Where You Stand Depends on with Whom You’re Standing: John F. Kennedy’s Vacillating Stance on Civil Rights

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In 1957, Eisenhower’s proposed Civil Rights Act was under review by Congress. Surely Senator John F. Kennedy, a Northern liberal who had been in close contact with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for almost his entire career, would support the bill. However, Kennedy compromised his pro-civil rights stance, voting with Southern segregationists in opposition to two of the bill’s proposals. His votes helped weaken the bill. Kennedy maintained this weak stance for most of his senatorial career; at one point, African American baseball star Jackie Robinson described Kennedy as the “fair-haired boy of Southern segregationists.”

If Kennedy’s voting record as a senator suggests that he was not very committed to the issue of racial equality, how did he become known as a human rights hero by the time of his death in November 1963? On the one hand, although he was reluctant to take a strong pro-civil rights stance through his entire political career, it would seem that Kennedy was committed to the issue and pressed for civil rights legislation when it was the pragmatic solution; he wanted to help African Americans gain rights, and did so when it was possible. However, Kennedy was not committed to the issue until 1963; before he became President, he would alter his stance often to earn and retain support from both African Americans and Southern white Democrats. Ultimately, due to violent opposition to the Civil Rights Movement, he chose to take a stronger stance on civil rights in 1963. Because of his desire to win votes from all Democrats, including African Americans and Southern whites, Kennedy altered his position on the issue in order to please the group that demanded the most of him at any given time. Because of the violence that stemmed from responses to civil rights protests, Kennedy

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was forced to consider civil rights conflicts to be a danger to the nation, which drove him to take the Civil Rights Movement seriously.

The Pragmatist

Although he took a weaker public stance on civil rights for most of his career, Kennedy was always committed to the issue. As a senator, Kennedy maintained a commitment to civil rights by building up a pro-civil rights staff, highlighted by former U.S. Civil Rights Commission attorney Harris Wofford. As President, he faced civil rights with the restraints of public opinion and a stubborn Congress in mind. By the end of his political career, Kennedy attempted to fulfill his earlier promises on civil rights, submitting a civil rights bill to Congress and also issuing several executive orders prohibiting segregation in federally assisted institutions. Overall, Kennedy maintained a private commitment to civil rights, although he was forced to relax his public stance for pragmatic reasons.

Although he weakened his public stance on civil rights to protect himself from adversaries attempting to destroy his presidential campaign, Kennedy did maintain a private commitment to the issue that is conveyed through both statements to presidential aides andhirings of political advisers who were known for their support of civil rights. Historian Mark Stern sympathizes with Kennedy’s caution on the issue as he began to campaign for the presidency in 1957, noting how hard it was for a Democratic candidate from the North to take a position on civil rights; any statement that Kennedy made regarding the issue would be scrutinized by Republicans, especially by white Southerners. Stern’s claim is exemplified by an article published by the New York Times shortly before the election, which cited two Republican Senators attacking the “conflict” between Kennedy’s statements and his voting record. The article reflects the pressure Kennedy faced from politicians for openly advocating for civil rights. In this political scene, Kennedy was justified in his cautious approach towards the issue, since any wrong move could ruin his campaign. However, Stern argues, Kennedy did show a loyalty to the civil rights cause; he stayed in contact with civil rights activists throughout his
campaign and also chose political advisers and cabinet members, such as Robert F. Kennedy and Harris Wofford, who had very strong pro-civil rights stances. As a senator, Kennedy was practical in the sense that he would let his actions rather than his words reflect his stance on civil rights, since his words were more likely to receive criticism from Republicans. Furthermore, although he was committed to civil rights, political aide Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. notes that Kennedy once refused to dramatize his commitment to civil rights when one of his political advisers suggested doing so. Kennedy did not want to appear to be a sell-out by making impossible promises to blacks about the issue. A speechwriter for Kennedy, Richard Goodwin, quoted him saying that he wanted to be in the “thick of the fight” as president. The quote demonstrates that in his heart, Kennedy wanted to make a difference in helping African Americans gain their rights. Kennedy’s aides Schlesinger and Goodwin, who saw Kennedy as both a politician and a person, suggest that Kennedy was a person who deeply cared about civil rights; in combination with Stern, it seems that Kennedy was a pragmatist who set realistic goals, and his goals caused him to take a weak stance on civil rights during his campaign.

