

Martin Luther King and the New Frontier
By Totrina L. LaFayette

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On an early June morning in 1960, one month before the Democratic National Convention, Martin Luther King, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), met with Massachusetts Senator John Fitzgerald Kennedy at his New York apartment to discuss civil rights issues. King immediately voiced his concerns on civil rights and made recommendations for the next presidential administration. He complained that President Dwight Eisenhower had ignored civil rights and that this situation could not go on. Senator Kennedy gave his undivided attention to King who went on to urge the need for strong executive leadership. The next president must outlaw discrimination and pass major civil rights legislation and a voting rights bill. Kennedy agreed with King's philosophy on what needed to be done and expressed his own willingness to help. He asked for King's endorsement of his candidacy and said he would take immediate action to provide the much needed leadership on the issue of civil rights. He reminded King that he had consistently voted for civil rights legislation earlier in his political career.¹

King was not so certain about Kennedy's commitment. He reminded the Senator that he had often sided with southern politicians on civil rights issues. In 1957, the Civil Rights Act failed to pass. It would have given the Attorney General broad powers to seek federal injunctions against violators of civil rights including the right to vote. After the bill went down to defeat, Kennedy had voted to keep the bill from returning to the Senate Judiciary Committee. In addition, he voted for an amendment requiring jury trials for the accused, claiming the new law would "affect Southern courts and those juries hearing civil rights cases." When pressed on

this vote by King, Kennedy said he would reverse his decision if the bill came before the Senate again.²

King had been blunt with Senator Kennedy about civil rights because he felt that Kennedy did not truly understand the problem. Kennedy had not been actively involved with the Negro community and did not know the extent of their discontent. Kennedy told King that he understood the system of segregation was morally wrong and that he was thoroughly committed to integration. However, King felt his commitment was only based on an intellectual level.

In fact, Kennedy had not been interested in the civil rights issue as a senator. Once he had decided to run for President, he asked his brother, Robert Francis Kennedy, who was his campaign manager, to develop a civil rights sector for the operation. He encouraged his young brother to do whatever he could to make a good impression on the black population. Neither Senator Kennedy nor his brother Robert knew very many Negroes or had paid very much attention to their problems, but they were now willing to become advocates of civil rights.³

A few months later, presidential candidate John Kennedy again met with King in the Senator's Georgetown home. Kennedy expressed his concern about losing the election if he did not receive enough votes, primarily from black voters. He asked King if he would give a speech at a board meeting about civil rights, sponsored by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and convince people of his devotion to the cause. When Kennedy privately spoke with Negroes, the purpose was generally about winning the Negro vote. King refused Kennedy's proposal because the SCLC had decided to remain impartial. If he made such a speech, he would have to invite Richard Nixon, Kennedy's Republican opponent, whether he came or not. Also, King personally thought the idea was a mistake because he did not want to be charged with taking any one political side. While King still had some reservations about

Kennedy, he generally admired the Senator. Kennedy had promised to implement change with a “stroke of the pen.” Family and friends of King encouraged him to support Kennedy, although, he did not publicly endorse candidates.⁴

In October 1960, King received an invitation from students to participate in a lunch counter sit-in in Atlanta, Georgia. King applauded such nonviolent efforts to integrate lunch counters. He was immediately arrested along with over two hundred eighty students at the request of local merchants under Mayor Bill Hartsfield. King promised to serve his time in jail, instead of posting bond. After five days, Harris Wofford, Senator Kennedy’s assistant on civil rights, called King’s lawyer, Morris Abram, requesting that he do something to get King out of jail. Within two hours of receiving the call, King was released from jail. Criminal charges were dropped and everyone, including King, was released without bail. When King left the jail, the police arrested him again and served him with papers accusing him of probation violation.⁵

In the previous May, King had been stopped by the DeKalb County police. Discovering he had an Alabama license, the police issued him a ticket. King had neglected to exchange his current license for a Georgia license. On following day, King went to court and his lawyer pleaded guilty in exchange for paying a small fine, accepting a six-month probation and a suspended sentence. Unaware of what had actually happened, King did not give the case much thought.⁶

On Saturday night, October 25, the Fulton County police took King into custody, and informed him that he was to be transferred to the DeKalb County jail. He would stand trial on Tuesday morning. When Tuesday arrived, King was brought from his cell to the courtroom of Judge Oscar J. Mitchell. King’s pregnant wife, Coretta Scott King, and his father, Martin Luther King, Sr., were in the crowd waiting for the verdict. The judge found King guilty and sentenced

him to six months hard labor, without appeal, in the State Penitentiary at Reidsville. No one in Georgia had a record of being arrested on this type of charge, nor did the state have a specific law regarding a deadline residents of another state had to meet in order change their driver's license.⁷

King's family demanded that he not be taken to Reidsville. The judge agreed to postpone the move. But on same night at 4:30 in the morning, several officers came to King's cell to send him on his way. "*King! King! Wake up!*" they yelled. King quickly dressed himself. He was placed in a chained jacket, handcuffs were tightly placed around his arms and legs, and he was put into the back of a paddy wagon. He rode nearly three hundred miles to the prison. Apparently by secret negotiation with one of his lawyers, Charles M. Clayton, King had been moved because he would be in a safer environment. When King arrived at Reidsville, he was forced into a prison uniform and thrown into a narrow cell.⁸

Coretta King was told of her husband's transfer at 8:30 the following morning. She feared for her husband's safety. She asked her father-in-law to go with her to Reidsville. However, the elder King said they should both go see Abram to figure out an alternative solution. Mrs. King agreed, and as she was getting prepared for her meeting, the telephone rang. A strange voice asked, "*May I speak to Mrs. Martin Luther King, Jr.? Just a minute, Mrs. King, for Senator Kennedy.*" There was a brief pause on the line when suddenly Kennedy spoke. First, they exchanged greetings. Immediately afterward, Kennedy told Mrs. King:

I want to express to you my concern about your husband. I know this must be very hard for you. I understand you are expecting a baby, and I just wanted you to know that I was thinking about you and Dr. King. If there is anything I can do to help, please feel free to call on me.

