

“Let the Word Go Forth”:
John F. Kennedy’s Presidential Rhetoric
on Civil Rights during
the South’s Second Reconstruction

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I

Beginning with Franklin D. Roosevelt, every subsequent president of the United States has confronted civil rights issues during his tenure as the nation’s chief executive. All of them, with varying degrees, have been compelled to face volatile racial incidents and to deal with the accompanying public scrutiny and demands to address America’s racial problems. Indeed, modern presidents since the Second World War have become one of the major focal points for civil rights struggles in the nation. And in these respects, John F. Kennedy was no exception.

Since his untimely death on November 22, 1963, the historiography of President Kennedy and his administration has essentially manifested two quite contradictory interpretations. Both published in 1965, two early biographies of Kennedy—Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.’s *A Thousand Days* and Theodore C. Sorensen’s *Kennedy*—were penned by those who occupied the inner circle of the Kennedy administration, knew the president intimately, and held him in high esteem and reverence. For a while

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and at least for the rest of the 1960s, these two books solidified the favorable image of President Kennedy, projecting him as an able and promising chief executive who could have done much more for the good of the country.¹

The following decade of the 1970s, however, witnessed the emergence of a parade of revisionist appraisals of the Kennedy presidency—Henry Fairlee’s *The Kennedy Promise* (1973) and Lewis J. Paper’s *The Promise and the Performance* (1975) to name just a few. Though the specific subjects and the focuses of interest studied and pursued by them differed, those who found themselves in the “revisionist camp” generally agreed on one important point—that Kennedy failed to move a reluctant Congress to materialize his advocated policies.²

The revisionist trend, claiming that many of Kennedy’s “promises” were not kept, neither abated nor was abandoned in the 1980s. Having studied the civil rights, education, housing, and social welfare policies under the Kennedy administration, Alan Shank, in his *Presidential Policy Leadership* (1980), concluded that the president’s “overall performance . . . can only be rated as disappointing,” and that Kennedy failed to take full advantage of his presidential powers. A similar conclusion was offered by Herbert S. Parmet’s *JFK* (1983), where the author even asserted that Kennedy had simply “capitulated to Congress.”³

To refute these protracted revisionist interpretations depicting Kennedy as a mediocre president, many of whose domestic policies were dismal failures, the political scientist Irving Bernstein came out with his counter-revisionist work in 1991. Giving special attention to the progress made under the Kennedy administration in the fields of civil rights, education, unemployment, Medicare, and the Peace Corps, Bernstein’s *Promises Kept* contended that many of Kennedy’s campaign promises were in fact on their way to achievement. “The naked conclusion is,” Bernstein maintained, “that [Kennedy] was a very successful” chief executive, and that the revisionists were all “dead wrong.”⁴

To be sure, Bernstein’s excoriation of the revisionists did not deter them from continuing to voice critical appraisals of the Kennedy presidency. While admitting that Kennedy was a “gifted” politician who had to react to “events he often neither foresaw nor understood,” Richard Reeves, for instance, offered his interpretation in *President Kennedy* (1993) that the president “never made a decision until he had to, and then invariably he chose the most moderate of available options.”⁵

While the Kennedy historiography seemed to be making an eternal interpretive circulation—from the traditional interpretation to the revisionist one and then to the counter-revisionist appraisals (thus virtually back to the traditional one)—in the scholars’ task of deciphering how effective the Kennedy presidency really was in carrying out his domestic agenda, a few welcome and important additions were made to the historiography in the early 2000s. Though it did not deal specifically with the Kennedy administration only, Mary L. Dudziak’s *Cold War Civil Rights* (2001) shed a provocative light on the impact that the Cold War had on America’s civil rights reform in the mid-twentieth century. Dudziak’s work was soon followed and reinforced by an equally persuasive study accomplished by Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line* (2001), and by Brenda G. Plummer’s edited work, *Window on Freedom* (2003).⁶

As Dudziak, Borstelmann, and Plummer all suggested, those presidents who occupied the White House during the Cold War were constantly reminded of and agonized over the vulnerable fact that while preaching freedom and democracy in its international affairs, the United States did not practice them at home, notably in its southern states. Under the Kennedy administration, the nation’s struggles against the Soviet Union and its Communist bloc for the allegiance of nonwhite countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East kept intensifying. As the survival of white supremacy in the United States became all the more discernible in the eyes of the world, the nation’s diplomatic concern with foreign opinion as well as international pressures both constrained and enhanced America’s civil rights reform.

Also in the early 2000s, the Kennedy historiography began to include some theretofore relatively unattended aspects of the Kennedy administration. Among them was an examination of the role of rhetoric in Kennedy’s presidential leadership and policy making. As in the case of Dudziak’s work, though it was not intended to be a study exclusively on the Kennedy presidency, the communication professor Garth E. Pauley’s *The Modern Presidency and Civil Rights* (2001) abundantly revealed the intriguing world of Kennedy’s presidential rhetoric.⁷

In this paper, which is indebted to and builds upon the Kennedy historiography, I interpret President Kennedy’s civil rights rhetoric and place it in the historical context where Kennedy endeavored to lead the nation in the early 1960s. By examining both the limitations and potential

that Kennedy's presidential rhetoric revealed in confronting the nation's race issues, I will trace the eventful journey of his slow but maturing understanding of civil rights and his administration's cautious but advancing policy in the same field. Obviously, this article is not the first to advance the notion that President Kennedy was eventually, in the main, driven to civil rights legislation by a series of rapid-fire incidents on the civil rights front. It is certainly true that those events, as well as the Cold War restraints and his uneasy relationship with Congress, dictated Kennedy's course of action. But when he finally realized that the problem of civil rights was not regional and self-confining but was national and all-encompassing, Kennedy strove to make the best use of his oratorical skills in the form of presidential rhetoric—to inspire black Americans, to define and redefine executive and, in a larger sense, federal power, and to educate the general public and, probably most importantly, himself.

