

JOHN F. KENNEDY, REPORT TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE ON CIVIL RIGHTS (11 JUNE 1963)

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Abstract: John F. Kennedy's address to the nation on June 11, 1963, was one of the most significant presidential messages on civil rights in U.S. history. Kennedy made a compelling case for comprehensive civil rights legislation and for eliminating racial discrimination from American life more broadly. He appealed to political values, legal and constitutional principles, and a sense of justice and morality in his call for the end of Jim Crow. In addition, the speech had a lasting effect on American presidents' implicit rhetorical duties with regard to civil rights.

Keywords: Kennedy, John F.; Civil Rights; University Desegregation; Discrimination in Public Accommodations; Rhetoric—Moral and Ethical Aspects

President John F. Kennedy's June 11, 1963, address to the nation on civil rights is a landmark in the history of U.S. oratory. Leading scholars of American rhetoric have ranked it among the fifty best American speeches of the twentieth century.¹ Still, even the White House speechwriter who helped craft the address notes it was not Kennedy's most eloquent. Instead, he argues that it was among the president's top-three speeches in terms of its impact.² Its immediate impact included convincing many Blacks that Kennedy was on their side, reframing the racial crisis confronting the nation, and bolstering the sense of urgency for comprehensive civil rights legislation. The speech's long-term impact includes setting the tone for presidents' rhetorical leadership and securing Kennedy's legacy as a civil rights president. In sum, the address is a significant episode in the nation's discursive efforts to make sense of and deal with its race problems.

Scholars have studied Kennedy's speech through a variety of lenses, evaluating it as "liberal persuasion," crisis rhetoric, and the "politics of faith."³ Although it will touch upon some of those topics, this essay will take a broader look at the address in order to give readers a reasonably comprehensive sense of the president's rhetoric (while taking a close look at its moral appeals) and of how his speech interacted with its historical, political, and cultural contexts. Close attention to the speech and its contexts will call into question some common assumptions about Kennedy and his motivations, public receptiveness to his message, the ethics of his appeals, and the functions and significance of his moral arguments. In addition, it will suggest that the legacy of even landmark speeches cannot be taken for granted.

Racial Awakenings and Rhetorical Opportunities

John F. Kennedy was born into a life of privilege, and his personal experiences never shook that foundation or cultivated significant empathy for those who were disadvantaged or oppressed. Moreover, his blind spot regarding racial discrimination was especially large as a

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result of having little personal interaction with Blacks throughout most of his life. Kennedy attended elite schools, vacationed in white enclaves, served as a lieutenant in a segregated Navy, and knew Blacks mostly as domestic workers or service employees. Biographer Frederik Logevall notes that “though in personal terms Kennedy was largely free of racial prejudice,” he showed little interest in or understanding of the plight of African Americans.⁴

Kennedy first encountered civil rights as a political issue during his tenure as a U.S. congressman and senator from Massachusetts. He established his liberal credentials by supporting legislative efforts to abolish the poll tax, to establish a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), and to make lynching a federal crime. On the other hand, he voiced only tepid support for federal enforcement of the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, and he supported an amendment to the Civil Rights Act of 1957 that virtually guaranteed the acquittal of Southerners who violated court-ordered desegregation plans. In addition, Kennedy’s overall racial politics were characterized by a detached attitude, even when his deeds and words sounded progressive. Close friends acknowledged that he supported civil rights “more as a matter of course than of deep concern.”⁵ Indeed, Kennedy deplored racism in principle because it was wasteful, divisive, and unreasonable—and because it undercut America’s global leadership, the political issue that mattered to him most.

As he transitioned from Massachusetts senator to national political figure, Kennedy endeavored to straddle the issue of civil rights. He hoped his voting record solidified his image as a reliable Northern Democratic politician on matters of race, yet he simultaneously aimed to position himself in the South as a politician who would take a steady but moderate approach to progress.⁶ When he emerged as a possible presidential candidate for the 1960 election, some Blacks castigated Kennedy for consorting with Southern senators and governors. Yet he seemed able to defuse their criticism through symbolic acts like his speech at Howard University, his call to Martin Luther King Jr.’s wife following King’s arrest during an Atlanta sit-in, and his broad promise to provide moral leadership if elected. Kennedy’s balancing act showed political cunning but may have convinced him, implicitly, that as president he would be able to finesse the issue of civil rights and its major stakeholders. Moreover, his successful presidential campaign sustained Kennedy’s belief that “as long as he was not an active racist himself,” he was on the right side.⁷ It also reinforced his brand of liberalism. Namely, Kennedy planned to do what he could to promote equality without taking serious political risks. He hoped that through a general expansion of economic opportunities and limited executive orders targeting formal discrimination he could improve the lives of African Americans without courting chaos.