Shocked at the call, Coretta Scott King expressed her gratitude for his concern and replied that any help he could provide would be greatly appreciated.⁹

After hanging up, Coretta did not know how to react. She thought Kennedy might use the call for political reasons in his attempt to win the presidency. Also, she herself did not want to become affiliated with any one political party member because King had a policy of not endorsing political candidates. Kennedy campaigners had designed a public statement for Kennedy to issue regarding Georgia and its behavior toward King, but Kennedy decided not to release the statement because he was more interested in getting King out of jail than in getting publicity.¹⁰

It had been Harris Wofford's idea to call Kennedy. He told Sargent Shriver who in turn approached Kennedy. The Senator said, "*That's a wonderful idea. Do you have her number?*" So Shriver called, and Kennedy spoke to Mrs. King.¹¹ Senator Kennedy's brother, Robert Kennedy, was angry about the phone call fearing it would alienate the South. He was worried about losing several states in the election over the issue of civil rights. However, he also realized that Americans did not know his brother as well as they knew Vice President Richard Nixon, the Republican nominee. People simply did not know where Senator Kennedy stood on many issues including civil rights. Thus, in order to make himself more popular, Kennedy had to do some major thing to get his name out before the public.

Later, after his brother's phone call to Mrs. King, Robert Kennedy received a call from Georgia Governor Ernest Vandiver. He recommended calling Judge Oscar J. Mitchell for King's release. Later that evening, Robert Kennedy debated with himself whether this was the right move. Part of him worried about the negative effect the call might have on the election. But the rest of him could not sleep because he "kept thinking about that Georgia judge putting a decent

American in jail and sentencing King to six months hard labor because he was black and fighting for civil rights.” While in Long Beach, New York, Bobby Kennedy stepped into a phone booth and made the call to Judge Mitchell. At the start of the conversation, he said, “*Are you an American or not? If you’re an American, you get King out of jail.*” Mitchell happened to like the idea. Kennedy asked Mitchell, “*Will King get out on bail?*” Mitchell replied, “*Bob, it’s nice to talk to you. I don’t have any objection about doing that.*”¹² The judge released King on bail at noon the next day.¹³

After King returned home, he made a statement to the press thanking Senator Kennedy and his brother for their intervention during his imprisonment. However, he still did not publicly endorse Kennedy. King knew their actions were in part humanitarian, but he could not help but think that there was a political drive behind it. King suspected that Kennedy had been advised by members of his campaign to make the call, but he also felt that the young Senator was finally beginning to understand what a terrible thing segregation truly was.

Although King never came out with a public endorsement for Senator Kennedy, his father did.

*If any man will wipe the tears from my daughter-in-law’s eyes, I’ll vote for him, even though I don’t want a Catholic. But I’ll take a Catholic or the Devil himself if he’ll wipe the tears from my daughter-in-law’s eyes. I’ve got a suitcase full of votes—my whole church—for you to give to Senator Kennedy.*¹⁴

Up until the Kennedy phone calls, Martin Luther King, Sr. had endorsed Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon. Like many Protestants, he believed that a Catholic should never be president. He also felt that Nixon would do a better job on civil rights.¹⁵

While the Kennedy brothers did not immediately publicize this turn of events, their father did. Joseph P. Kennedy broadcast his sons’ actions with King. He paid for brochures that

included articles recounting the two phone calls to be distributed in black churches right before Election Day. Wofford, under Joe Kennedy's instruction, distributed in black neighborhoods many copies of a restrictive lease that Nixon had signed for his home in which racial words were used. The words "Jews" and "Negroes" were circled. The goal was to make Nixon look far worse than his opponent, Kennedy.¹⁶

Part of King's ambivalence toward Kennedy came from the respect he had for his opponent Richard Nixon. King had personally disliked Nixon before meeting him in person, but had changed his mind once he got to know him better. They became friends and often sought out each other's advice. King believed Nixon's views on civil rights were sincere. Nixon was even an honorary member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since the early 1950s. King was also impressed that Nixon was a Quaker. Members of this faith were known for their racial tolerance. As Vice President, Nixon had once cast a tie-breaking vote to end a Senate filibuster against civil rights legislation, which resulted in Eleanor Roosevelt openly praising him for his support of civil rights. Yet despite how much he admired Nixon, King knew that he had not made as big a step as Kennedy had in order to win the black vote. After the Kennedys' political intervention to release King from jail, many black voters were ready to turn away from Nixon and vote for Senator Kennedy in the election of 1960.¹⁷

On November 8, 1960, John Kennedy defeated Richard Nixon in the closest popular election in history. While only 100,000 votes separated the two men, the electoral vote was 303 for Kennedy and 219 for Nixon. At the age of forty-three, Kennedy became the youngest man ever elected to the Presidency.¹⁸ Robert Kennedy quickly set about organizing a team of individuals to find the best men to serve in his brother's administration that would be called the "New Frontier."¹⁹

The day after the election, President-elect John Kennedy asked his brother to become the Attorney General. Bobby Kennedy refused, saying he wanted to get out of government work completely. He was seriously thinking about running for Governor of Massachusetts and felt the need to create some distance between himself and his brother.