II

By the dawn of the 1960s, issues involving public school desegregation generated by the United States Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling and the ever-intensifying civil rights movement in the South, as well as white southerners' recalcitrant resistance and sometimes violent reactions to the movement, had already created some major constitutional crises. In September 1957, the first dramatic confrontation between a southern state and the federal government over school desegregation occurred in Little Rock, Arkansas. Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower, ever since the Supreme Court announced its *Brown* decision, had assumed an evasive and at best, an ambivalent attitude toward civil rights issues in general and federally initiated school desegregation in particular. But in the end, to protect the constitutional rights of nine courageous black students, Eisenhower was compelled to federalize almost ten thousand men and women of the Arkansas National Guard and to dispatch some twelve hundred troops of the United States Army to Little Rock.⁸

Having done that, the president now needed to explain his course of action to the American people on nationwide television. In addressing the nation on September 24, 1957, Eisenhower based the vindication of his action on two major mainstays—a theme of “law and order” and what Dudziak has termed the “Cold War imperative”—both of which would

later become the pillars of Kennedy’s discourse on civil rights during his first two years as president. Unless the president took affirmative action to prevent violence and restore peace and order in Little Rock, Eisenhower explained, “anarchy would result.” Rather than confronting the Little Rock incident squarely as a national moral crisis, the president anchored his argument on the “law and order” theme and his constitutional duty. “Mob rule,” he continued, “cannot be allowed to override the decisions of the courts.” And along with this “law and order” theme came the Cold War imperative. Devoting almost the entire last page of his four-page-long address to it, Eisenhower reminded the American people of the “tremendous disservice” and the “harm” that was being done to the “prestige and influence” of the United States in world affairs. “Our enemies are gloating over this incident and using it everywhere to misrepresent our nation,” he cautioned. Finally, in an attempt not to incite white southerners to further rebellion, the president appealed to their sense of decency. “The decision of the Supreme Court . . . affects the South more seriously than it does other sections of the country,” Eisenhower tried to appease the white South, “[but] from intimate personal knowledge, I know that the overwhelming majority of the people in the South . . . are of good will, united in their efforts to preserve and respect the law even when they disagree with it.”⁹

In the end, Eisenhower’s “intimate personal knowledge” of the white South was proven to be wrong. The day after the president’s address, the *Jackson Daily News* in Mississippi ran the shortest editorial that ever appeared on its front page: “TO THE PRESIDENT: (an editorial) NUTS!” Meanwhile, an anonymous white Arkansan, who identified himself simply as “A Patriot,” composed a poem entitled “The Battle between Ike and Faubus.” After denouncing President Eisenhower as a race mixer in Little Rock and revering Arkansas Governor Orval E. Faubus who had stood tall to “uphold the rights of our dear ‘southland,’” the poem ended with the following verses: “Old Ike had won and felt mighty nippy. But God help their souls when they try ‘MISSISSIPPI.’” And to be sure, the nation’s civil rights leaders were equally unhappy. Roy Wilkins, executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), was one of them. “If he [Eisenhower] had fought World War II the way he fought for civil rights,” Wilkins blasted the president, “we would all be speaking German today.”¹⁰

The trilogy revealed in Eisenhower’s address on the situation in Little

Rock—the “law and order” theme, the Cold War imperative, and the appeasement of the South with an appeal to white southerners’ sense of decency and honor—was eventually inherited by Kennedy in dealing with the South’s Second Reconstruction. As strange as it may seem, however, these three themes espoused by both Eisenhower and Kennedy were also adopted, used, and abused by the white South in a completely different fashion. In order to defend their social, political, and economic status and privilege, all of which were inextricably connected with race and caste in southern societies, white leaders often appealed to “law and order.” While portraying civil rights workers and demonstrators as troublemakers, instigators, and lawbreakers, white southerners generally regarded those who were committed to the movement as grave violators and usurpers of local racial autonomy. Southern white leaders also based their defense of racial segregation on their self-proclaimed decency and honor—a sense of honor stemming from picturing themselves as noble paternalists who, in reality, degraded their fellow black southerners to second-class citizens or less. In addition, the white South had its own Cold War imperative as well. Many politicians in the region blindly resorted to the assertion that black southerners’ quests for social justice and simple human dignity were nothing more than a foreign enterprise—the “worldwide Socialistic and Communistic conspiracy”—both directed and dominated by what they perceived as despicable outside agitators and race-mixers and worse, outright Communists and subversives.¹¹

III

In 1960, when Kennedy campaigned for the presidency, he ran on a fairly strong civil rights platform. As he launched his campaign for the White House, the Democratic hopeful talked about his image of the presidency at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on January 14. Kennedy sought to inspire the gathered audience, telling them that as the nation entered a new decade of “the challenging revolutionary sixties,” the American presidency would “demand more than ringing manifestoes issued from the rear of the battle.” It would be vital for the next president, he went on, to “place himself in the very thick of the fight . . . [and to] care passionately about the fate of the people he leads.” As he did so when he accepted the National Democratic Party’s nomination for presidency in Los Angeles on July 15, Kennedy also frequently criticized Eisenhower’s handling of the Little Rock crisis, claiming that black

Americans’ demand to end racial injustice was “strained . . . by timid executive leadership.” Meanwhile, in his second televised debate with the vice president and Republican hopeful, Richard M. Nixon, on October 7, Kennedy emphasized that the future president “must establish a moral tone and moral leadership” to guarantee the concept of equality before the law. To be sure, his remarks on “moral leadership” were immediately drawn into a familiar theme of the Cold War imperative. Equating the United States with a “goldfish bowl,” Kennedy concluded: “We are a goldfish bowl before the world. We have to practice what we preach. We set a very high standard for ourselves.”¹²

