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John F. Kennedy's Civil Rights Address:

An Analysis of its Context, Legacy, and Implications

The subject of inequality has been at the center of debate for centuries. As Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote in the “Declaration of Sentiments” from the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, “we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” emphasizing the inequality between men and women in the mid 1800s (176). Similarly, inequality between white Americans and African-Americans were also at the forefront of debates. Modeled after the “Declaration of Independence,” the arguments in the “Declaration of Sentiments” echoed the grievances of African-Americans in the 20th and 21st centuries. Stanton writes that “mankind are more disposed to suffer while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed,” aligning with the wave of protest and public disobedience for civil rights during the 1960s (176). The “Declaration of Sentiments” was written before African-Americans or women were given the right to vote and was a document that garnered support in favor of suffrage. Stanton lists grievances of women against “he” which parallel grievances of African-Americans, such as “he has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise,” “he has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education,” and “as a teacher of theology, medicine, or law, she is not known” (179). Likewise, African-Americans were barred from voting even after the passage of the 15th amendment—which officially granted African-American men the right to vote—through other legal means like literacy tests, which were ultimately abolished with the Voting Rights Act of 1965. African-Americans and women were also socially restricted to certain jobs through employment discrimination. In many ways, the “Declaration of Sentiments”

is comparable to the Civil Rights movement through the grievances and inequalities African Americans and women were subject to.

The Civil Rights movement of the mid-twentieth century was characterized by countless protests and acts of civil disobedience. The ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) stated that states could no longer segregate schools based on race, overturning the “separate but equal” ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). Although the Supreme Court ruled that separate facilities were inherently unequal and, therefore, unconstitutional, it took several years to fully desegregate public schools and other public facilities. This ruling was met with great opposition from white southern political leaders and citizens fighting against desegregation. On June 11th, 1963, the University of Alabama enrolled its first African-American students, the last state university in the country to do so. That same evening, President John F. Kennedy addressed the American citizens with one of his most prominent speeches from the White House in Washington, DC. His “Civil Rights Address” attempted to ease tensions between the two races and promote future legislation designed to outlaw segregation and decrease discrimination. Ultimately, Kennedy achieved most of his goals outlined in his address, leading to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which institutionally outlawed segregation and discrimination based on race. Differences in media coverage of the speech suggest that there were strong divides regarding the issue of desegregation, even within the president’s political party, and subsequent scholarship reviewed Kennedy’s civil rights approach as timid; although this address and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 were greatly impactful and achieved greater equality within the two races, the trend of desegregation seems to have reversed within the education system in the United States.

Kennedy gave his “Civil Rights Address” following the successful and peaceful integration of two Alabama students into the University of Alabama. The governor of Alabama

at the time, George Wallace, a firm proponent of segregation, “stood...in the doorway of the university building in which the students were to register” attempting to block the students from registering for classes (“The Long March” 13). The United States District Court of the Northern District of Alabama had ordered Wallace not to stand in the way of the admission of the two African-American students or he would be jailed. Kennedy began his speech by informing the public that the Alabama National Guard was federalized in order to carry out that order. He went on to explain that legislation would not solve “difficulties over segregation and discrimination,” instead stressing that this was a moral issue. He broadly outlined legislation that he would introduce in the following week in three main points. First, Kennedy asked Congress to outlaw discrimination in “hotels, restaurants, theaters, retail stores, and similar establishments,” viewing equal access to these services as “an elementary right.” Second, Kennedy asked Congress to allow greater federal government involvement in “lawsuits designed to end segregation in public education,” citing previous success in “persuading many districts to desegregate voluntarily.” Third, Kennedy called on Congress to further protect African-Americans’ right to vote. Through this speech, Kennedy laid the foundation for legislation known as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In addition to outlining his proposals to the people of the United States, Kennedy listed the inequalities between the two races in order to exemplify the necessity for the proposed legislation, in a similar way to Stanton outlining the women’s grievances in the “Declaration of Sentiments.” Kennedy noted that African Americans born during his time had “one-half as much chance of completing a high school as a white baby born in the same place on the same day,” “twice as much chance of becoming unemployed,” “a life expectancy which is 7 years shorter, and the prospects of earning only half as much.” Kennedy asked his audience whether they would be willing to have the color of skin that would prohibit them from eating at public restaurants or sending their children to the public school of their

choice in an effort to appeal to those who may be apprehensive about desegregation. These points attempted to appeal to all citizens living in the United States, as well as the concerned white southern political leaders who would soon be voting on the legislation.