Immediately upon becoming president, Kennedy communicated ideological fervor that stood in contrast to his general tendency toward detachment and dispassion. His inaugural address decried oppression and systemic poverty and called for progress, freedom, justice, and the guarantee of one’s God-given rights. Its lofty rhetoric elicited hope and enthusiasm from many Blacks, even though most of Kennedy’s ringing appeals were connected to matters of international politics. That he still could generate such excitement reveals his skill as speaker, as well as significant growth from his early political career, when he was considered a dull, unpolished, uninspiring, wooden orator.⁸ However, most civil rights leaders felt that despite the compelling, idealistic rhetoric of his inaugural speech, Kennedy would approach civil rights “as he did any other issue—as a matter of politics, not of morals.”⁹ Although he had, as a candidate, articulated a conception of the presidency that featured moral leadership and political courage, Black leaders were skeptical about Kennedy’s willingness or ability to exercise these qualities when it came to matters of race. In addition, although they appreciated his ability to reinvigorate

cherished ideals and connect them to vision of a better world, they wondered whether that rhetorical vision would dominate his presidency or, more likely, one that represented a much more circumscribed outlook on civil rights.

That Kennedy disappointed civil rights advocates during his first two years as president may seem unsurprising, given his personal background and political sensibilities. But how, then, did he come to deliver one of the most acclaimed presidential speeches on civil rights in 1963? The answer is that Kennedy grew in political experience and judgment. Toward the end of the 1960 campaign, he had revealed his political immaturity by asking Harris Wofford—who later served as special assistant to the president on civil rights—what that nation’s president should do “to clean up this goddam civil rights mess.”¹⁰ Serving as president forced Kennedy to reckon with intractable political problems even when he just wanted to cool down perceived hot spots. Wrangling with civil rights issues, especially when confronted by others, slowly increased his understanding, as did being held accountable and expected to lead. Furthermore, Kennedy eventually came to see that African Americans would not be satisfied with half-measures, that racial injustice was a multifaceted problem, and that white supremacy was not simply an irrational, embarrassing cultural legacy that would fade away eventually. In addition, by listening to civil rights leaders and opponents more thoroughly, he learned their vocabularies and about the desires and motivations they expressed. Kennedy did not have a conversion experience on civil rights, as some have suggested. Rather, his political judgment—forged during a revolutionary moment in American history—matured. Kennedy still had limitations, no doubt: namely, he wanted to control events and conform them to his interests, and he was quick to view civil rights crises through the lens of foreign affairs. But by 1963, he was positioned to exercise strong political and rhetorical leadership.

The struggle over civil rights in the United States became a fury in 1963, but its political meaning remained ambiguous. The number of marches, boycotts, sit-ins, and voter registration drives increased dramatically, especially in the South and in border states. Less than a week before Kennedy’s speech, *Time* claimed that the beginning of 1963 would “long be remembered as the time when the U.S. Negro’s revolution for equality exploded on all fronts.”¹¹ The magazine’s use of an ordnance metaphor signified macabre irony, given the violent character of massive resistance to civil rights campaigns. Indeed, several civil rights workers had their homes and headquarters bombed. Others were shot. Scores of demonstrators were attacked with dogs and firehoses, and many more were beaten viciously. To many Americans, the events of the “Negro revolution” simultaneously—and alarmingly—revealed the pervasiveness of racial discrimination and the depth of Southern white supremacists’ racism and defiance. *Something* had to be done about the disturbing circumstances, it seemed, but there was little agreement about what that something was. A common historical interpretation holds that the events of 1963 “forced Kennedy’s hand”—that is, compelled him to make a strong televised speech and propose comprehensive legislation. But this conclusion is simplistic. Events influenced his actions, to be sure, and understanding them is vital for grasping the significance of his speech and discerning its message. Yet Kennedy chose to speak and announce his legislative plans (against the majority counsel of his advisers) based on his interpretation of events and his maturing political judgement. Moreover, his speech helped bring meaning to those events and, therefore, reshaped the political context in which change could take place.

The nonviolent direction action campaign in Birmingham, Alabama, in the spring of 1963 typically is identified as the key episode that reconfigured President Kennedy’s political calculus on civil rights. However, his administration had been reckoning with unsettling events since the

start of the year. In January, George Wallace, the new governor of Alabama, foreshadowed a confrontation with the federal government by declaring his commitment to “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever” in his inaugural address.¹² Meanwhile, a group of Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives challenged the president’s legislative leadership by proposing a narrow civil rights bill. Kennedy countered by recommending a minor civil rights initiative of his own, but more significantly he made an overture toward adopting a new rhetorical stance that emphasized the moral dimension of racial issues. His special message to Congress at the end of February decried racial discrimination on the grounds that, “Above all, it is wrong.”¹³