Be that as it may, Kennedy’s eloquent and often acclaimed inaugural address on January 20, 1961—a “familiar paeon to Cold War freedom,” to borrow the words of the historian Eric Foner—made no reference to black southerners’ struggles at home. “Let the word go forth from this time and place,” the new president inspired the American people, “that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans . . . [who are] unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights . . . to which we are committed today at home and around the world.” There, Kennedy spoke about freedom and human rights in a broad sense. But his focus was on international affairs, and he did not mention anything whatsoever about the nation’s internal civil rights. Once he occupied the White House, Kennedy sought to avoid confronting civil rights issues for as much and as long as he could. At the March 8, 1961, news conference, President Kennedy was pressed by a reporter for a clarification of his position on civil rights. “When I feel that there is a necessity for a congressional action, with a chance of getting that congressional action,” Kennedy replied passively, “then I will recommend it to the Congress.” The president, in the words of his two close advisors—Schlesinger and Sorensen—was “abstractly” against racial discrimination, but that understanding was “an academic judgment” rather than a deeply rooted personal conviction. “He considered [racial discrimination] irrational,” Harris Wofford, special assistant to the president on civil rights, concurred, “[but] [i]t was alien to most of his experience.” After all, there was little in Kennedy’s own world and experience to create a passion about civil rights and thus to ignite significant social changes in the nation’s race relations.¹³

In addition, the president, as well as his younger brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, did not regard themselves as moralistic idealists. Rather, they considered themselves as cool-headed pragmatists,

recognizing in what areas and to what extent they could possibly carry out their administrative agenda, particularly those related to domestic issues. As a pragmatist, the president was well aware of the political landscape which he had been thrown into. While Kennedy's presidential campaign had emphasized the dawning of renewed politics with his youth, vitality, wit, charm, and challenge to antiquated racial and religious bigotry, the basic political alignments of the early 1960s remained the same as those which Presidents Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman had dealt with. Which is to say, that Kennedy, too, had to hold together the National Democratic Party's diverse and fragile coalition of blacks, white southerners, rural and small-town Protestants, and urban and big-city Jews and Catholics. Furthermore, President Kennedy understood that many of the important items on his legislative agenda were virtually in the hands of southern senators and representatives on Capitol Hill, who then chaired more than half of the thirty-eight congressional standing committees. The president knew that he had "no muscle" to stand on a par with Congress. "I can't [even] get a Mother's Day resolution [passed through Congress]," Kennedy once lamented with much frustration. However ill-favored it was for the president, Kennedy realized that he simply could not afford to alienate such powerful and segregationist politicians as Senators James O. Eastland from Mississippi and Richard B. Russell, Jr., from Georgia by pushing his civil rights policies.¹⁴

In discouraging the powerful southern committee chairs—many of whom were rabid segregationists—from holding his civil rights policies hostage to his other important programs, Kennedy was virtually compelled to rely on a heavy use of executive orders. For instance, his 1961 *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* alone lists a total of sixty-seven executive orders. A number of the Kennedy administration's vital programs, including the organization of the Peace Corps and the creation of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity (where the "affirmative action" concept was first put forward in federal antidiscrimination policy), were launched by these executive orders. Even by relying on his presidential prerogative, it took a year and ten months for Kennedy to realize one of his campaign promises. During the second Kennedy-Nixon presidential debates, Kennedy assured the audience that if elected, he would take prompt executive action on discrimination in federally supported housing projects with "a stroke of the President's pen." Almost two years after he took the helm of the nation,

President Kennedy eventually signed an executive order on November 20, 1962, to “take every proper and legal action” for preventing discrimination in federal housing facilities. By then, however, the nation’s civil rights organizations had had to remind Kennedy of his own “stroke-of-the-pen” promise by “mailing him pens by the thousands.”¹⁵

In President Kennedy’s ideal world, there should have been no Communists overseas and no segregationists at home. But unfortunately for him, his contemporary world had plenty of both. And while Kennedy struggled to define the proper place of civil rights in his own mind and in his administration’s overall agenda, the president, as he had done during his Senate years, tried to focus his time, resources, and attention on world affairs. Some civil rights leaders understood Kennedy’s conspicuously vulnerable position. Wilkins, executive director of the NAACP, for example, saw the president as being “intellectually in sympathy with the civil rights movement.” But obviously, not every civil rights leader was as kind and sympathetic as Wilkins regarding Kennedy’s profound lack of apprehension of and commitment to the nation’s race issues. With harsh words, James Farmer, the national director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), once appraised the president as follows: “Jack Kennedy was . . . ignorant on civil rights in particular and blacks in general at the time he became president.” And it was Farmer who first decided to focus the nation’s attention on civil rights issues by daring to test Kennedy’s willingness to uphold black Americans’ constitutional rights.¹⁶

In the late spring of 1961, only a few months after his inauguration, Kennedy came face to face with the first constitutional crisis over black civil rights under his administration when the Freedom Riders, who were organized by Farmer, headed for Mississippi determined to make racial desegregation in interstate travel facilities a reality. But before the Riders reached Mississippi, they had received violent “welcomes” from the local white mobs at Anniston, Birmingham, and Montgomery in Alabama. The violence against the Freedom Riders suddenly became the center of national and international press coverage. While Attorney General Kennedy tried to move the Freedom Riders out of Alabama as quickly as possible, he pleaded with them for a “cooling-off” period. Both dismayed and outraged, Farmer told a reporter: “We had been cooling off for 100 years [since the Emancipation Proclamation]. If we got any cooler[,] we’d be in a deep freeze.”¹⁷