Two influences, public opinion and Congress, caused Kennedy to become reluctant in fighting for civil rights reform during his presidency. These influences compelled him to consider civil rights pragmatically, causing him to take a weaker position on the issue than he had held whilst running for president. In a study of Kennedy’s actions on civil rights during his term, historian Daniel Stevens argues that Kennedy clung to public opinion as a guide to his stance on the matter, and that the lack of public interest in the issue caused a reluctance to propose and push legislation that lasted throughout the first two years of his presidency. Stevens cites a 1962 press conference in which Kennedy responded to a question about his reluctance to issue an executive order banning discrimination in federally assisted housing; Kennedy stressed the importance of maintaining a “national consensus” with the public. Kennedy’s response to the question illustrates how the public had a large influence on his civil rights stance, forcing him to consider the potential backlash that could occur due to his actions. Furthermore, it was impractical for Kennedy, who had won the
1960 election by the closest margin in history, to suddenly press for enormous social change. Kennedy was pragmatic in his sensitivity to the public opinion, putting his personal goal—to win civil rights for African Americans—aside.

Kennedy’s second influence as president, Congress, forced him to temporarily retreat from his promises of ensuring racial equality for two reasons: because he was certain that Southern congressmen would force the bill to die out during Congressional sessions, and also because he needed votes from those same congressmen to make progress on other issues, such as foreign policy. Shortly after his inauguration, Kennedy was warned in a memo by Senator Joseph Clark that the chances of a civil rights bill being passed in Congress were not very high. Theodore Sorensen, who served as Kennedy’s special counsel and adviser, stated that “the prospects of a long filibuster” in the Senate caused Kennedy to believe that he could not launch a “major civil rights campaign” early in his presidency. Taking into account that Kennedy did become more reluctant to pass civil rights legislation as President, both Clark and Sorensen reflect Kennedy’s practical approach through the fact that he did not even attempt to press for civil rights legislation when there seemed to be no chance that it would pass through Congress.

When public approval of the Civil Rights Movement rose, the prospect of a civil rights bill suddenly became plausible, causing Kennedy to strengthen his public stance and reveal his underlying commitment to civil rights. Kennedy’s pragmatism is evident because he jumped at the earliest opportunity to push for civil rights legislation when it appeared possible. He realized the possibility of a bill being passed when his brother received a report that 1,122 civil rights demonstrations had occurred between May 20 and August 10, 1963. The report illustrates that people all over the country were now supportive of African Americans’ fight for constitutional rights, and that there would be a considerable amount of pressure on the federal government to pass a civil rights bill. The idea that public opinion of civil rights was strong in 1963 is supported by a September 1963 Gallup Poll recording what the public perceived as the most important issue at various points during
Kennedy’s presidency; the poll states that by September 1963 civil rights had risen to become the most important issue to the public. Many Americans, both white and black, were aware of the importance of solving the issue, which made a civil rights bill appear achievable. Seeing the bill as a pragmatic solution, Kennedy led the nation in a campaign for a civil rights bill.

Although it is possible that Kennedy ignored Gallup polls, he did have a resource that kept him consistent with public opinion as President: sixteen public opinion polls that his assistants took over the course of his term. Therefore, it can be argued that Kennedy was aware of public opinion and could be influenced by it; he would act based on the polls that his assistants gave to him.

Compromiser or Sell-Out?