Bobby Kennedy finally decided that he would work for his brother, but not as a Cabinet member. He told a friend, "*I've been chasing bad guys all my life. I'd like a change.*" He considered taking a sub-cabinet position in the Defense or State Department, but later decided against it because he did not want to work for someone in a higher position. He wanted a position with great responsibility and prestige and that did not require him to take direct orders from anyone. John Kennedy wanted his brother to be the Attorney General of the United States because he knew he would encourage social change. In addition, he wanted someone close to him who would discuss matters honestly.

By December 1960, Robert Kennedy still had not decided whether to accept appointment as Attorney General. His brother needed a decision soon. The outgoing Attorney General Bill Rogers needed to work with the new Attorney General. Still Robert Kennedy hesitated. He called his brother at his Georgetown home. He told the President-elect that he would not accept the position. John Kennedy refused to listen to him and said, "*Let's talk it over tomorrow.*" When the next day came, the President-elect still insisted on having his brother in the administration. They debated back and forth during breakfast, when finally with a sigh, Robert Kennedy decided to accept the job of Attorney General.²⁰

Many people quickly attacked the appointment of Robert Kennedy as the Attorney General. They thought the office needed someone with a strong legal background, sound judgment, willingness to work hard, and the ability to learn fast. John Kennedy responded to the

attacks by saying, “*Bobby’s got all that.*” John Kennedy also knew how tough his brother could be. He was ready for the fight that was soon to break out over civil rights.²¹

On the ice-cold morning of January 20, 1961, President Kennedy stood on the steps of the Capitol, took the oath of office, and gave his inaugural address.

*We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom—
symbolizing an end as well as a beginning—signifying renewal as well as
change...United, there is little we cannot do in a host of cooperative ventures.
Divided, there is little we can do—for we dare not meet a powerful challenge at
odds and split asunder.*²²

Many civil rights leaders remembered Kennedy’s promise of implementing change “with a stoke of the pen” during his campaign.²³

As President Kennedy transitioned into office, he was determined to be a strong leader. He had no intention of allowing people to defy his administration or the courts. Kennedy believed in strong national unity, and was determined to meet every challenge.²⁴ One of the first problems Kennedy tackled as a new President was the implementation of black judicial appointments. He appointed five lifetime judges to the District of Columbia bench. Marjorie Lawson, the first black female jurist, was among the five. In addition, Kennedy named Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP’s President, to the Court of Appeals. After making these appointments, Kennedy decided not to appoint any more Negroes until the people had proven themselves.

In March 1961, the President issued an executive order ending segregation in the executive branch. The order covered twenty million employees, black and white. It covered unions and work plants not identified in the order. President Kennedy and the Attorney General thought desegregation was moving at a slow pace, and remained skeptical on how many jobs

would open up for blacks even after the executive order had been signed. However, the some significant progress was soon made. Negroes were able to acquire better jobs. Textile mills used Negro labor for various positions besides sweepers, blacks were able to apply in aircraft plants, whereas before, they were unable to, and many new jobs, including supervisory positions were created for blacks. In addition, President Kennedy appointed Negroes to top federal jobs as ambassadors in foreign affairs, U. S. Attorneys, Assistant Secretaries of Labor, Deputy Assistants of Secretary of State, and Commissioners of the District of Columbia.²⁵

The issue of voting rights was equally important to the new administration. Legislation for black voting rights had been an ongoing problem. President Kennedy thought by making sure that blacks had the right to vote the balance of political power would shift throughout the country. Although the President was newly elected, he could not help but think the Negro vote could make a difference in his 1964 re-election bid. He wanted to assist black voting rights by eliminating discriminatory literacy tests and poll taxes in national elections. Additionally, Kennedy aided Negro tenant farmers in Tennessee who were persecuted and evicted because of their voting activity. A federal court, as a result, halted their eviction.²⁶

Despite these early efforts of the administration on behalf of civil rights, Martin Luther King was not satisfied. He said the administration was far too cautious. The month following Kennedy's inauguration, King wrote an article about Kennedy urging him to use the government's power to end segregation. He said the government supported discrimination against blacks in housing programs and voting, and that the government should pass major legislation to end it. Furthermore, King said a "New Deal" was needed for the South. He referred to the 1930s when Franklin D. Roosevelt was in the White House. The Democrats had helped to bring about great economic changes in those days, and the nation had accepted the new

role of government for the good of everyone. King tried to convince Kennedy that he could do the same now for civil rights.

In addition, King proposed three immediate actions for Kennedy to take. First, he advised the President to help elect members to Congress who would fight for civil rights. Hopefully, the new Congressmen would work to protect the voting rights of black Americans. If blacks were to have a voice in politics, their voting rights needed to be guaranteed. Secondly, King felt the President should not attend segregated events. He should use his influence to help establish communication between the two races. Opportunities for blacks would rise if Kennedy openly promoted anti-discrimination and desegregation. Lastly, the fate of civil rights ultimately lay with the President. He could write and enforce executive orders to end discrimination in housing facilities and employment. Furthermore, he advised the President to use his Attorney General effectively. The Attorney General could be a strong force especially in the struggle for school desegregation.²⁷

A few months later, King had a meeting with the Attorney General at the Justice Department requesting that the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) reorganize its charter. Bobby Kennedy responded that the ICC was the slowest moving of all regulatory agencies, and that an appeal could prolong the change for years to come. King, not seeing any change coming from the new administration, reminded the Attorney General that the blacks had voted for his brother.