Of course, confrontations between civil rights activists and opponents raged throughout this time and garnered significant media attention, both in the U.S. and abroad. The retaliation against demonstrations in Greenwood, Mississippi, was especially fierce and dramatic. Moreover, the racial situation in the Magnolia State as a whole was so bad that the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights issued an interim report expressing its alarm at the defiance of the Constitution and a near-complete breakdown of law and order—a situation it claimed “affronts the conscience of the nation.” The report acknowledged the moral language of Kennedy’s recent special message but also emphasized the commission’s unanimous belief that the president should “employ to the fullest the legal and moral powers of his office” to help guarantee equal rights.¹⁴ Finally, the astounding, brutal retaliation against protestors in Birmingham—often seen as one of the most vital episodes in the entire movement—also led some critics to demand that the president view events through a moral lens and communicate that vision to the nation. Notably, Martin Luther King Jr. emphasized in an interview that Kennedy needed to speak to the country about the moral imperative of integration.¹⁵

Events in the first half of 1963 gave the issue of civil rights media salience and helped bring it to the forefront of the national conscience. Moreover, the variety of demonstrations and statements by Black leaders helped widen the issue publicly, showing that matters of racial equality were not confined to the spheres of public education and transportation.¹⁶ However, the significance of these events was not so clear or overwhelming that it *demand*ed Kennedy deliver a vigorous speech immediately. Indeed, if events had forced his hand, surely the president would have done so sooner. Instead, in a press conference on May 8, just after the climax of the Birmingham protests, Kennedy blandly affirmed his commitment to “uphold the law of the land.” He also referred to events in Birmingham as a spectacle that damaged the nation’s reputation and expressed hope that the situation there would be “peacefully settled.”¹⁷ Four days later, the president did deliver a short national address about the events in Birmingham. But his comments were managerial in tone as he emphasized the federal government would “do whatever must be done to preserve order, to protect the lives of its citizens, and to uphold the law of the land.”¹⁸ At the end of the month, an editorial in the *Washington Post* called for “dynamic national leadership to tell the country of its crisis and to win public opinion to support the dramatic changes that must take place” with regard to civil rights.¹⁹ Yet for many Americans, Kennedy’s position seems to have been adequate. His comments resonated with public concern about law and order and widespread opposition to demonstrations.²⁰

By June, President Kennedy faced a complex political and rhetorical situation on civil rights—and it promised to keep evolving, especially given the impending confrontation to desegregate the University of Alabama. The state of affairs represented a crisis, as the *Post* editorial stated. But what type of crisis was it, exactly, and how would it be solved? In public, Kennedy suggested the best way to solve the crisis was to “take steps to provide equal treatment

to all of our citizens.”²¹ In private, though, he began to see that Southern segregationist leaders would not acknowledge their responsibility for the crisis and, therefore, would perpetuate it.²² Moreover, he knew that civil rights activists hoped to build on their recent success at creating “constructive, nonviolent tension.”²³ While Kennedy wanted the protests to stop—for a variety of reasons, including their impact on the nation’s image and his own—he also understood that Blacks had legitimate grievances and were growing tired with the counsel of patience. Comprehensive civil rights legislation would address the crisis and the underlying issues it represented, of course. But would Congress pass such a law? Moreover, it was easy for commentators like the editors at the *Post* to call for dynamic leadership, but performing such leadership, especially rhetorically, was an enormous challenge. What could the president say? When? To whom? And to what effect?

While administration officials considered how best to tackle the daunting situation in which the nation found itself, George Wallace prepared to “stand in the schoolhouse door” to prevent the court-ordered desegregation of the University of Alabama. The Justice Department prepared thoroughly to avoid a repeat of the fiasco at the University of Mississippi in 1962, and school officials in Tuscaloosa cooperated with its efforts to ensure the attendance of two Black students. But nothing could be taken for granted.

Two days before the final act in Alabama, President Kennedy seemed to try out a new combination of rhetorical appeals on civil rights in his speech to the conference of U.S. mayors. He emphasized that equal rights was a national issue rather than a regional one, affirmed the cause as morally just, and put the onus for progress on white political leaders. His remarks received scant public attention but were promising. Moreover, Kennedy considered building on them. He contemplated delivering a forceful national address on civil rights soon, depending on how things went in Tuscaloosa.

Kennedy’s chief speechwriter, Ted Sorensen, has noted that the situation at the University of Alabama “seemed an unlikely basis for a major presidential speech” on civil rights, since it did not represent a constitutional crisis and was not related to the most controversial parts of the civil rights bill the president planned to introduce.²⁴ In addition, the outcome in Alabama was a favorable one for the administration (i.e., no use of force or violence) and, therefore, did not require damage control. Furthermore, virtually all of Kennedy’s advisers—except his brother, the attorney general—counseled against delivering a national address. So why did he eventually choose this occasion to make a strong statement?