The legislation Kennedy outlined in his speech points to significant disparities between white Americans and African-Americans within society needing to be resolved not only at the legislative level but also at the moral level. He stated that the United States was hypocritical in preaching freedom around the globe while African-Americans were being socially and economically oppressed. Kennedy urged the people to act in their “daily lives” to promote justice between the two races. Kennedy addressed every citizen in every city by saying that “it is not enough to pin the blame on others, to say this is a problem of one section of the country or another,” implying that although this problem dominates the South, “difficulties over segregation and discrimination exist in every city” (Kennedy). While the North was mostly desegregated by this point, Kennedy signaled that African-Americans still faced discrimination and oppression even in those desegregated cities. Additionally, Kennedy pointed out that “redress is sought in the streets, in demonstrations, parades, and protests which create tensions and threaten violence and threaten lives,” clear evidence that the fight for civil rights had been ongoing and was not yet resolved through other nonviolent means.

On June 12th, 1963—the day following Kennedy’s “Civil Rights Address”—various newspapers covered the televised speech. The *Washington Post* dedicated that day’s headline to the event: “JFK Asks Nation to End Race Curbs; Two Negroes Enrolled at Alabama U.” Under the subheading of “Rights Plan Outlined in Speech: Negro Discontent Noted in Appeal to Consciences,” the *Post* briefly informed its readers that this speech was delivered hours after Governor George Wallace of Alabama was forced to “cease his resistance to the admission of two Negroes to the University of Alabama.” The *Post* noted that the University of Alabama was

the last state university in the Union to desegregate, and it emphasized that this was done without violence. This article also positively highlighted that part of Kennedy's speech was delivered without notes, possibly to show its readers that Kennedy was speaking from his conscience as opposed to from a carefully crafted speech from a speechwriter. The *Post* used direct quotes from Kennedy's address for the majority of its summary, such as discussing the urgency of "peaceful and constructive" change within "homes of every American" and that African-Americans should be treated as how white Americans would want to be treated (Kilpatrick). These quotes highlight Kennedy's view that discrimination was a moral issue that demanded immediate action. Overall, the *Post* responded to Kennedy's speech with great detail and a positive tone.

Similar to the *Post*, the *New York Times* coverage of Kennedy's speech was extensive and positive. The *Times* announced the headline "Kennedy Sees 'Moral Crisis' in U.S." to discuss Kennedy's "Civil Rights Address." The author, Tom Wicker, pointed out that Kennedy "appeared to be speaking without a text, and there was a fervor in his voice when he talked about the plight of some Americans," highlighting Kennedy's passion for this issue, in his unscripted conversation with the American public. Wicker further noted that his was "one of the most emotional speeches yet delivered by a President." The overall positive tone of approval Kennedy's speech could suggest a slight liberal bias. The cognitive linguist George Lakoff describes the liberal ideology through a nurturant parent model in which "nurturant parents want all their children to fulfill their potential, and so it is the role of the government to provide institutions to make that possible" (201). This idea coincides with Kennedy's speech since he advocates that every child "should have the equal right to develop their talent and their ability" (Kennedy). Also, the speech emphasized Kennedy framing the issue of segregation as a moral issue, explaining that "again and again, the President returned to the theme of the moral necessity for white Americans to treat Negro Americans as equals," followed by a quote from Kennedy in

which he uses the term moral crisis (Wicker). Wicker further comments that this speech was the “broadest appeal on civil rights ever addressed to the nation by a President,” illustrating that these issues were perhaps not as prominent then as they are now. This suggests that the violence and public demonstrations in favor of civil rights had finally become such a significant issue that the president needed to address the matter publicly.