The president was embarrassed and angered by the Freedom Riders’

persistent posture. The disaster and debacle of the Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba had seriously spoiled his reputation only a few weeks earlier, and now Kennedy was preparing for his first presidential overseas trip to meet Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev at a summit conference to be held in Vienna. The white Alabamians' violent reactions and resistance that greeted the nonviolent Freedom Riders and the accompanying international attention could not possibly help the president, who was then desperate to prove himself to be "a confident and accomplished world leader." "Stop them! Get your friends off those buses!," Kennedy vented his frustration on Civil Rights Advisor Wofford at the White House. Having less than two weeks to attend the face-to-face conference with the leader of the Communist bloc, the president felt that he was being "nagged and nitpicked and nibbled to distraction" by his own American people—the southern blacks and the white liberals on one hand, and the southern white segregationists and conservatives on the other hand. After all, those brave Freedom Riders, according to Assistant Attorney General Nicholas D. Katzenbach, were considered "a pain in the ass" by Kennedy, who kept calling the incident "this . . . civil rights mess."¹⁸

While Kennedy publicly and ostensibly made it clear at a press conference that he believed "everyone who travels . . . should enjoy the full constitutional protection given to them" and that there was "no question of the legal rights of the . . . Freedom Riders to move in interstate commerce," the president and his attorney general secretly struck a deal with Mississippi Governor Ross R. Barnett. Their veiled agreement was mediated by Senator Eastland who, as the all-powerful chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, once boasted that he had "put a special pocket in [his] pants" where he dutifully kept a number of civil rights-related bills to prevent their passage in Congress. As a result, the Kennedys decided that they would not enforce the Supreme Court's 1960 *Boynnton v. Virginia* ruling, which would have given the Freedom Riders their constitutional rights to use any public facilities at the Jackson, Mississippi bus terminal. In return for the Kennedy administration's concession, Governor Barnett promised that he would make sure there would be no violence used against the Freedom Riders. Though the president and the attorney general barely avoided bloodshed in Mississippi, they ended up putting the Freedom Riders at the mercy of the local police and judges by giving in to the state's segregation laws.¹⁹

The day after the first group of the Freedom Riders wheeled into

Jackson, President Kennedy personally went before a joint session of Congress on May 25 to deliver an extraordinary State of the Union address. In his “Special Message to the Congress on Urgent National Needs,” Kennedy announced that he intended to “promote the freedom doctrine.” “The great battleground for the defense and expansion of freedom today is the whole southern half of the globe—Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East,” he declared, “[and] [t]hey seek an end to injustice, tyranny, and exploitation.” The president asked Congress to double the combat power and capability of the United States Army to protect freedom’s “great battleground” overseas and to help him commence the race to the moon. But not to mention the Freedom Ride incident, no reference was made at all to the “injustice, tyranny, and exploitation,” that black Americans were suffering from, in “the whole southern half” of the United States. After all, the nation’s “race relations” were subordinated to the “race to the moon,” and civil rights issues were not included in what the president termed those “urgent national needs.”²⁰

Thereafter, the Freedom Riders continued to pour into Jackson and, by the end of the summer of 1961, approximately three hundred participants had been arrested and put in jail. At one point, White House Civil Rights Advisor Wofford suggested that President Kennedy go on national television and say “a few stout words” on the incident. But the president stayed behind, letting his younger brother speak in a television interview that the administration had “no sympathy with segregationists, but segregation is far better than having it decided in the streets, with beatings.” In the end, Kennedy’s eloquence on civil rights revealed in his presidential campaign could not be detected in the wake of the Freedom Ride incident, nor was his executive power enforced.²¹

As Kennedy’s first year in the White House neared its end, the administration evaluated its domestic and overseas achievements. Surprisingly, the civil rights issues that the administration perceived as its “accomplishments” were listed as part of the document entitled “Major Foreign Policy Measures Taken by the Kennedy Administration.” “[T]he orderly evolution of desegregation in the United States” had “had a favorable effect overseas,” the White House patted itself on the back, “[and] [p]rogress in the field of civil rights and education have [*sic*] been noteworthy.” The administration’s self-praise, however, did not reflect the complex and volatile nature of civil rights at home. Though the president’s reticence on black civil rights and Mississippi’s honor were both

preserved at the sacrifice of those brave Freedom Riders in the spring of 1961, the eventual confrontation between the Kennedy administration and the white South was only temporarily spared.²²

IV

As the anonymous Arkansan had ominously predicted in the aftermath of the 1957 Little Rock crisis, in the fall of 1962, Mississippi, once again, became a major battlefield for black civil rights over the successful desegregation attempt by James H. Meredith at the all-white University of Mississippi, better known as Ole Miss. Only a day after Kennedy's inauguration in January 1961, true to the young president's words, Meredith, a twenty-seven-year-old black veteran of the United States Air Force, set out to do what he could do for his country, his native state, and his race. Serving in the Air Force for almost a decade from 1951 to 1960, the native of Attala County, Mississippi, was in the military "to preserve and protect the rights and privileges of democracy" that he himself "didn't in fact enjoy." When he got out of the Air Force and came back to his native state, where racial segregation and discrimination were kept intact, Meredith was determined to do everything that he possibly could to right the wrongs for himself and for his fellow black Americans. Soon, breaking down the high wall of the state's white supremacy became his "absolute conscious decision."²³