It is valid to argue that Kennedy maintained a commitment to civil rights but was forced to approach the issue with more caution for pragmatic reasons; however, most of his statements and actions during this same time period strongly indicate that he did not have much interest in civil rights, and only considered the issue as a political tool. Many of Kennedy’s aides, such as Harris Wofford, believed that he hired a staff that on the whole supported civil rights because he did not want to deal with the issue himself. Furthermore, Kennedy only met with activists, such as members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, to win their endorsements; he believed that the endorsements would help his popularity among African Americans. Similarly, Kennedy must have had political motives in selecting Lyndon Johnson, a Southern Congressman who had a weak voting record on civil rights, to be his running mate in the Presidential election; this suggests that it was not Kennedy’s motive to select politicians who would fight for civil rights. Even if he appeared to be committed to civil rights, in reality Kennedy held no passion for the issue; he was forced, not eager, to take action on the issue.

Because he wanted to win votes from both African Americans and Southern Democrats, who had opposing views on civil rights, Kennedy
altered his stance several times throughout his political career. After privately committing himself to running for the 1960 Presidential nomination while the 1956 general election was underway, Kennedy traveled into the South, aiming to earn support from Southern Democrats. He continued to campaign throughout the South until he was forced to vote on the proposed 1957 Civil Rights Act. Trying to maintain the support of the Southerners, he voted against two important sections: Title III, which would have given the attorney general the power to enjoin, and Title IV, also known as the Jury Trial Amendment. Kennedy’s votes helped severely weaken the bill. A Southern newswriter wrote that Kennedy helped make “that year’s civil rights bill so eminently acceptable to the South that a half dozen Southern Senators actually voted for it.” After Kennedy had pledged support to black activists for so long, many members of the NAACP were outraged; in response to their frustration, Kennedy wrote a letter to “a Boston NAACP constituent” defending his vote and pledging his commitment to civil rights. On the same day, however, he also wrote to several Southerners promising them that he had taken their advice on the vote. Kennedy’s contrasting letters illustrate how he used his ambivalent stance on civil rights to his advantage; he would alter his stance to meet the demands of the group whose support he needed the most to win the election. Kennedy continued to straddle the barrier throughout his presidential campaign.

Even months before the election, Kennedy would change his stance in an appeal to a certain constituency of voters. In September of 1960, the New York Times reported that Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., a well-known activist and Representative, had pledged full support to Kennedy due to the candidate’s “recent positions and pledges” on the issue. The fact that Powell was starting to warm up to Kennedy at that moment suggests that Kennedy did not have a strong stance on the issue beforehand, and had only recently switched to a pro-civil rights stance. The Times quoted Powell months earlier saying, “‘if the election were held today [in June], Senator Kennedy could not carry the Negro vote and could not carry New York State.’” Only months before the election, Kennedy was a compromiser in the eyes of black activists. In
the election, however, Kennedy did win New York and amassed over 70 percent of the African American vote nationwide, both critical factors in his victory.\textsuperscript{21} The election results suggest that Kennedy continued to make the pledges that impressed Powell, which played a large role in winning the votes of the majority of African Americans. He continued to change his position on civil rights only months before the election because, while he wanted to maintain support from Southern voters, he needed the votes from African Americans to become president.

Because civil rights continued to be a minor issue through 1962, Kennedy continued to consider the issue solely from a political standpoint, abandoning the promises on his plank in order to keep support from Southern whites. About two years into his term, NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins sent him a telegram with a clear message: he had not lived up to the bold rhetoric that had earned him the admiration of millions of African American voters during his campaign. Wilkins expressed disappointment in Kennedy’s overall lack of action on civil rights, alluding to a rumor that an executive order he promised to issue had been postponed “for fear it would irritate Southern congressmen.”\textsuperscript{22} Comparing this telegram to the \textit{Times} article, it is clear that Kennedy tried to please groups with contrasting views, which signifies that he was more focused on winning votes than living up to his word by adhering to the party platform. In fact, Wilkins called out Kennedy for abandoning his platform, which stated that “effective moral and political leadership” was necessary “to make equal opportunity a living reality for all Americans.”\textsuperscript{23} This was one of the many bold promises that Kennedy made but failed to live up to as president. Wilkins’s telegram suggests that Kennedy did weaken his stance on civil rights, abandoning a major part of his plank, because he wanted to make all of his voters happy; however, this was impossible.