In the following May, the Freedom Rides began. With King as their leader, many blacks and white boarded buses and headed south. They traveled everywhere, boldly ignoring segregation laws in bus terminals and at lunch counters, restaurant facilities, and restrooms. While in route between Atlanta and Birmingham, one of the buses was overturned and set on fire

in Anniston, Alabama. Local police arrived but did little to protect the passengers. They stood back and watched as an outraged mob beat the Freedom Riders senseless.²⁸

The next morning, the President and the Attorney General first learned of the event by reading the newspaper. They agreed that something needed to be done before the situation grew worse. Robert Kennedy sent his assistant, John Seigenthaler, to Birmingham. Seigenthaler was to report what he learned directly to the Attorney General. Seigenthaler found out that a new group of Freedom Riders was on their way to Birmingham. When they arrived at the Greyhound bus station, no one would drive the bus. Birmingham Commissioner of Public Safety Eugene “Bull” Connor said that the police could protect the bus while it was in the station, but the matter would be out of his hands once the bus left for Montgomery.²⁹

Bobby Kennedy decided he needed to speak personally with Governor John M. Patterson of Alabama who at the moment refused to do anything to protect the Freedom Riders. A conference call was arranged between Governor Patterson and Seigenthaler, with the Attorney General listening on the phone. Bobby Kennedy gave the Alabama governor an ultimatum. If he did not change his position, the federal government would intervene to correct the situation. The Governor agreed to protect the buses. Meanwhile, the Attorney General called George E. Cruit, Superintendent of the Birmingham Greyhound Terminal, to find a driver for the bus transporting the Freedom Riders. Cruit was hesitant at first, but finally, he found a driver.

On May 21, 1961, the bus arrived in Montgomery. Riots broke out and federal troops were deployed in the city to restrain the violent crowds. Seigenthaler had ridden with the Freedom Riders to ensure their protection. Upon getting off the bus, he was beaten and his skull was cracked open. Later that night, Robert Kennedy called Martin Luther King and told him to call off the Freedom Riders. He was upset that his friend had been hurt. The episode had

affected Robert Kennedy so deeply, that he felt as if he were in Montgomery himself. He was also upset by a phone call from President Kennedy who said that the Freedom Rides were embarrassing him in Vienna while meeting with Nikita Khrushchev. Unimpressed, King refused to call off the Freedom Rides. Around midnight, the Attorney General made another proposal. If King called off the Freedom Rides, Kennedy would get Governor Patterson's promise to desegregate Alabama's bus terminals. Both King and the governor said, "No!"³⁰ Because of the constant pressure of the Freedom Rides, the Attorney General decided to pressure the ICC to call for desegregation in the travel industry. As the Freedom rides continued, the ICC ruled in October 1961 that "all buses would be used without reference to race, color, creed, and all carriers would have to have that sign in the buses...in all the terminals, the 'colored' and 'white' signs had to come down at the fountains and at the restrooms."³¹

In December 1961, King joined the Albany Movement, an event that rose out of the Freedom Rides. He walked in the streets of Albany, Georgia, representing the SCLC, along with other protestors to fight once again against segregation in all public places in Albany. Along with over seven hundred Albany protestors, King was arrested on the charges of parading without a permit, obstructing the sidewalk, and disturbing the peace. A fine was imposed which he refused to pay. A few days later, all the prisoners including King were released with a trial date set for February 1962. The attempt of the Albany protestors had failed. The city refused to desegregate public places.³²

When King heard this, his voice only became louder. He decided to attack President Kennedy again for being too cautious in the matter of civil rights. He compared the new administration's promises and the few actions that had not been taken. Kennedy had not written an executive order to end housing discrimination. He had written an executive order to end

discrimination in employment practices in the federal government, but the order had not been enforced. King recommended that the President take bold and swift action to galvanize the nation. He said:

Resistance stiffens after each limited victory; inertia sets in, and the forward movement not only slows down, but is often reversed entirely. What is required to maintain gains is an initial sweep of positive action so far-reaching that it immobilizes and weakens the adversary, thus depriving him of his power to retaliate.

King understood that the President wanted to move in such a way to maintain a national consensus. However, if the President maintained such a consensus, there would be no great change. Instead, there would be limited integration, affecting a few Negroes rather than the many.³³

On July 10, 1962, King went to court on charges that stemmed from his support of the Albany Movement. Judge A. N. Durden imposed a \$178 fine on King. Since King did not have the funds to pay the fine, he was sentenced to perform forty-five days of community service. King was immediately taken to the Albany County Jail, stripped of his civilian clothes, and put into a filthy jail cell. Depressed at first about going to jail, King realized what he was doing was for a great cause.³⁴

At 7:30 am on the morning of July 13, 1962, police came to King's cell and ordered him to put on his own clothes. An hour and a half later, he was informed that his fine had been paid. After King's release, he wanted to know who the undisclosed individual was who had pulled strings to get him out of jail. Although no one gave him information regarding his release, King felt that it was unfair others did not have the convenience of being well known and could get out of jail, so why should he?

Two weeks later, King and several other civil rights leaders held a prayer vigil in front of the Albany City Hall. They wanted the City Commissioners to negotiate with them to end segregation. When they arrived, Police Chief Laurie Pritchett invited the leaders into his office in front of the press. When they declined his invitation, King and the other leaders were immediately arrested. On the following day, King arranged with Chief Pritchett to have his staff meetings in the jail. His wife Coretta and his assistant Reverend Wyatt Walker both came to see him. Later, Chief Pritchett told King he was free to go and to stay out of jail for good. King refused the invitation, saying he had every intention of serving his sentence. Chief Pritchett asked King if he really knew how bad things were. When King replied with a “No,” the Chief told him that, “the sheriff in the County Jail almost busted his attorney’s (C. B. King) head wide open.” After hearing this, King immediately sent for Reverend Walker, asking him to inform President Kennedy, Attorney General Kennedy, and Burke Marshall of the Justice Department about the misuse of power by the Georgia law enforcement, and that something needed to be done.

