp had regarded as the cause of so little governmental progress.

In September 1962, he sent U.S. Marshals and troops to Oxford, Mississippi, to enforce a federal court order admitting the first African American student, James Meredith, to the University of Mississippi. Riots ensued during the period of Meredith's admittance, which resulted in hundreds of injuries and two deaths. Yet Kennedy remained adamant concerning the rights of black students to enjoy the benefits of all levels of the educational system. The Office of Civil Rights also hired its first African-American lawyer and began to work cautiously with leaders of the civil rights movement. Robert Kennedy saw voting as the key to racial justice, and collaborated with Presidents Kennedy and Johnson to create the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, which helped bring an end to Jim Crow laws.

He was to maintain his commitment to racial equality into his own presidential campaign, extending his firm sense of social justice to all areas of national life and into matters of foreign and economic policy. During a speech at Ball State University, Kennedy questioned the student body on what kind of life America wished for herself; whether privileged Americans had earned the great luxury they enjoyed and whether such Americans had an obligation to those, in U.S. society and across the world, who had so little by comparison. It has been argued that although this speech has been largely overlooked and ignored, due to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr, it was one of most powerful and heartfelt speeches Kennedy delivered.

After the assassination of President Kennedy, Robert Kennedy undertook a 1966 tour of South Africa in which he championed the cause of the anti-Apartheid movement. The tour was greeted with international praise at a time when few politicians dared to entangle themselves in the politics of South Africa. Kennedy spoke out against the oppression of the native population and was welcomed by the black population as though a visiting head of state. In an interview with Look Magazine he had this to say:

“ At the University of Natal in Durban, I was told the church to which most of the white population belongs teaches apartheid as a moral necessity. A questioner declared that few churches allow black Africans to pray with the white because the Bible says that is the way it should be, because God created Negroes to serve. 'But suppose God is black', I replied. 'What if we go to Heaven and we, all our lives, have treated the Negro as an inferior, and God is there, and we look up and He is not white? What then is our response?' There was no answer. Only silence.”