No single factor explains President Kennedy’s decision, which was made at the last minute and gave his staff little time to prepare a speech text. But he likely realized that, in a sense, no better occasion would come along. Exigencies like Birmingham would continue to draw him into the morass and limit his opportunities for a clear win. In contrast, the desegregation of the University of Alabama constituted a public drama in which the villain and loser already had been cast and provided the president sufficient distance to exercise leadership rather than crisis management. Increasingly, Kennedy was stung by criticism from political allies that he had failed to use “moral suasion” effectively to lead the nation and the Congress.²⁵ Critique can lead to reappraisal, of course. Perhaps the relatively unemotional character of the Tuscaloosa situation allowed Kennedy to see that a direct, public, moral appeal on civil rights could enable him to get in front of the issue and improve his image. Moreover, he had come to realize his presidency might “be defined by his response to the racial crisis”²⁶ and understood that perceptions of his moral leadership would shape his legacy. Kennedy also was bolstered by the administration’s success in Alabama and may have gained confidence that he could persuade

some Americans to face up to the nation's deep problems related to race. Who knew how a national address would affect the prospects for his forthcoming legislative proposal? But a compelling rhetorical rationale for legislation could shift criticism to Congress, and a strong moral appeal might convince civil rights leaders that he was not unmoved—personally or politically—by their cause. Furthermore, the president could reframe the context so that a failure to take significant action on civil rights constituted something more than a mere political shortcoming.

Amid these larger concerns, the White House needed to finalize a speech in a matter of hours. On the afternoon of June 11, as events in Tuscaloosa wound down, Kennedy made a firm decision to speak. His press secretary already had reserved the 8 p.m. time slot on the national television and radio networks, and members of the administration had previously discussed some general ideas for a possible presidential address. Ted Sorensen drafted the speech, which included a few of those ideas alongside stock passages from previous messages, plus new perspectives. The president revised the draft with the assistance of Robert Kennedy and Burke Marshall, the assistant attorney general on civil rights. As Sorensen worked on a second draft that incorporated those revisions, President Kennedy continued to discuss the speech with his brother and jotted down additional ideas he might include. Time passed. Sorensen typed frantically. The broadcast team finalized its preparations in the Oval Office. White House officials worried the speech would not be ready in time. Ultimately, a final speaking text—albeit one that lacked a proper peroration—was completed just minutes before the scheduled start time.

Reinterpreting and Responding to America's Racial Crisis

That Kennedy would deliver some type of speech on the evening of June 11 probably did not surprise most Americans at the time. The events at the University of Alabama received significant attention in the news, and speaking out about dramatic school desegregation episodes seemed to have become a part of a U.S. president's job since Little Rock. Just what Kennedy would say, however, was much less predictable. White moderates in the South who were cooperating with modest desegregation efforts and opposed to antics like Wallace's must have hoped Kennedy would signal some measure of support or satisfaction. Government officials and political allies who had been urging him to take a stronger rhetorical stand wondered if that might finally happen. Black leaders hoped the president would speak to the moral imperative involved in the struggle for civil rights but feared he might deliver just another speech focused on constitutional questions, public order, and the nation's image. But given the ambiguity of recent events and the president's rhetorical inclinations, "no one knew just what to expect"²⁷ when they tuned into his speech.

Ultimately, he began by speaking calmly about the events in Tuscaloosa. Then, he made a philosophical and political case for equality, and he connected the struggle for civil rights at home to the international fight for freedom. Through the speech, he explicated the broader legal, economic, and social aspects of racism. He asserted that racial discrimination was a nationwide problem and announced his intent to introduce comprehensive federal civil rights legislation. He articulated many Blacks' interests, affirmed their frustrations, and implicitly called out whites for sustaining their oppression. He recognized discord yet called for unity, inviting listeners to solve the nation's racial crisis for everyone's good and the good of the republic. And, most notably, he declared that the fundamental issue of the civil rights crisis was a moral one.

The speech ended awkwardly, as Kennedy had to extemporize the conclusion, and another round of editing could have improved the overall structure. Moreover, some of the language was too abstract or stilted. Even so, the message was direct and challenging, and the president delivered well. He spoke from a manuscript throughout most of the thirteen-minute address but started speaking from memory at the eleven-minute mark. In the early minutes, Kennedy's delivery was marred slightly by vocal fillers as he found his bearings as a speaker, and with more practice he surely would have used pauses to greater dramatic effect. Still, he conveyed sincerity—especially when he invited white listeners to imagine life from the perspective of the other and when he decried the “arbitrary indignity” that African Americans experienced as a result of segregation. And as he spoke from memory, the president's sustained eye contact, natural gestures, and easygoing rhythm made his appeal feel candid and personal.

That Kennedy's speech has so many themes makes it difficult to analyze and interpret exhaustively. But its most important rhetorical features are these, which will be considered in turn: (1) Kennedy connected the civil rights crisis to the Cold War crisis without implicitly subordinating the domestic struggle for equal rights. (2) He recognized that the problem of racial injustice was not confined to the South. (3) He employed a subtle fear appeal that implied the civil rights crisis must be solved to avoid a state of disorder and chaos. (4) He made a case for a bold legislative solution. (5) He situated the issue of equality in the moral and political domains simultaneously, with mixed success.