*Dear Mr. President, Gratified by directness of your statement to Albany crisis. Reverend Abernathy and I earnestly hope you will continue to use the great moral influence of your office to help this critical situation.*³⁵

President Kennedy responded to King’s telegram by ordering the Albany commissioners to hold talks with the civil rights leaders. King, pleased by the President’s action, sent him an appreciative letter hoping that his moral influence would not die out, but would rather continue. By Friday, August 10, King was released on a suspended sentence. He called off further marches in Albany and returned home. Despite the help of the Kennedy administration, he was still disappointed because he believed the Kennedys could do more.

The naked truth is that whether the object of the Negro community’s efforts are directed at lunch counters or interstate buses, First Amendment privileges or

pilgrimages of prayer, school desegregation or the right to vote—he meets an implacable foe in the Southern white racist. No matter what it is we seek, if it has to do with full citizenship, self-respect, human dignity, and borders on changing the “Southern way of life,” the Negro stands little chance, if any, of securing the approval, consent, or tolerance of the segregationist white South.

In September 1962, King sent another telegram to President Kennedy warning him that the Negro was desperate and desired immediate federal action.

I have learned from authentic sources that Negroes are arming themselves in many quarters where this reign of terror is alive. I will continue to urge my people to be nonviolent in the face of bitterest opposition, but I fear that my counsel will fall on deaf ears if the federal government does not take decisive action. If Negroes are tempted to turn to retaliatory violence, we shall see a dark night of rioting all over the South.³⁶

After the many protests against segregation in Albany and so many people being jailed, the City Commissioners decided to give in to the administration and the civil rights leaders. The city code that protected segregation laws was repealed. Negroes were able to register to vote. The public library was integrated on a thirty day “trial” basis. Perhaps inspired by the changes in Albany, the state of Georgia elected the first governor who vowed to uphold desegregation. Although inequality remained throughout the state, civil rights leaders were happy to have won a partial victory.³⁷

Despite King’s criticism of the administration, President Kennedy was working for civil rights in the White House. He had nominated Robert Weaver to lead the Housing and Home Finance Agency (HHFA). Kennedy believed Weaver, a Negro, would be a powerful advocate for low and middle income black families. In late November 1962, the President recommended that the HHFA be raised to a cabinet position. The HHFA would become the Department of

Urban Affairs, and Weaver would be the first black to serve in a cabinet position. However, the bill making this a reality was defeated in the House Rules Committee by the slender 9-6 vote. He had the bill resubmitted to the Congress, but it did not get very far. The bill would require the support of Southern Congressmen and, at the moment, they were not willing to support it.³⁸

Kennedy had greater success in using his executive authority to desegregate state universities throughout the South. On September 30, 1962, President Kennedy issued an executive order for James Meredith's safe admission into the University of Mississippi. James Meredith, a black applicant, had been admitted to the all-white college, but the Governor of Mississippi Ross Barnett refused to allow him to enroll. A year earlier, Meredith tried to register at the campus in Oxford, but was again denied. A Supreme Court order found Governor Ross Barnett guilty of contempt for blocking the admission of Meredith. When Barnett ignored the court's decision, President Kennedy was determined to enforce it. He ordered troops, as well as the Mississippi National Guard to Oxford, to protect Meredith as he enrolled. Meredith was brought to the campus by helicopter. The U. S. Marshals escorted Meredith on campus, while the army and National Guard held back the angry crowds. Later that night, President Kennedy made a speech to the nation on television in which he said the orders of the Court "were beginning to be carried out." Furthermore, he stated that "*Americans are free to disagree with the law, but not to disobey it...the orders of the court will be carried out with whatever means are necessary.*" The next day, and many other days thereafter, Meredith continued to be escorted by several officials. As 1962 came to a close, the administration could honestly say that they were the first to look segregation in the eye.³⁹

Early in January 1963, King and two other civil rights leaders, Ralph Abernathy and Fred Shuttlesworth, met with President Kennedy and the Attorney General at the White House to

discuss civil rights. The three black leaders emphasized the immediate necessity for major new civil rights legislation. Despite their recent efforts against segregation, the Kennedy brothers said they would propose no civil rights legislation in 1963. As the two brothers continued to talk, they explained their reasons. President Kennedy said the Congress was deeply divided on the issue of civil rights. He could not afford the embarrassment of watching the legislation go down to defeat—especially at the hands of Democratic congressmen from the southern states. After the conference, a very disappointed King informed the President and his brother that he had no other choice but to hold a march in Birmingham, an event he had been planning since the beginning of January. He advised the administration that he and his followers would need federal assistance if violence occurred.⁴⁰

President Kennedy thought about civil rights action more intensely. It weighed heavily on his mind that the country, the South in particular, was so deeply divided over race relations. One month after his meeting with King, Abernathy, and Shuttlesworth, he decided to give a major televised address on civil rights to explain the goals of the Civil Rights Commission. He asked that the role of the Civil Rights Commission to be expanded throughout the whole nation, so that information and assistance could be provided to all communities. The President wanted technical and economic assistance to school districts that were attempting to end segregation. His message extended to voting rights. Literacy tests for individuals with a sixth grade education, application of different standards to those of a different race, and immediate registration of voters in contested areas were to all be abolished and prohibited. President Kennedy's message promoted equality throughout the nation. It was widely received by Negroes; however, it was primarily ignored by the rest of the nation and in Congress.⁴¹