After a series of ensuing legal battles, on June 25, 1962, the United States Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals directed Federal District Judge Sidney C. Mize of Mississippi to order the University of Mississippi to admit Meredith as its first black student. Though the court had spoken, the grave question, as in the case of the 1957 Little Rock crisis, remained unanswered: who would enforce the federal court order? In the White House, while Kennedy and his advisors were determined that Meredith should eventually attend the university, they were also desperate to find a way to avoid direct military confrontation with Mississippi. Indeed, the president was "very, very reluctant to use troops" and believed that "the one bad mistake Ike made was to send troops into Little Rock." If Kennedy repeated Eisenhower's "bad mistake" in Mississippi, it would certainly cost the president southern Democratic support that he then needed in Congress and might even ruin his bid to be renominated as the party's presidential hopeful in 1964. Thus, Kennedy preferred and sought a political solution. Accordingly, on September 15, 1962—two

days after Mississippi Governor Barnett proclaimed that his “sovereign state” would not surrender to the federal government during his statewide television address, Attorney General Kennedy made his first call to Barnett on behalf of his brother to try to seek a way out. It was the beginning of the Kennedy administration’s secret telephone conversations with the Mississippi governor. And it also marked the opening of the bizarre and tortuous process of their dead-end negotiation with Barnett.²⁴

On September 20, Barnett personally blocked Meredith’s first attempt to register as a student at Ole Miss in Oxford, Mississippi. Two days later, in Washington, D.C., Kennedy’s previously recorded remarks were broadcast at the ceremony that commemorated the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation held at the Lincoln Memorial. “[T]he essential effort, the sustained struggle, was borne by the Negro alone with steadfast dignity and faith,” the president said, “[and] [i]t can be said . . . that Abraham Lincoln emancipated the slaves, but that in this century since, our Negro citizens have emancipated themselves.” Placing special emphasis on the black Americans’ struggles in the nation’s long fight for equality and justice, Kennedy concluded: “Like the proclamation we celebrate, this observance must be regarded not as an end, but a beginning.” Despite his noble words that the centennial ceremony signified a “beginning” to reassure freedom to all the citizens, Kennedy kept hoping to avoid personal involvement in the Ole Miss affairs and a predictable federal-state confrontation with Mississippi—Senator Eastland’s beloved state. In so doing, the president let the attorney general be the administration’s representative voice. Asked about his thoughts on the Mississippi affairs by President Kennedy, Sorensen, the president’s speechwriter and advisor, concurred in Kennedy’s judgment “to stay out of it personally for the time being.” “The defiance [of Mississippi] should be [construed as being] against the majesty of the United States,” Sorensen wrote back to the president, “[but] not John F. Kennedy.”²⁵

However, the veiled negotiation between the young attorney general and the wily old governor of Mississippi did not get them anywhere. Finally, on September 29, the president personally placed his first call to Barnett from the Oval Office. “I’m glad to talk to you, Governor,” Kennedy tried to charm the Mississippi segregationist. But their ensuing five-minute conversation was filled with chaos and confusion. Attentive listening to the telephone conversation tapes recorded by the White House and careful reading of their transcripts reveal a discrepancy between the two deeply troubled chief executives, trying to achieve

something unachievable. While Kennedy, as the nation's chief executive, needed to exercise his constitutional duty to uphold and carry out the federal court orders, Barnett had his own constitutional responsibility to abide by Mississippi's constitution and laws providing racial segregation. "Well, now, here's my problem," the president got on to the main question: "I didn't . . . put him [Meredith] in the university, but on the other hand, under the Constitution, I have to . . . carry that order out." Barnett, meanwhile, began to make a plea for the president's understanding: "[Y]ou . . . know what I am up against, Mr. President. I took an oath . . . to abide by the laws of this state. . . . I'm on the spot here." "[T]he problem is, Governor," Kennedy also gave vent to his sentiments, "that I [ve] got my responsibility, just like you have yours." Later on the same day, President Kennedy reluctantly signed the already prepared proclamation document, federalizing the Mississippi National Guard and authorizing Secretary of the Army Cyrus Vance to call out troops to send to Ole Miss if it became necessary. A moment before signing the document, Kennedy looked up at Assistant Attorney General Norbert A. Schlei and asked gingerly: "Is this pretty much what Ike signed in 1957 with the Little Rock thing?" Assured that it was, the president went on to subscribe his name to the document.²⁶

As Eisenhower had done five years earlier, Kennedy now needed to address the nation on television to explain his course of action and more importantly, to prevent possible riots on the Ole Miss campus over Meredith's registration. Sorensen later recalled that the president rewrote his speech several times to make sure that the federal government "was merely carrying out" court orders and "was not forcing anything down the throats of Mississippians" on the initiative of the White House. Using the word "tyranny," instead of the word "anarchy" that was used by Eisenhower in 1957, Kennedy followed his predecessor's "law and order" discourse in his September 30, 1962, address. Reminding the American people of the fact that the United States was "founded on the principle that observance of the law is the eternal safeguard of liberty and defiance of the law is the surest road to tyranny," the president emphasized that his "obligation under the Constitution . . . to implement the orders of the court" was "inescapable." Having said that, Kennedy had special words for white Mississippians in general and the Ole Miss students in particular, appealing to their "tradition of honor and courage": "You have a new opportunity to show that you are men of patriotism and integrity. . . . It lies in your courage to accept those laws

with which you disagree as well as those with which you agree.” But for the president, the Ole Miss crisis was not merely a national issue where “the honor” of Ole Miss and Mississippi was “in the balance.” Invoking the Cold War imperative, the president reminded the white South that “[t]he eyes of the Nation and of all the world are . . . upon all of us.”²⁷