When Kennedy stated, early in the speech, “Today we are committed to a worldwide struggle to promote and protect the rights of all who wish to be free” (5), civil rights leaders likely heard it as a prologue to subordinating their cause to the Cold War. Indeed, many Blacks were frustrated that the president seemed to view civil rights demonstrations—and the struggle as a whole—through the lens of international affairs. Did protests signify to him a deep problem in American society that needed solving, or rather an embarrassing public image problem for his foreign policy efforts? Oftentimes, it seemed to be the latter. But in this speech, he avoided mentioning issues of image and instead suggested that racial discrimination made a mockery of America's gospel of freedom at home and abroad, but most significantly at home:

We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it, and we cherish our freedom here at home, but are we to say to the world, and much more importantly, to each other that this is the land of the free except for the Negroes; that we have no second-class citizens except Negroes; that we have no class or caste system, no ghettos, no master race except with respect to Negroes? (13)

Asking Americans to see the struggle for freedom at home as part of a larger ideological contest made good sense. The battles against white supremacy and Communism were linked, politically and rhetorically. Yet gauging the impact of this appeal on listeners' motivations is difficult. Perhaps reckoning with the broader hypocrisy inherent in racial discrimination influenced some listeners, as it involved a different perspective on the issue as well as distance from the immediate civil rights crises. Regardless, Kennedy's appeal was a significant accomplishment of another kind, as it signaled to civil rights advocates that their cause was no longer a subordinate concern for his administration.

In addition to suggesting that the issue of racial equality transcended national boundaries, the president explained that it transcended regional boundaries, too. At the time, the confrontations over race that dominated the news took place in the South, and many Americans

saw discrimination as a regional problem. But Kennedy stated in his speech, “This is not a sectional issue. Difficulties over segregation and discrimination exist in every city, in every state of the union” (9). Lest a listener missed his point, he built upon it later: “It is not enough to pin the blame on others, to say this is a problem of one section of the country or another, or deplore the facts that we face” (17). This appeal may have been intended to placate whites in the South who complained that their region was targeted unfairly since the racial situation in the North was at least as bad. More likely, though, Kennedy’s appeal reflected his matured understanding that racial inequalities plagued Americans everywhere and revealed his administration’s recent recognition that African Americans outside the South were equally fed up with their oppression. Some white listeners outside the South would have understood the president’s message, and, indeed, civil rights problems in the North and Midwest gained significant media attention at the end of 1963. However, many white listeners probably found it difficult to appreciate Kennedy’s point. For Blacks living outside of Dixie, though, the president had affirmed their frustrations, albeit indirectly and to a limited extent.

Just because he understood that African Americans in places like Illinois and New York were exasperated with their oppression did not mean Kennedy was on their side wholeheartedly. In fact, the president’s speech subtly sounded the alarm about the possibility of Black violence even as it acknowledged “their only remedy is in the street” (20) and invited sympathy for their pent-up dissatisfaction with “the counsels of patience and delay” (11). For instance, immediately after noting that racial difficulties represented a nationwide problem, Kennedy also noted that they had produced “in many cities a rising tide of discontent that threatens the public safety” (9). Later, he developed the theme further: “The fires of frustration and discord are burning in every city, North and South, where legal remedies are not at hand. Redress is sought in the streets, in demonstrations, parades, and protests which create tensions and threaten violence and threaten lives” (15).

Intentionally or not, the president made it seem that the specter of violence was Blacks’ fault, especially since he never decried the brutal violence against them by whites. Administration officials were concerned that perpetual racial confrontations would create a state of chaos across the nation, an anxiety that had some legitimacy. But did the president purposefully try to activate public fears about Black violence in his speech? It is difficult to know, but his rhetoric may have functioned that way, regardless. Whether or not the fear of violence motivated listeners to support desegregation initiatives is difficult to discern, too. After all, (presumed) Black violence could be prevented through crackdowns on demonstrations rather than addressing the injustices that gave rise to it. In the end, Kennedy may not have fully appreciated the implications of what he communicated with regard to violence.

Kennedy’s rationale for civil rights legislation in this speech was based, in part, on the fear of violence. He claimed that “nationwide legislation is needed if we are to move this problem from the streets to the courts” (23) and noted that unless “the Congress acts, their [‘Negro citizens’] only remedy is in the street” (20). But his rationale also was based on the premise that current efforts to ensure equal opportunities—despite their achievements or intentions—were inadequate. The president suggested that as a result of his executive orders, the principle “that race has no place in American life or law” (19) had been adopted in the operations of the federal government. Yet he noted that this principle did not govern the nation as a whole—which is why legislation was required. He suggested that as a result of his guidance, many businesses and schools had made progress in desegregating voluntarily, yet he indicated that the obstacles to further—and faster—progress could be removed through legislation alone.