However, even after the President gave his speech on civil rights, King was still not satisfied. While he commended the President by stating his words were very much appreciated, he still claimed the President had not done enough to end segregation. While Kennedy opened “jobs, voting rights, desegregation of public facilities, housing discrimination, and appointed Negroes to high positions of authority,” King reminded him that only a small number of people benefited, while the majority remained unaffected. In addition, King criticized the administration by saying the movement for equality remained “constricted and refined,” and a mass movement would be necessary to result in a large gain.⁴²

Due to the small victory in the Albany Movement, King decided to put forth a plan that would focus on more specific civil rights goals in Birmingham, the largest segregated city in the United States.⁴³ The march was set to begin on March 12. However, it was delayed due to the mayoral election took place on March 5. The mayoral candidates were Eugene “Bull” Connor, Tom King, and Albert Boutwell. King thought there should be no protests during the campaign. He feared a march would benefit Connor, the Police Chief of Birmingham, who believed in segregation. After the election, no candidate had a majority. The city had to hold a runoff election between Connor and Boutwell, who was also a segregationist, in the first week of April.⁴⁴ Robert Kennedy urged King to postpone his demonstration until after the runoff. King agreed.⁴⁶

Boutwell won the runoff election, but Connor said he would not leave office until 1965. This angered King, and he decided to start the protest in Birmingham anyway. The march began on April 3 with sit-ins and mass meetings. Every night, King spoke to huge crowds encouraging them with his philosophy of nonviolence. At the end of every meeting, the crowds sang old Negro spirituals about freedom.

Every morning, demonstrations began anew. Bull Connor and his police arrested 400 to 500 people daily. The demonstrators always posted bail and quickly returned to their protests. King, in an effort to negotiate, tried to meet with city officials, but they ignored him. King decided to take part personally in the Birmingham protests on Good Friday, April 12, 1963. On the day before he and other civil rights leaders were to protest, King received a message from the local bondsman that the funds for bail had run short. King wondered what his next move should be. If he were to go to jail, there would be no other leader to take his place. Supporters in his organization begged him not to go, but all he could do was think of the millions of people who had been fighting so long for freedom and justice. He made up his mind to join the protest on the next day.⁴⁶

The morning of April 12 arrived. King and his supporters began their march at Zion Hill Church and headed downtown. As they marched closer to the city center, Connor ordered his officers to arrest the protestors. King was taken too and placed in a separate part of the jail away from everyone. After the first twenty four hours, guards placed him in solitary confinement and refused to let him communicate with the outside world. Unable to have any visitors, King could only sit alone in his dark and quiet cell. The only light came in the mornings when daybreak peaked through an opening at the top of his narrow cell.⁴⁷

While in solitary confinement, King was most worried about his wife Coretta. She had just given birth to their fourth child. Mrs. King in turn feared for her husband's life. She called Wyatt Walker and asked him what she should do. Walker told her to call President Kennedy. She phoned the President's office immediately and spoke with Pierre Salinger, Kennedy's press secretary. Salinger assured Coretta that he would relay the message to President Kennedy and that he would call her. Hours later, the telephone rang. Coretta King picked it up and heard

Attorney General Robert Kennedy on the other end. He told her his brother asked him to check on her and see what needed to be done. Mrs. King informed the Attorney General that her husband was in solitary confinement in a Birmingham jail and that no one could speak with him. She frantically expressed her concern for her husband. Bobby Kennedy said, “*Mrs. King, we have a difficult problem with the local officials. Bull Connor is very hard to deal with. Maybe after the new city government takes over we can get something done in Birmingham. But I promise you I will look into the situation and let you know something.*”⁴⁸

On the next day around 5 p.m., President Kennedy called Coretta Scott King from Palm Beach. He assured her that he would give the situation concerning her husband immediate attention. In addition, he informed her that King was safe and reiterated what his brother had told her the previous day about Birmingham being a difficult place. President Kennedy ended his conversation with Mrs. King saying, “*...your husband will be calling you shortly. If you have any further worries about your husband, I want you to feel free to call me.*” A few moments later, after President Kennedy hung up, Coretta received a call. It was from her husband telling her that he was all right. He said he had been allowed to send a telegram to the President thanking him for consoling his wife during this difficult period.⁴⁹ On April 19, King was set free from jail on bond.⁵⁰

With King’s release, the protests in Birmingham started again. Once again large crowds of protestors singing songs of freedom marched through the city. On May 4, Bull Connor could bear it no longer. He let his police attack the crowd. Men, women, and even children were beaten with clubs, sprayed with fire hoses, and attacked by police dogs. Despite the vicious attack, King vowed to carry on the protests on May 3, 1963, as King’s followers tried to hold a gathering near the city jail. Bull Connor urged them to obey his order to stay back. The

marchers continued to move forward toward the jail. As they got closer, Connor shouted, “Dammit! Turn on the hoses!” The protestors were hit with the hard pressure of cold water, but pushed forward and made it to the meeting place as scheduled.⁵¹

As news of the events in Birmingham spread across the nation, pressure built up on the Kennedy administration. Newspapers and television broadcasts showed young Negro children and adults being beaten, attacked by dogs, and drenched with water. Floods of telegrams poured into the White House and the President soon had no choice but to react. On May 4, 1963, he and the Attorney General sent Burke Marshall, Chief Civil Rights Assistant in the Justice Department, to Birmingham to arrange a peace settlement. Marshall quickly opened negotiations between community and civil rights leaders. Both sides were willing to make peace efforts, and as a result, a twenty four hour truce was called for the morning of May 8.⁵²

Later on the same day, President Kennedy went on television to make a major public address on civil rights. He told the nation that the Birmingham situation would be resolved and, if necessary, the Administration would enforce order by federal troops. During President Kennedy’s speech, King was thrown in jail on an old charge, but quickly posted bond to finish further negotiations.⁵³