Neither the *Wall Street Journal* nor the *Las Cruces Sun-News* dedicated their own resources to cover Kennedy’s speech, but instead both ran syndicated stories from the Associated Press and United Press International, respectively. The *Journal* summarized the speech under the headline of “Kennedy Outlines Civil Rights Bill, Asks Public Help,” on the second page of the newspaper. Only six direct quotes from Kennedy were included when discussing the context of the speech; the majority of the short article discussed his speech through a summary of it. When discussing the admission of the two University of Alabama students into the university, the AP article in the *Journal* says that the governor of Alabama “bowed to Federal pressure,” signaling a negative view of the federal government’s intervention (“Kennedy Outlines Civil Rights Bill”). This article also fails to mention that their admission into the university was peaceful and met without violence. This point, as well as the article’s placement on an inside page, could suggest that the *Journal* may have wished to downplay the speech, which could have been upsetting to some of their readers, a possible sign of a conservative bias. Lakoff describes conservatism through a series of metaphors, including moral strength as the most prominent metaphor in conservative ideology, explaining that “from the perspective of these metaphors, multiculturalism is immoral, since it permits alternative views of what counts as moral behavior” (190). Kennedy’s speech could be seen as promoting multiculturalism in the sense that he advocates for African-Americans—who were then widely seen as inferior to white Americans—to be treated with the same respect and the same regard as them. A further negative tone is

implied through AP's diction in its summary of the speech: "Mr. Kennedy said, 'We face, therefore, a moral crisis' which cannot be left to police action or to mob action in the streets" ("Kennedy Outlines Civil Rights Bill"). The *Journal* referred to what Kennedy called "increased demonstrations in the streets" as "mob action," which carries a much more negative connotation than "demonstrations." This article also notes that this address was "quickly arranged," which implies that this speech was thrown together to capitalize politically on the events in Alabama and therefore to advance Kennedy's agenda. Also, since the *Journal* used a syndicated story for its coverage of Kennedy's speech, this could mean that his address was not significant enough to have an in-house journalist report on it. The front page of the *Journal* from the day following Kennedy's speech contained headlines discussing the economy, such as "Countries Crack Down to Keep Wage Boosts From Outrunning U.S." and "Latin American Inflations," suggesting that foreign markets are of greater importance to the *Journal's* audience than civil rights issues. Furthermore, the *Journal* did not greatly emphasize their coverage of Kennedy's speech, which again signals a slight conservative bias.

The United Press International story carried in the *Sun-News* dedicated half of its length to summarize the main points of Kennedy's speech, using direct quotes from Kennedy that would appeal to the moral conscience of Kennedy's audience, for half of the summary, noting, for example, Kennedy's lines that "when Americans are sent to Viet Nam or West Berlin, we do not ask for whites only" and that "every American ought to have the right to be treated as he would wish to be treated." In addition, this article appeared on the front page of the *Sun-News*, but it was located at the bottom of the page, below the fold. Articles discussing a government crisis in Greece and as well as an arms treaty discussion in the Senate took precedence over Kennedy's speech and the University of Alabama's desegregation. The front page was also full of articles discussing events and issues of Las Cruces, New Mexico. This could suggest that

discrimination and segregation issues were not as prominent to the citizens of Las Cruces as other news relating to world events or local issues. However, this could also suggest a slight conservative slant. Following Lakoff's conservative metaphor of a strict-father model, which states that conservatives see the government in the role of a strict father whose job is to protect the family—the family being the citizens—conservatives would favor measures that would increase the security of the United States (192). In this case, the front page headline, reading “Arms Director Sees No Treaty Snag in Senate,” follows Lakoff's conservative theory since this headline promotes news that is beneficial to the security of the country and its citizens. Thus, the *Sun-News* coverage of Kennedy's speech signals a conservative bias.