Thus, imitating Eisenhower’s discourse in the wake of the Little Rock crisis, Kennedy’s address ended up with focusing on the “law and order” theme, the president’s obligatory constitutional duty, the Cold War imperative, and an appeal to white Mississippi’s “sense of honor.” And by delivering such an address, Kennedy made exactly the same mistake as that of Eisenhower, where he merely perceived the Ole Miss crisis as “a legal contest” and “a problem of enforcement,” rather than understanding the issue as part of the whole country’s moral dilemma. By the time Kennedy began his nationwide address, the campus riots had already flared up at Ole Miss. The majority of students did not hear or heed the president’s appeal to their “sense of honor.” And to subdue the night of terror that had brought two deaths, some twenty-three thousand federal troops were dispatched by the Kennedy administration. “We lacked,” Special Assistant Edwin O. Guthman to Robert Kennedy later admitted, “a sense of Southern history.” Strained, the president wearily asked his younger brother if there would be “any more like this one coming up soon.” The attorney general had disappointing news, telling Kennedy that he “could look forward to losing at least one more state’s electoral votes” if he ran for the 1964 presidential election. Alabama would be the next battleground.²⁸

V

On January 14, 1963, George C. Wallace, the newly inaugurated governor of Alabama, set out to make himself a renewed symbol of southern defiance in Montgomery. During his gubernatorial campaign in the previous year, Wallace had made it clear that if the federal government, by its court orders, forced the state to desegregate its public universities, he would defy such “illegal” orders “to the point of standing in the schoolhouse door.” After the debacle of the Ole Miss crisis, southern white segregationists had been in a desperate search for someone and something to cling to. And in January 1963, they found their “someone” in Wallace and “something” in his ever-intensifying defiant posture. To be sure, the southern defiance personified in the Alabama governor also

renewed black southerners' resolves to tear down the high wall of racial segregation and discrimination. By the spring of 1963, over ten thousand civil rights demonstrators—both black and white—had been arrested in the former Confederate states.²⁹

In April 1963, the worst racial and racist violence exploded in Birmingham, Alabama, where Martin Luther King, Jr. had been invited to lead nonviolent demonstrations against the city's racial and racist practices. Public Safety Commissioner T. Eugene "Bull" Connor's ferocious use of police dogs and fire hoses to disperse the demonstrators on May 3 gained national and international attention for the civil rights campaign, as well as for the ugliest face of southern defiance. King, who had been arrested and jailed more than two weeks earlier, wrote his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail" on April 16, where he made his forthright "confession" that he had "been gravely disappointed with the white moderate," tacitly criticizing the Kennedy administration. "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion," King painfully wrote in his dark jail cell, "that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's [sic] Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate," who was "more devoted to 'order' than to justice." On May 4, when President Kennedy met with the delegates of a liberal political organization—the Americans for Democratic Action—in the Oval Office, his frustration over the Birmingham incident was evident. "Birmingham is the worst city in the South," the president did not mince his words, "[and] it is an intolerable situation."³⁰

While making Birmingham a major battlefield for civil rights, Alabama Governor Wallace was preparing to "toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny" of the federal government. A federal district court, as Attorney General Kennedy gloomily predicted in the aftermath of the Ole Miss crisis, had ruled that the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa must admit two black students—Vivian J. Malone and James A. Hood. Alabama, then, remained as the only state in the nation whose higher educational institutions refused to admit blacks. Unlike Mississippi Governor Barnett, Wallace was a shrewd and calculating politician. And having learned a lesson from his neighboring state's desegregation incident, Wallace understood how far he could possibly carry out his defiance of the federal government. But at the same time, as in the case of Barnett, the Alabama governor was not willing to simply retreat from the federal "tyranny" without a fight. Wallace needed a little farcical show at the schoolhouse door, where the governor would be able to indi-

cate to his fellow Alabamians and to the world that he was forced to give up his campaign pledge to the formidable might of the federal troops.³¹

True to his own vow, on June 11, 1963, Governor Wallace stood before the door of Foster Auditorium on the University of Alabama campus, physically blocking the enrollment of Malone and Hood in defiance of a federal court order by “standing in the schoolhouse door.” In response, Kennedy issued an executive order, federalizing the seventeen thousand-man Alabama National Guard. Three hours later, the commanding general of the national guard strode to the door of the auditorium and informed Wallace—his former commander-in-chief: “It is my sad duty to ask you to step aside.” The governor backed down, and Malone and Hood were registered without violence.³²

VI

While June 11, 1963, marked the inevitable demise of “massive resistance” staged by Alabama, the “Heart of Dixie,” it also marked the beginning of the Kennedy administration’s full-fledged commitment to the cause of black Americans’ civil rights struggles. Although he was eventually forced to order the Alabama National Guard into federal service, now with the two black students having safely been enrolled at the university, Kennedy no longer needed to explain his action to the nation. But the president, seeing the occasion as an important and appropriate moment, decided to address the nation on the most pressing domestic issue—civil rights. Going on national television, Kennedy did not want to merely “explain” what had happened on that day. Rather, he wished to “talk about” civil rights to the American people. After all, the Freedom Ride incident, the Ole Miss crisis, the white violence against the nonviolent protesters in Birmingham, and Governor Wallace’s defiant stand “in the schoolhouse door” all had shown the president “how stubborn, savage, [and] deeply rooted” the nation’s racial problems were. Kennedy’s close advisors, however, disagreed with the president. Special Assistants Kenneth P. O’Donnell and Lawrence E. O’Brien did not believe that Kennedy should personally get involved in the matter. Sorensen, who had suggested that the president stay out of the Ole Miss crisis in the previous year, was simply dubious. Attorney General Kennedy was virtually the only one who strongly urged his brother to address the nation. Nonetheless, Sorensen immediately began to work on the president’s speech. The time was running short, and Kennedy