Negotiations continued for the next two days between Marshall, King, and the Birmingham city officials. On Friday, May 10, an agreement was reached that mandated immediate desegregation in public facilities and nondiscriminatory employment in the city. The news of the compromise flashed around the world.⁵⁴ Despite the settlement, the city erupted in violence just one day later. The black neighborhoods were sealed off by the police who moved in and beat many black citizens senseless. Homes and businesses owned by blacks were bombed. President Kennedy decided immediate action must be taken. About 9 pm on May 11,

the President spoke to the nation on television about civil rights while sitting at his desk in the Oval office. As he spoke, Kennedy warned the nation that a just pact would be enforced and those who opposed it would not be tolerated. He dispatched three thousand military troops to surround Birmingham and federalized the Alabama National Guard. Afterward, the President waited in his office for telephone reports regarding any further violence, while King the Attorney General remained in telephone contact. On the next day, Bull Connor and his city commissioners stood before the Alabama Supreme Court where justices ordered him out of office permanently.⁵⁵

The struggle in Birmingham was soon credited as a huge victory for the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King was especially happy that events in Birmingham had finally galvanized the administration into action. On June 11, the President announced a new civil rights bill that would be sent to Congress within the week. The bill called for the end to discrimination in all public places. In addition, it gave the Attorney General the authority to desegregate public schools. President Kennedy intended to use the power of the Justice Department to make certain that discrimination would end once and for all.⁵⁶

But if the civil rights bill was ever to pass the Congress, the administration would have to confront Martin Luther King with disturbing information they had received about his own organization. On June 22, President Kennedy and Attorney General Kennedy met with in the White House and asked him about his renewed ties with Stanley Levison. One of King's closest advisors, Levison was suspected of being a member of the Communist Party. King had been warned by the administration in 1961 to break ties with Levison because of the damage his communist connections could do to the civil rights movement. Although King broke off his friendship with Levison for a short time, he had recently started communicating with him again.

When President Kennedy found out about it through J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), he decided he to warn King explicitly one last time. If information on King's relationship with Levison was to leak out to the public, it could destroy the administration's efforts to pass the Civil Rights bill.⁵⁷

In order to put pressure on Congress to pass Kennedy's Civil Rights bill, King and other civil rights leaders planned a march on Washington for August 28, 1963. As the day drew near, President Kennedy openly worried about the protest. Many citizens of Washington D. C. feared of riots, while white southern Congressmen vowed that no amount of protests would ever change their position on civil rights. To maintain order, the President called out 2000 D.C. National Guardsmen and 4000 federal troops. They waited across the Potomac River ready for the Presidential order if trouble was to occur.⁵⁸ Even though the President had worried that the protest would do more harm than good, he publicly endorsed the March on Washington, saying it might persuade Congress to pass the Civil Rights bill.⁵⁹

On August 28, 1963, more than 250,000 people from all walks of life came to show their support for Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement. President Kennedy could see many of the protestors from the Oval office. Various speakers talked on behalf of equal rights for all American citizens. While many of the marchers supported the President, most felt he was not doing enough. When it was finally King's turn to deliver a speech, he walked to the podium and nervously began his handwritten speech. Five minutes into the talk, he stopped looking at the paper and began speaking off the cuff. The crowd roared as he preached about injustices. When he finished, the crowd cheered even louder.⁶⁰

After the march, King and other civil rights leaders met with President Kennedy and Vice President Lyndon Johnson at the White House. The President was happy that there had

been no violence. President Kennedy said he would continue pushing for civil rights legislation and for an end to discrimination in the country. However, he warned that passing the Civil Rights bill would be tough and would need strong bipartisan support.⁶² Deeply moved by the march, Kennedy was determined than ever to do what was necessary to win equal rights for all.

Although the speakers and many Americans at the March on Washington wanted equal rights advocated, several Americans obviously did not feel the same way. Even though peace settlements were being upheld in the city, some people felt the desire to avenge them. In Birmingham, on September 15, four girls attended Sunday school at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, when a dynamite blast went off, killing the children instantly. The public outcry against the crime was so great in the nation that President Kennedy called King and other civil rights leaders to the White House on September 19 to discuss the matter. When King left the meeting, he had a more positive outlook that the Kennedy Administration would finally provide the strong, effective leadership the nation needed.⁶³

The following month, October, tested President Kennedy's position on civil rights. On October 23, the Civil Rights Bill went up to Congress. While some Congressmen felt the bill was fair and necessary, most Republicans and southern Democrats were against it. President Kennedy was soon at a standoff with Congress.⁶⁴ The fact that rumors were again emerging about King's ties to the Communist Party only made matters worse. Attorney General Robert Kennedy authorized the FBI to conduct an extensive investigation of King. Agents were to observe King's daily activities and to find out who his companions were. In addition, the Attorney General authorized a tap on King's phone. The Kennedys did not want to believe that King was a Communist, but they had to know the truth of the situation as rumors swirled on Capitol Hill. Throughout the ordeal, King remained optimistic because he felt that the Kennedy administration

had at last taken steps to win the civil rights of all Americans. In his opinion, he could put up with anything, even an investigation by the FBI, if it meant passage of the Civil Rights bill.⁶⁵

Sadly, King's hopes, like the hopes of so many other American, were dashed on a Friday afternoon in Dallas, Texas. On November 22, 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated and the news of his death swept the nation. As King thought of the "great national tragedy," he also thought how the President's death would have an impact on the Civil Rights Movement. King now felt that the President was a friend of the cause, and without that friendship, the struggle for equality might be stalled forever. He could not anticipate what the future would bring.⁶⁶