In addition, half of the syndicated story carried in the *Sun-News* was devoted to responses from several senators and congressmen regarding Kennedy's proposed legislation. The Speaker of the House, John McCormack, a Democrat, was quoted as saying that Kennedy's speech “would have great weight with the country as well as Congress.” On the other hand, Senator Allen J. Ellender, a democratic senator from Louisiana, was quoted as saying that, “if the President tries to enforce his legislative proposals, I think it will mean violence” and threatening to filibuster the proposed legislation (“President Calls”). Ending on a negative note would cater to a conservative audience since this hints that the legislation may not pass and become law. The difference in responses to Kennedy's legislation from two members of the same party suggests that there may have been a party divide within the Democratic party: those who favored segregation and those opposed to it.

Time magazine, a weekly publication, published their coverage of Kennedy's speech on June 21, 1963, ten days after his “Civil Rights Address.” The article in *Time* allotted seven pages of the magazine to discussing what it characterized as a “charade” at the University of Alabama with the governor, Kennedy's political history, and the Kennedy Administration, but only briefly

mentioning Kennedy's speech. *Time* negatively portrayed Wallace when discussing the admission of the two students at the University of Alabama by emphasizing that "the only opposition was an empty gesture of defiance by Governor George C. Wallace" and that the two students were "met with smiles and friendly greetings from white students," pinning him as the only person against this integration ("The Long March"). *Time* continued this mocking tone of the governor by calling him "pudgy" and "pale and trembly" when standing in the way of the two African-American students attempting to register for classes. Additionally, the article quotes "a ponderous, five page proclamation" by Wallace in which he says, "I denounce and forbid this illegal and unwarranted action by Central Government." Although Wallace was a Democrat, his antagonism toward the Kennedy Administration signals a conservative slant in harmony with Lakoff's theory of conservative ideology following a "strict father morality." Lakoff notes that a "peculiar feature of American conservatism" is the "antipathy toward government," coinciding with Wallace's negative tone of the democratic executive administration. Wallace, a democratic governor with conservative ideals as Lakoff has described them, further suggests a strong divide regarding desegregation.

Even though *Time* appeared to be critical of George Wallace, the magazine was also critical of Kennedy and his administration, though for different reasons. *Time* mentions that Kennedy's "Civil Rights Address" "was possibly the most important that Kennedy has delivered as President of the U.S.," yet notes that his speech "did not and could not solve the civil rights crisis." However, the article agrees with Kennedy in that race discrimination should be eliminated for the reason "not that Negroes are protesting against it, but that it violates justice and morality," much as Kennedy had pointed to the issue of discrimination and segregation as a moral issue ("The Long March"). The article points out Kennedy's "approach to civil rights has been essentially political," observing that he asked "not what a Kennedy Administration could do

for the Negroes, but what the Negroes could do for John F. Kennedy on Election Day,” emphasizing Kennedy’s approach to civil rights satisfying no one (“The Long March”). *Time*’s comments about civil rights and the Kennedy administration further underscore the divide in the country regarding race relations as well as the dissatisfaction of the means taken to resolve that divide.

In comparing the five news sources listed above, I would say that the *Post* had the most extensive coverage of Kennedy’s speech. Given that the *Post* is published in the same city in which the speech took place, Washington, DC, it is reasonable that it would thoroughly cover the event. Unlike the other four sources—the *Times*, *Journal*, *Sun-News*, and *Time* magazine—the *Post* included a full transcript of the speech. This is useful to its audience since they could then read the speech as Kennedy intended to have it received, as opposed to summarized by newspapers with their respective biases. Also, the *Post* emphasized the speech more than the other four news sources by being the only source that completely devoted its main headline to the event. The article in the *Times* appeared to have the most positive, approving tone of Kennedy’s speech, emphasizing the peaceful progress toward desegregation that has been taken, possibly showcasing the *Times* as one of the more progressive publications of the 1960s. In contrast, the *Journal* and *Sun-News* did not cover Kennedy’s speech in great detail and used syndicated stories in their reporting, downplaying the importance of this speech. *Time* magazine focused most of its discussion on the Alabama governor and Kennedy’s approach to civil rights, providing context of previous attempts of desegregation and the actions the president has taken to improve race relations. In that regard, *Time* provided the most background information for the speech, which would be helpful for an audience who may not be well informed of the civil rights issues of the time. In sum, the *Post* and *Times* had emphasized their positive coverage of the speech, the *Journal* and *Sun-News* just briefly covered it through syndicated stories, while *Time* magazine

provided lengthy commentary and context surrounding George Wallace and the issue of desegregation.