actually would have to wholly extemporize the concluding part of his address.³³

In fact, in the span of just two days in June 1963, Kennedy gave two major addresses that would be long remembered: one on civil rights and the other on the quest for world peace. On June 10, the day before the University of Alabama desegregation crisis, the president announced, in his address delivered at American University's commencement ceremony, that he and Khrushchev had agreed to start high-level discussions, "looking toward early agreement on a comprehensive [nuclear] test ban treaty." Close reading of this June 10 address, however, reveals that Kennedy not only hoped to generate public support for the proposed nuclear test ban treaty in world affairs, but also sought to make an important connection between world peace and human rights at home. "Finally, my fellow Americans, let us examine our attitude toward peace and freedom here at home," the president suggested. "It is the responsibility of the executive branch . . . to provide and protect that freedom for all of our citizens by all means within their authority," he continued, "[and] [i]t is the responsibility of the legislative branch . . . , wherever that authority is not now adequate, to make it adequate." But that was not enough, Kennedy reminded the audience, for it was also "the responsibility of all citizens in all sections of this country to respect the rights of all others."³⁴

In concluding his remarks, the president got to the heart of the matter: "All this is not unrelated to world peace. . . . And is not peace, in the last analysis, basically a matter of human rights—the right to live out our lives without fear of devastation . . . ?" Throwing this profound question to the nation and, much more than that, to himself, Kennedy was in search of redefining his civil rights policies. Though the president used the words "human rights" instead of "civil rights," Kennedy's American University address, which is often regarded and acclaimed as a major turning point in his overall foreign policy, was in fact an early expression of the president's June 11 address in the aftermath of the University of Alabama crisis.³⁵

At 8:00 P.M., Washington time, on June 11, 1963, Kennedy went on national television with an unfinished speech text that was entitled "Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights." Incorporating, for only the second time, the exact words "civil rights" in a title of his address and offering his impassioned moral argument on black civil rights to the "American people" as a whole, Kennedy laid

aside the legal and constitutional arguments that had marked his previous public discourse on the issue. No longer did Kennedy try to appease the South, “explaining” his constitutional “duty” and “obligation” to uphold “law and order.” Instead, the president now emphasized the moral imperative that he and the nation faced. “This is not even a legal or legislative issue alone,” Kennedy said, “[but] [w]e are confronted primarily with a moral issue.” Another marked departure from his earlier rhetoric on civil rights was made in terms of Kennedy’s overcoming of the Cold War imperative that had prevented the president from grappling with the issue. It was true, Kennedy continued, that the United States preached freedom around the world: “[B]ut are we to say to the world, *and much more importantly* [emphasis added], 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 cast[e] system, no ghettos, no master race except with respect to Negroes?” Here, the president professed that the nation should confront civil rights as “a moral crisis,” not because of its adverse effect on the country’s image in world affairs, but because it deserved to be treated as an imperative issue in its own right.³⁶

And finally, revealing his plan to ask Congress to enact civil rights legislation and “to make a commitment . . . to the proposition that race has no place in American life or law,” Kennedy hoped that “every American, regardless of where he lives, will stop and examine his conscience” about the nation’s racial injustice. “This is not a sectional issue,” the president added, “[but] [d]ifficulties over segregation and discrimination exist in every city, in every State of the Union.” His realization, that the malignancy of racial injustice and hatred was not confined to the South, reflected the president’s slow but steady understanding of the nation’s racial problems. Legally imposed or not, Kennedy began to see, the whole system of racial segregation and discrimination was no longer the South’s “peculiar institution,” as American slavery was once termed. In truth, with racism being a definite factor, the nation would soon witness the most intense and recalcitrant resistance to court-ordered school busing during the 1970s in Boston—the political home ground of the Kennedys.³⁷

As promised, eight days after his historic address, on June 19, 1963, Kennedy sent a package of civil rights legislation to Congress. The president insisted that the legislation would be needed “not merely for reasons of economic efficiency, world diplomacy and domestic

tranquility—but, above all, because it is right.” In concluding his message, he had special words for the lawmakers from the South. “I . . . ask every member of Congress to set aside sectional and political ties, and to look at this issue from the viewpoint of the Nation,” Kennedy pleaded, “[and] I ask you to look into your hearts . . . for the one plain, proud and priceless quality that unites us all as Americans: a sense of justice.” The president’s appeal notwithstanding, as later events would reveal, those southern politicians and their white constituencies were far from ready to “set aside” their “sectional ties” and to abandon their cherished “southern way of life.”³⁸

VII

Though Kennedy himself “did not indulge in comparisons,” Sorensen recalled, the president “was not averse” to those who regarded his civil rights address to the nation and the following special message to Congress as “the Second Emancipation Proclamation.” At the same time, Kennedy always felt that his “Proclamation” was going to be “his political swan song.” Five days after the March on Washington took place in the nation’s capital, on September 2, 1963, the president appeared on CBS’s television news program and was asked by Walter Cronkite whether he thought that he would “lose some Southern States” in the upcoming 1964 presidential election if he ever ran. Admitting that his renewed civil rights policies had “caused a good deal of feeling” against his administration in the South and in other parts of the country, Kennedy replied decisively: “I am not sure that I am the most popular political figure in the country today [and particularly] in the South, but that is all right.”³⁹

Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, the president wrote in early 1963, “was only a first step—a step which its author unhappily did not live [long enough] to follow up.” Neither could Kennedy live long enough to follow up his own. On November 22, 1963, he was gunned down in Dallas, Texas, in the most controversial assassination in United States history. The remarks that the president intended to deliver to the dinner party for Texas Democrats in Austin on that fateful day echoed his determination made on June 11 that he would continue “to make a commitment . . . to the proposition that race has no place in American life or law.” “There is no noncontroversial way to fulfill our

constitutional pledge to establish [racial] justice,” Kennedy wrote in the undelivered speech, “but we intend to fulfill those obligations because they are right.”⁴⁰