Three days later, King received a call from President Lyndon Johnson at 9:20 p.m. President Johnson convinced King that he would do his best to support civil rights and get the legislation passed. The bill had been lingering in Congress since its submission by Kennedy and action needed to be taken to ensure passage. President Johnson asked for King's support because he intended to plod forward on civil rights, something he had been supportive of since the election of 1960. In response, King gave him the firm support of the SCLC, and left an invitation open for him if he needed anything. In addition, King said, "*I think one of the great tributes that can be paid in memory of President Kennedy is to try to enact some of the great progressive policies that he sought to initiate.*" President Johnson ensured King of his support and welcomed his suggestions.⁶⁷

Martin Luther King and the two Kennedy brothers had maintained a strained relationship throughout the New Frontier. King had come to believe in them, even though they were hesitant in acting on certain issues in the beginning.⁶⁸ During his first two years as President, John Kennedy had moved toward support for civil rights in a slow, cautious way because of the uncertainty of his presidential victory and fears for his re-election bid. However, by 1963, a new

President Kennedy had emerged.⁶⁹ Knowing that his support for civil rights might cost him the 1964 election, President Kennedy still tried to do what was right to win full equality for Negroes.⁷⁰ But now the Johnson Administration had replaced Kennedy's. What would become of the lingering civil rights bill? All Martin Luther King and President Johnson could do was finish what President Kennedy had helped to start.

Endnotes

- ¹ Clayborne Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 143.
- ² David Burner and Thomas R. West, *The Torch Is Passed: The Kennedy Brother and American Liberalism* (New York: Antheneum, 1984), 60; Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 143.
- ³ George Plimpton, *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1970), 89.
- ⁴ Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 144; Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1965), 471, 480.
- ⁵ Plimpton, *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*, 90-91.
- ⁶ Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 145-147.
- ⁷ Coretta Scott King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), 177-178.
- ⁸ *Ibid*, 179; Plimpton, *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*, 91.
- ⁹ King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 180.
- ¹⁰ Plimpton, *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*, 91.
- ¹¹ King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 180; *Ibid*, 92.
- ¹² Edwin O. Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman, *Robert Kennedy: In His Own Words, The Unpublished Recollections of the Kennedy Years* (New York: Bantam Press, 1988), 69-70; *Ibid*, 93.
- ¹³ King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 181.
- ¹⁴ Plimpton, *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*, 93.
- ¹⁵ Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 149.
- ¹⁶ Burner and West, *The Torch Is Passed: The Kennedy Brother and American Liberalism*, 94.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, 60; Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 148-149.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*, 94.

- ¹⁹ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 211.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*, 185-186, 197; Guthman and Shulman, *Robert Kennedy: In His Own Words, The Unpublished Recollections of the Kennedy Years*, 73-74.
- ²¹ *Ibid*, 188.
- ²² John F. Kennedy, *John F. Kennedy: Words to Remember* (Hallmark Cards, Incorporated, 1967), 18-19.
- ²³ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 480.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, 229, 472.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, 473-474.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, 475, 478-479.
- ²⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Equality Now." *The Nation* 192, 4 February 1961, 92-95.
- ²⁸ Guthman and Shulman, *Robert Kennedy: In His Own Words, The Unpublished Recollections of the Kennedy Years*, 83; Plimpton, *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*, 96.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*, 83-84.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, 85-86 and Plimpton, *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*, 101.
- ³¹ Plimpton, *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*, 103.
- ³² Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 154-155.
- ³³ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Fumbling On the New Frontier," *The Nation* 194, 3 March 1962, 190-192.
- ³⁴ Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 155-157.
- ³⁵ *Ibid*, 159-164.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*, 165-166.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*, 168-169.
- ³⁸ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 480-481.
- ³⁹ *Ibid*, 483-485.

- ⁴⁰ King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 203.
- ⁴¹ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 494.
- ⁴² Martin Luther King, Jr., “Bold Design for a New South,” *The Nation* 196, 30 March 1963, 259-260.
- ⁴³ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 489.
- ⁴⁴ Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 176-177.
- ⁴⁵ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 489.
- ⁴⁶ Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 177-183.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 183-184.
- ⁴⁸ King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 208-210.
- ⁴⁹ Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 184-185
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 205.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid*, 208-210; King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 213
- ⁵² *Ibid*, 212-213; *Ibid*, 214
- ⁵³ King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 212-213
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 214.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 215-216; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 491.
- ⁵⁶ Carson, 218-220; *Ibid*, 496-500.
- ⁵⁷ Guthman and Shulman, *Robert Kennedy: In His Own Words, The Unpublished Recollections of the Kennedy Years*, 83; Plimpton, *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*, 141-143.
- ⁵⁸ “200, 000 Join In Orderly Civil Rights March on Washington.” *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* 21, 30 August 1963: 1495; Margaret Long, “March on Washington,” *New South* 18, September 1963, 4.
- ⁵⁹ Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 229.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 221,223,227.

⁶¹ King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 221; Long, “March on Washington,” 19.

⁶² “200, 000 Join In Orderly Civil Rights March on Washington.” *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report* 21: 1496, 1527.

⁶³ Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 229, 232-233.

⁶⁴ Benjamin Bradlee, *Conversations With Kennedy* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1975), 215, 222.

⁶⁵ Guthman and Shulman, *Robert Kennedy: In His Own Words, The Unpublished Recollections of the Kennedy Years*, 83; Plimpton, *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*, 138-140.

⁶⁶ King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 226-227.

⁶⁷ Michael Beschloss, *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 37-38.

⁶⁸ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 109-111.

⁶⁹ Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 235-236.

⁷⁰ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 113.

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