The media, like the print newspapers or periodicals covering Kennedy's speech, has long been influential in shaping public opinion. In his "Power of the Media" speech, given to the National Association of Broadcasting in Chicago in 1968, Lyndon B. Johnson—John F. Kennedy's Vice President and successor—recalled a time in during which "'the printing press [was] the most powerful weapon with which man has ever armed himself'" (491). The printing press then is what online and television media is today. Kennedy's "Civil Rights Address" was televised and reported on by print media, and as Johnson points out to the media, "the commentary that you provide can give the real meaning to the issues of the day or it can distort them beyond all meaning" (491). This idea relates to the different news source's bias and how someone's interpretation of events may be different from someone else's based on their news source and their respective slant. For example, at the time of Kennedy's speech, those who may not have owned televisions or who missed the televised speech relied on print media or others to get their information, which would all carry biases, possibly distorting the original intended message. Johnson also points to an issue that is relevant today with regards to public political figures by asking, "how does that leader speak the right phrase in the right way under the right conditions to suit the accuracies and contingencies of the moment when he's discussing questions of policy so that he does not stir a thousand misinterpretations and leave the wrong connotation or impression?" (490). This has increasingly become an issue with lawmakers and other public officials speaking in a way as to be politically correct in order to offend the least amount of people, possibly as an attempt to garner as much support as possible for a particular candidate or policy, resulting in using language that one might otherwise not use under different circumstances. Thus, political figures are having to be more careful with their phrasing in order

for comments to not be taken out of context or to advance themselves politically. Moreover, the media is reporting can shape people's view points on certain topics which can influence policy.

The legacy of Kennedy's "Civil Rights Address" has been evaluated by many scholars, most of whom agree that this speech was crucial to improving relations between the two races and in the fight for civil rights during that era, even though Kennedy was timid in his approach to civil rights. In "Local Protest and Federal Policy: The Impact of the Civil Rights Movement on the 1964 Civil Rights Act," Kenneth Andrews and Sarah Gaby note that Kennedy's speech "marked an important turning point and set the stage for passage of the Civil Rights Act" (510). Andrews and Gaby further note that Kennedy and his administration were reactive to civil rights protests (510). They point out that earlier in 1963, Kennedy had taken a much more passionate tone when speaking about racial equality when "he began to speak in moral terms," as witnessed in Kennedy's speech. The authors also cite a presidential historian who called the speech "the beginning of what can truly be called the Second Reconstruction" (Andrews and Gaby 515). Likewise, Stephen F. Knott, in "What Might Have Been," states that Kennedy's "greatest domestic achievement was ringing endorsement of civil rights for African-Americans" (668). Thus, the general positive consensus surrounding the speech was that it was a necessary addition to the Civil Rights Movement and contributed to legislation that aimed to achieve greater equality and opportunity within the United States.

In contrast, in "John F. Kennedy and the Politics of Race and Civil Rights," Sheldon Stern mentions that "Kennedy was too cautious and timid" and that this was "consistent with the findings of many civil rights scholars" (120). Just as *Time* magazine had mentioned that Kennedy's civil rights acts were merely political, Stern agrees, arguing that Kennedy came out against the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*—which had ruled discrimination in schools as unconstitutional—in order to win the support of the South in the 1956 democratic vice-

presidential nomination (119). Additionally, Stern explains that Kennedy's voting record as a senator was a source of both "pride and frustration for the black supporters," further illustrating that some of his actions were for the purpose of getting reelected by getting enough votes from both sides of the civil rights debate (119). Stern quotes the author Nick Bryant and his book, *The Bystander: John F. Kennedy and the Struggle for Black Equality*, when describing Kennedy's association to racial issues as a "bystander" (124). Despite some criticism surrounding Kennedy's overall mild attitude toward civil rights, most scholars agree that his "Civil Rights Address" was a critical point of his presidency that was crucial to the fight towards civil rights and equality.