Analyzing Kennedy’s stance from a perspective that incorporates his entire political career, historian Mark Stern argues that Kennedy had always been inconsistent on civil rights. According to Stern, Kennedy “constantly shifted his position on the civil rights issue as he faced different electorates.”\textsuperscript{24} He approached the issue strategically, without
any commitment to the issue, which enabled him to alter his stance based on the social group that pressured him at any given time. Stern also notes that Kennedy’s personal opinion of the issue had no effect on his stance whatsoever; he portrays Kennedy on the whole as a “sell-out.”

One can think that Kennedy’s political expediency was normal then and continues to be common today, since all successful politicians must compromise their stances to win votes, but Kennedy compromised on one of the most important domestic issues of his time after making bolder promises than any other politician made. Kennedy’s actions were much different from those of Republican candidate Richard Nixon; Nixon had favored the 1957 Civil Rights Act and had also backed efforts to make his children’s school district a model for desegregating schools. Nixon’s efforts illustrate that he maintained a consistent commitment to civil rights, but he never made the bold promises of immediate executive orders and a civil rights bill that Kennedy made in his plank. Therefore, Kennedy was an exception among most politicians, because he was ambivalent about his position on the most important domestic issue of his era and used his ambivalence to court the entire Democratic Party, making bold promises to one constituency and different ones to another.

Many historians, such as Mark Stern, contend that Kennedy was a “sell-out” because receiving votes was the motive for his opinion on an important issue of his time. Kennedy constantly changed his stance in order to meet the demands of different social groups, and his success in the Presidential election of 1960 illustrates his ability as a politician. However, he stands out among other politicians facing the issue due to the disparity between his words and his actions, and this is what causes many to view him as a sell-out instead of a judicious compromiser.

The Last Stand

In 1963, Kennedy strengthened his stance on civil rights, committing himself to solving the issue through executive orders and a proposed civil rights bill; however, the only reason that Kennedy did this was
the violent riots that occurred in response to African Americans' non-violent protests. Before he changed his position, African Americans had been waiting for two years for Kennedy to act on his pledge to solve the issue. Historian Thomas C. Reeves wrote, “[The Kennedys] hoped that the racial issue would take care of itself while they devoted their attention to other matters.”

Kennedy’s lack of commitment to the issue is evident because he devoted his attention to other issues that he found more important. For Kennedy’s commitment to change, something would have to occur that grabbed his attention.

Kennedy’s reluctance to help African Americans solve the civil rights problem had such a negative effect on their overall attitude that some academic historians, such as Reeves, argue that Kennedy was actually the underlying cause of the chain of events that led to blacks lying dead in the street. Kennedy’s failure to help blacks provoked louder demonstrations, which triggered riots in which people were killed. Reeves argues that Kennedy “failed to realize that [his] eloquent campaign rhetoric…would be taken seriously by people who had suffered long enough.”

Blacks were inspired by Kennedy’s early promises of progress on civil rights, and they expected him to get a civil rights bill passed. However, after two years without major advances towards solving the issue, many blacks began to adopt the mindset that, if Kennedy would not help them, then they would have to earn those rights themselves.

James Meredith, an African American who adopted this new mindset when he attempted to register at Mississippi’s all-white state university, was a crucial factor in setting off a riot that pushed Kennedy into taking his final stance. Supported by the federal government, “which insisted that Mississippi honor the rights of all its citizens, regardless of race,” Meredith registered to attend classes at Ole Miss. However, Meredith’s actions provoked riots at the school, forcing Kennedy to send in federal troops. Kennedy’s actions regarding the riots have prompted historian Ronald Sylvia to argue that “Oxford was a turning point for the administration.”