Moreover, he argued that federal legislation needed to “authorize the federal government to participate more fully in lawsuits designed to end segregation in public education” (24). This statement also functioned as a signal to those in Alabama, including George Wallace, who believed they still might win the school desegregation battle²⁸ because (in their estimation) the federal government had no legal authority to intervene. In addition, his call to empower the government further signaled that he finally understood the significant, unfair burdens that Black families and civil rights organizations shouldered by trying to secure equal educational opportunities through the courts. Overall, Kennedy’s rationale affirmed that with regard to civil rights there was not “for every wrong a remedy” (20) and that even the few remedies available were flawed and limited.

Throughout the speech, the president commended the basic decency of whites who had complied with desegregation efforts for “having met their responsibilities in a constructive way” (3) and for “recognizing right was well as reality” (18). Yet after the melodrama in Tuscaloosa, it was obvious to many listeners that plenty of whites, especially in the South, did not recognize right or reality. Indeed, very few “even accepted that segregation was morally repugnant and ought to be abandoned.”²⁹ Kennedy understood this, of course. He also seemed to understand that more comprehensive, more effective, more expeditious desegregation efforts were vital but would not make things right in the nation with regard to racial equality. The nation needed a deep moral reckoning, as civil rights leaders had suggested. The president could not make that happen completely. But he could acknowledge it, declare it, and point the nation in the right direction.

Kennedy turned to moral rhetoric early in the speech by expressing his “hope that every American . . . will stop and examine his conscience about this [the desegregation of the University of Alabama] and other related incidents” (4). He took a soft, indirect approach to start. He did not demand that listeners examine their consciences but rather expressed hope they might. Still, the president presented a moral frame; that is, he located current events and the broader context of racial equality in the moral domain. When a speaker convinces listeners that an issue falls within the moral domain, they react differently. They become more responsive to universalism, the notion that a certain position should be adopted in principle, across the board.³⁰ Perhaps not surprisingly, then, Kennedy continued his effort to situate racial equality in the moral domain with an appeal to a series of *oughts*—a sequence of universal imperatives about racial justice in the United States. Notably, he did not assert, to start, that whites ought to treat Blacks in a certain way or argue Blacks ought to receive such treatment. Instead, he presented moral imperatives that were more indirect and abstract by using the language, “It ought to be possible for . . .” His initial appeal was a mild moral imperative that provided a vision of what the nation should look like in principle rather than in practice.

The president’s speech deployed these imperatives awkwardly, however. For instance, the following claim sounds like a *non sequitur* fallacy or a faulty syllogism: Because Americans of all races serve in the military, it “ought to be possible . . . for American students of any color to attend any school they select without having to be backed up by troops” (5). Indeed, the basis for Kennedy’s imperatives is confounding more generally. At times, his speech is grounded on natural rights and law—namely, as the president put it, “the principle that all men are created equal and that the rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened” (4). But at other times, his imperatives relate to matters of political rights and privileges, such as the franchise. In addition, his speech employs the quasi-religious appeal that “every American ought to have the right to be treated as he would wish to be treated” (7) yet suggests—

inexplicably—that this tenet is both “as old as the scriptures and . . . as clear as the American Constitution” (10). Despite their quasi-logical form, the imperatives in Kennedy’s speech do not add up.

The imperatives Kennedy presented his listeners lacked consistency and clarity because morality does not translate easily into the language of rights, and his message dealt with both subjects. But perhaps his message did not require precision to be persuasive. In many public controversies, citizens imbue moral imperatives (e.g., “people ought to be able to . . .”) with legal ones (e.g., “there ought to be a law that guarantees . . .”)³¹ and generally lack a framework for talking or thinking about morally-tinged social problems in a cohesive way. That Kennedy’s imperatives do not withstand close logical scrutiny does not mean they were without rhetorical force. Many of his listeners wanted, intuitively, to hear a commonsense justification guaranteeing racial equality rather than a detailed, systematic rationale. One effect of moral protests (such as the 1963 civil rights demonstrations) is that citizens can develop an intuitive understanding something is wrong without precisely naming the principle(s) at stake.³² In such rhetorical contexts—especially if one’s opponents cannot be reasoned with—it makes sense for a speaker to convey an overall sense that the issue is intellectually and emotionally beyond the pale.³³ Such an accomplishment was the strength of President Kennedy’s moral appeal. His rationale for racial equality was not doctrinally robust, perhaps, but he communicated that the issue had been settled for all practical, political purposes. The most important feature of his speech was a simple declaration: “We are confronted primarily with a moral issue” (10). He backed up the declaration with a principle so common among religious traditions and in public life that it seems commonsensical: we should treat others as we want to be treated. But the straightforward declaration was paramount.

To be clear, Kennedy’s moral reasoning, such as it is, still had a significant function in the speech. In particular, he used the principle of reciprocity to elicit sympathy and empathy. The president depicted the pitiable condition of Blacks in which the system was stacked against them in order to show they were not, in fact, being treated as any white listener would want to be treated. His reminder that a Black citizen “cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public . . . cannot send his children to the best public school available . . . cannot vote for the public officials who will represent him” (11) was more vital, rhetorically, than proving what ought to be possible or what ought to be a right. When Kennedy punctuated this reminder with a poignant question—“[W]ho among us would be content to have the color his skin changed and stand in his place?” (11)—he invited the listener to provide the answer: “Not me.” This answer would have been obvious to many listeners, but not because switching places would lead to having one’s rights violated or because, in an abstract sense, what ought to be possible would not be possible. The answer was obvious because that other life would be terrible, because that life—as the president later suggested—would be filled with “arbitrary indignity” (22). In short, Kennedy presented his audience with a personally, rather than politically, abhorrent proposition.