Kennedy's original goals were realized through the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which broadly accomplished what Kennedy outlined in his speech; however, discrimination still persisted, especially within voting rights of African Americans. This led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which eliminated the grandfather clause and barred states from issuing literacy tests as a requirement for voting, as well as the 24th Amendment, which abolished the poll tax. Although this legislation passed fifty years ago aimed to provide greater equality and opportunity, discrimination and segregation remains to be an issue within the United States. This especially can be seen with the achievement gap among white students and minority students as well as what some refer to as "resegregation" within education.

As a result of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), schools were forced to integrate their segregated schools. This took years to achieve and some schools even saw a reversal in the trend. As Gary Orfield and Chungmei Lee note, "serious desegregation of the black South only came after...the 1964 Civil Rights Act"; however, resegregation began to take place in the early 1990s following the Supreme Court decisions of *Board of Education of Oklahoma City v. Dowell*, *Freeman v. Pitts*, and *Missouri v. Jenkins*—all limiting desegregation orders (5). Desegregation

plans in cities could be dissolved by judges if the judge finds “that the district has achieved what is called ‘unitary status,’” which implies that a school district treats all of its students equally (Orfield and Lee 7). Orfield and Lee explain how this has led to school systems “that leave most whites in good middle class schools and most nonwhites in segregated high poverty schools failing to meet federal standards” (7). Additionally, the percentage of black students attending majority white schools was higher in 1968 than in 2011, noting that “school integration peaked in 1988 and has been declining ever since” (Karaim 723). Moreover, this suggests that schools are—legally—becoming less integrated.

In a recent *New York Times* piece, “Family by Family, How School Segregation Still Happens,” Kate Taylor tells a story of a family deciding which school to send their child to: P.S. 165, a primarily low income Hispanic school in their district, or the Manhattan School for Children, a primarily white school outside of their district. The school zone is composed of about one third white students, but only 13 percent of the public school students within that zone are white. Taylor notes that the district the family is in is among one of the most liberal parts of New York City, yet the schools “remain sharply divided by race and income, and just as sharply divergent in their levels of academic achievement” as the result of administrators’ and parents’ decisions. A study from 2005 explained that the “gap between Black and Latina/o fourth graders and their White counterparts in reading scaled scores was more than 26 points,” further exemplifying the divide in academic achievement (Ladson-Billings 4). According to this trend, those minority schools would have lower test scores than majority white schools, as was the case in the two New York City schools discussed above. Some parents see the lower test score as a reason to not send their child to that school, and thus contribute their time and resources somewhere else; consequently, enrollment in the mostly minority schools is declining. As one parent said, “more affluent families mean that the school gets a better rating and also that we get

more funding, because they definitely advocate...as people of color, unfortunately we don't do as much advocating as them," shedding light on an issue of income inequality associated with school resegregation (Taylor). This contributes to minority schools staying minority schools and not improving much academically, and white schools staying primarily white schools.

Furthermore, Kennedy's "Civil Rights Address" was a major victory for civil rights activists. His speech was received differently by different media through the overall tone of their coverage, and the content of the article itself. The difference in tone results in biases that shape people's opinions of topics and, as Lyndon B. Johnson said, "what we say and what we do now will shape the kind of a world that we pass along to our children and our grandchildren" (492). Even though Kennedy's speech did not solve the racial discrimination and prejudice that existed at the time, it was important that he publically address these issues and lay the onus to fix them on his fellow citizens. Kennedy called on the American people to reject discrimination on moral grounds and outlined legislation aimed at rejecting discrimination through legal means. Similarly, more than a century earlier, Elizabeth Cady Stanton had outlined her goals toward greater gender equality in "Declaration of Sentiments," which too laid the foundation for greater equality. Even though Kennedy's civil rights approach may have been timid at the time, the effects of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 on promoting equality between white Americans and African-Americans have been significant. However, the disparities between white schools and minority schools have not disappeared and are even widening with the trend of resegregation. Regardless of race or family income, students in any school should be able to receive the same quality of education as another student in a different school. As Kennedy said, this issue of discrimination cannot be solved through legislation alone and that every child "should have the equal right to develop their talent and their ability and their motivation, to make something of themselves."

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