Making sense of the 1960s is an important and yet unfinished business. Likewise, as the vicissitudes of his historiography have attested, making sense of President Kennedy, his administration, his hopes and dreams, and his anguish and despair is an equally weighty but incomplete task. “It was a long river, with many rapids, and the passage was too fast,” Wofford, who served as Kennedy’s special assistant on civil rights, once recollected in describing the volatile decade of the 1960s. And just as the “long river” did, Kennedy, who represented the era as the nation’s chief executive, sometimes took wrong turns and inflicted terrible damage to the country. The obvious discrepancy that existed between the words and the deeds of Kennedy in confronting civil rights issues in his first two years as president clearly manifested his anguish and despair. Even the political scientist David Niven’s harsh words that “President Kennedy stood in the way of civil rights progress, delaying and denying the rights of African Americans” might have some merit.⁴¹

However, in the final analysis, having eventually realized his responsibility to chart the course of the “long river,” President Kennedy, in his final months, placed substance and ideals above rhetoric and political expediency in the field of civil rights, thus conveying his hopes and dreams to his fellow citizens. After undergoing a tortuous process of maturing and learning to define and redefine the proper place of civil rights in his presidency, John F. Kennedy finally “[l]et the word go forth” to fulfill his long-expected “moral leadership” to secure racial justice at home, simply because it was “right.” But his high resolves were never given a chance to be fully heard, tested, and appreciated by what Kennedy had called the “new generation of Americans.”

NOTES

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¹⁰ Erle Johnston, *Mississippi's Defiant Years, 1953–1973: An Interpretive Documentary with Personal Experiences* (Forest, Miss.: Lake Harbor, 1990), 71; “The Battle between Ike and Faubus,” n.d. [1957], folder: “Circuit Riders, Inc.—Correspondence,” box 14, Myers G. Lowman Papers, Hoover Institution Library and Archives, Stanford University, Stanford, California; and James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 82.

¹¹ Gaines M. Foster, “Confess[ing] Ethical Lapse,” commentary on the author’s paper entitled “‘Because It Is Right’: President John F. Kennedy and His Rhetoric on Civil Rights during the South’s Second Reconstruction,” twenty-second Gulf South History and Humanities Conference of the Gulf South Historical Association, Pensacola Beach, Florida, Oct. 17, 2003, p. 4, in the author’s possession by courtesy of Gaines M. Foster, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge; Ross R. Barnett, “Oral History Interview with Ross R. Barnett,” recorded interview by Dennis O’Brien, May 6, 1969, transcript, p. 3, Oral History Program, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston; Barnett, “Statement of Governor Ross R. Barnett of Mississippi before U.S. Senate Commerce Committee, July 12, 1963,” record nos. 99–69–0–12–1–1–1 to 9–1–1, p. 2–1–1, Records of the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, Archives and Library Division, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson; and Yasuhiro Katagiri, “When the South Collided with the ‘Great Arsenal of Democracy’: Southern Segregationists’ Use and Abuse of American Values to Resist the Civil Rights Movement,” *The 39th American Studies International Conference: Rethinking Traditional American Values in a Global Context* [American Studies Association of Korea, Seoul] (2004): 197–210.

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¹⁷ Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 299; Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 134; and Strober and Strober, “*Let Us Begin Anew*,” 299.

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²⁷ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 544; and John F. Kennedy, "Radio and Television Report to the Nation on the Situation at the University of Mississippi," Sept. 30, 1962, in *Public Papers, 1962*, 727–28.

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³⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: New American Library, 1964), 84; and tape #85, May 3–8, 1963, Meetings Recordings, Presidential Recordings, President's Office File, John F. Kennedy Presidential Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

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³⁴ John F. Kennedy, "Commencement Address at American University in Washington," June 10, 1963, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, 1963* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1964), 463–64.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 464.

³⁶ John F. Kennedy, "Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights," June 11, 1963, in *Public Papers, 1963*, 469. The first time Kennedy used the exact words "civil rights" in a title of one of his addresses was when he sent a special message to Congress on February 28, 1963. See, in this regard, Kennedy, "Special Message to the Congress on Civil Rights," Feb. 28, 1963, in *Public Papers, 1963*, 221–30.

³⁷ John F. Kennedy, "Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights," June 11, 1963, in *Public Papers, 1963*, 468–69.

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⁴¹ Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings*, 3; 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), xvi.

The words of John F. Kennedy propelled a nation and moved the world; now Kennedy's views and visions have been compiled into one classic volume by his longtime friend and adviser, Theodore C. Sorensen. Photos. When he was elected the nation's thirty-fifth President, John Fitzgerald Kennedy became the youngest man and the first Roman Catholic elected to the Oval Office. Some Americans had opposed his candidacy because they feared that his religion would influence his decisions as President. Yet fascination with his personality, style, intelligence, wit, and character overshadowed these fears for many people. Articulate and forward looking, but with a great sense of the past, Kennedy was the only U.S. President to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize in biography. The Report to the American People on Civil Rights was a speech on civil rights, delivered on radio and television by United States President John F. Kennedy from the Oval Office on June 11, 1963 in which he proposed legislation that would later become the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Expressing civil rights as a moral issue, Kennedy moved past his previous appeals to legality and asserted that the pursuit of racial equality was a just cause. The address signified a shift in his administration's policy John F. Kennedy. Civil Rights Address. delivered 11 June 1963, White House, Washington, D.C. Audio mp3 of Address. 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 Vietnam 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.