This personal dimension of his speech is significant. Rhetorically, President Kennedy attempted to establish a moral community—a process that political theorists describe as creating a moral foundation for politics by re-drawing the boundaries in which individuals care about each other’s well-being and have a sense of shared fate and mutual responsibility.³⁴ Crucially, he encouraged whites to have an affective response to the moral indignity of racial discrimination, not merely to understand their political duty. By appealing to reciprocity and encouraging perspective-taking, Kennedy reinforced and heightened some listeners’ emotions about racial injustice that already had been triggered by images of vicious attacks on Blacks in

Birmingham and elsewhere. Moreover, by making emotions part of his moral appeal, the president responded, in effect, to criticism that he was detached and did not feel—or convey—the moral exigence of racial equality.

Finally, Kennedy’s moral rhetoric also stressed that it was time to take action “in all of our daily lives” (16), not just in the legislature. But he did not explain what such action would look like, and the speech focused on legislative solutions. Indeed, a skeptic might read his “moral issue” declaration as little more than a political strategy. The declaration was strategically significant, no doubt, as it performed one of the most basic functions of presidential rhetoric: defining political reality. That is, Kennedy named the situation to provide a basis for understanding it and determining the appropriate response.³⁵ Specifically, he framed comprehensive civil rights legislation as a partial remedy for a moral wrong. As with any moral definition communicated by a president, Kennedy’s had the potential to enhance his position, authority, and image³⁶ but also carried risks. Namely, his moral definition could make it difficult to compromise on the legislative solution, could increase frustrations if his legislative proposal failed, and could make some whites in the South more intransigent about desegregation rather than less so, as a few administration officials believed.

Other rhetorical features of Kennedy’s speech merit attention, including the absence of villains or enemies in a speech that depicted a moral tragedy and how it addressed multiple audiences simultaneously. But understanding the five features analyzed here—its framing of domestic civil rights as coequal to the global fight for freedom, its framing of discrimination as a national rather than regional crisis, its appeal to fears about chaos and violence, its legislative rationale, and its mixture of moral and political imperatives—provides insight into the speech’s most significant messages and meanings.

Immediate Impact and Enduring Significance

The immediate reactions to Kennedy’s message were diverse. But the general tenor was positive, and the president’s moral declarations received the most acclaim. Overall, Kennedy’s rhetoric improved his public image and authority on civil rights among both whites and Blacks. For instance, an editorial in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* claimed, “President Kennedy’s moving appeal to the conscience of America should be regarded as one the majority achievements of the civil rights struggle.”³⁷ In addition, Jackie Robinson asserted the address was “one of the finest declarations ever issued in the cause of human rights,” and Martin Luther King Jr. called it “one of the most eloquent, profound, and unequivocal pleas for justice and the freed of all men ever made by a president.”³⁸ The speech’s effect on King was especially significant, as it influenced him to shift the focus of the March on Washington from a demonstration against the president to a demonstration urging Congress to pass the president’s civil rights bill.

Not everyone was satisfied by the speech, though. Even before the adjustments to the March on Washington came to pass, Malcolm X indicted Kennedy for trying to contain the civil rights movement and direct it toward an outlet that favored his goals and interests. And moderate Black leaders like James Farmer and Wyatt Tee Walker—despite their general support for the speech—called on Kennedy to follow through by providing sustained political and rhetorical leadership.³⁹ Some whites who applauded President Kennedy’s address emphasized it had to be a first step, too. An editorial in *The New Republic* even called for him to deliver follow-up speeches in the South about the morality of civil rights.⁴⁰ Not surprisingly, he did not follow that advice.

More significantly, however, Kennedy “did not reassert his moral leadership on civil rights” after June 11. Indeed, he never delivered another speech focused on civil rights.⁴¹ Given that his laudable, inspirational rhetoric was followed by relative silence, frustration is part of this speech’s legacy. On the other hand, the address helped ensure Kennedy’s historical legacy. One scholar has observed that in delivering his speech, “Kennedy became the nation’s first civil rights president,” and another has argued the speech marked the beginning of the Second Reconstruction.⁴²

Another aspect of the speech’s legacy was apparent to some listeners soon after its delivery. To wit, a columnist for *The New Yorker* claimed:

The President’s proclamation of a state of “moral crisis” is surely the most important one he has ever made. . . . For the first time in history, the government has championed complete equality of the Negro as a matter of right; for the first time, it has acknowledged a moral obligation to seek quality, as a matter of right, by political means.⁴³

By “government,” the column in reality meant “the president,” in his role as chief executive and as symbolic head of the government. As such, the historic achievement identified in the column has turned out to be an enduring one. Namely, Kennedy’s June 11 speech allied the office of the presidency with the cause of civil rights, especially as a moral cause. Afterward, many Americans expected presidents to talk about racial equality using a moral vocabulary and to provide moral leadership on the issue in some sense.