Kennedy was forced to take action due to the danger of the situation, ignoring the possibility of losing support from segregationist Southern Congressmen because of his
support of Meredith. The danger was evident in the statistics: two people were killed and another seventy-five were injured.\textsuperscript{32} Therefore, as president, it was Kennedy’s duty to act in order to protect citizens of the United States. Furthermore, the violence itself forced Kennedy to take a stronger stance on civil rights. Another approach to the events at Ole Miss was taken by the \textit{New York Times}, focusing on the fact that Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett contested federal orders by leading protests against Meredith’s registration.\textsuperscript{33} Kennedy was forced into strengthening his stance on civil rights not only because of his role to protect the citizens, but also because Barnett was flouting the authority of the federal government.

Kennedy’s actions in response to protests against school integration illustrate that his viewpoint of the issue had completely changed. Hours after threatening to send federal troops to the University of Alabama in response to more public protests against integration, Kennedy went on national television, addressing the nation with what became his most famous speech.\textsuperscript{34} The fact that Kennedy made this speech only hours after federalizing the Alabama National Guard implies that the circumstances forced him to make the speech. Kennedy stated that America faced “a moral crisis” that “[could not] be left to increased demonstrations in the streets,” and that it was “time to act in the Congress.”\textsuperscript{35} With this statement, Kennedy demonstrated that he had become fully committed to settling the issue of civil rights, because for one of the first times in his career, his bold actions were matched by bold words; Kennedy had changed his stance. With its specific reference to protests on the street, Kennedy’s statement also illustrates the influence that these protests had on his new stance. Schlesinger confirms the idea that he was forced into taking action on the issue; he states that Kennedy “saw no alternative to leading the fight” against civil rights.\textsuperscript{36} His determination to earn equal rights for African Americans continued to hurt his image among Southern whites; Kennedy received a poll reporting that by September 4.5 million white voters had turned against the administration.\textsuperscript{37} However, Kennedy himself had changed; he would no longer alter his stance to please supporters.

In the end, Kennedy did become the champion of civil rights that he had promised to be in his plank. In the speech that made him a
hero, he shows that he was forced to change; white responses to the demonstrations, some of which were violent, transformed civil rights into a serious, moral issue instead of an avoidable political issue. Seeing civil rights as a moral issue, Kennedy was propelled into his last stance.

Long-Term Effects

After examining the causes of Kennedy’s words and actions, it is important to look ahead into the effects: did John F. Kennedy assist today’s African Americans in maintaining their constitutional rights? Just like Kennedy’s stance on civil rights, it is easy for historians looking back to assume a moderate position: to argue that Kennedy did not directly get a civil rights bill passed, but his legacy had a large influence on Congress as it voted on the 1964 Civil Rights Act. However, even if Kennedy used civil rights as a political tool throughout his political career, it is hard to deny that he made at least some progress in African Americans’ quest for equal rights. Kennedy helped empower the African American people throughout his time in office, calling for the repeal of the poll tax and appointing blacks to many government positions. Furthermore, he helped blacks organize nonviolent protests such as the march on Washington, hoping to persuade Congress to pass his proposed civil rights bill; in the march on Washington, he was the person who suggested that King take the protest to the Lincoln Memorial. Kennedy himself did not get legally established equal rights for African Americans, but he provided a substantial boost in the effort to gain those rights.

Making sense of Kennedy’s stance was no easy task; it took months of research to formulate an argument that spanned the most significant time of Kennedy’s career because, as history tells us, things change. John F. Kennedy was a complicated man who has been described as an “idealist” by some, and a “pragmatist” by others. It is hard to decipher Kennedy’s personal motives for his stance on civil rights, because there is no written record of his thoughts and feelings on the issue; this is why historians continue to debate the subject. However, from what we do have, Kennedy was both a “sell-out” and an example of “the last one on is the loudest.” The man who was infamous for voting against the 1957 Civil Rights Act died as a civil rights hero. ●
Notes


8. Ibid., 119.


11. Ibid., 129.

12. Ibid., 120.

14. Ibid.


18. Ibid.


20. Ibid.


25. Ibid., 818.


29. Ibid.


34. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days*, 964.


37. Ibid.

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