The persistence of this expectation became apparent somewhat recently, following race-related protests and confrontations in Charlottesville, Virginia, in the spring and summer of 2017. Scholars and pundits indicated that in his public statements and silences following those events, Donald Trump had violated the expectations of his office. President Trump was criticized for ignoring calls “to assume the moral leadership Americans expect from the White House,” and he was compared unfavorably to Kennedy, who—analysts noted—had delivered “transformative speech” that helped the nation move forward by morally condemning racism and urging citizens to confront it head-on.⁴⁴ It is too soon to gauge whether Trump’s contravention of this presidential expectation, paired with recent changes in American political culture regarding race, will have long-lasting significance.

Before closing, one additional legacy of Kennedy’s speech deserves mention: the embodiment of its message in the civil rights legislation of the mid-1960s. Kennedy’s identification with the cause of civil rights facilitated President Lyndon Johnson’s successful effort to pass comprehensive legislation in 1964, following Kennedy’s assassination.⁴⁵ The core messages of Kennedy’s June 11 speech—that national values forbade racial discrimination and that all Americans had the right to be treated as they would wish to be treated—found legal expression in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. And its emphasis that voting is an inherent privilege of citizenship found expression in the Voting Rights Act of 1965. As the enduring value of these laws recently has been called into question, Americans involved in those deliberations should look back to and learn from the rhetoric that gave rise to the civil rights acts, to the words that helped build the conviction that racial discrimination has no place in American life or law.

The Limits of Rhetoric

President Kennedy’s speech is truly a landmark of U.S. civil rights oratory. The speech was highly significant in its own time, an era when a presidential address to the nation had special standing and was not drowned out by an endless production of political messaging. As a

shared moment of rhetorical engagement, the speech provided a significant opportunity for Americans to reflect—simultaneously—on current events, the broader significance of racial inequality, and the lives of those who suffered under the system of Jim Crow. Moreover, Kennedy’s speech made an important contribution to the ongoing debate about civil rights in America by construing the meaning of the constitution and its underlying values with regard to the nation’s racial crisis.

Yet, in conclusion, one should acknowledge its limits. It probably did not convert the listeners who most needed a conversion, for example. After the speech, many whites in the South who had begun “to resign themselves to the inevitability of token desegregation chose to ignore Kennedy’s appeals to conscience and morality.”⁴⁶ Violent resistance persisted in the South. Indeed, civil rights worker Medgar Evers was murdered in Mississippi just hours after the president’s address. Segregationists in Congress persisted in their fight, too, and indicated that Kennedy’s message would not change their minds about civil rights legislation. In fact, Georgia Senator Richard Russell called the speech “propaganda” and claimed it “completely disregarded reason, human experience, and true equality under the Constitution.”⁴⁷

Still, Kennedy’s address was—and remains—effective. The president exhibited prudence in the speech, as he attempted to balance competing interests on a contentious issue. But he also understood the limits of accommodation, especially moral accommodation. His declaration that civil rights was a moral issue was effective, even though not all audience members were persuaded by his moral rationale. If nothing else, his speech shifted the moral burden of proof to the opponents of civil rights, and it functions as a model for keeping it there. As such, his address helped constrain the rhetorical opposition to racial equality. Finally, the speech reinforced the moral component of presidential leadership, and it remains an exemplar of how to evoke implicit values in order to instigate the process of moral reckoning. The moral logic of Kennedy’s speech may not withstand close scrutiny as a formal argument, but it is rhetorically compelling and effectively points the nation in the direction of racial justice.

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Notes

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¹⁵ David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 267.

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- ³⁸ Martin Luther King Jr., Telegram to John F. Kennedy, June 12, 1963, White House Central Files, Name File, Box 1478, John F. Kennedy Library; Jackie Robinson, "A Salute to Kennedy," *Norfolk Journal & Guide*, June 22, 1963, 6.
- ³⁹ The morning after Kennedy's speech, Malcolm X, Allan Morrison, James Farmer, and Wyatt Tee Walker debated it in a television studio; the debate was broadcast five days later. "Race Relations in Crisis," *Open Mind*, hosted by Richard D. Heffner, Metromedia Broadcasting, June 16, 1963.
- ⁴⁰ "Law and Justice," *The New Republic*, June 22, 1963, 3.
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- ⁴² Steven Levingston, *Kennedy and King: The President, the Pastor, and the Battle Over Civil Rights* (New York: Hachette, 2017), x; Carl M. Brauer, *John F. Kennedy and the Second Reconstruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 259.
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