

# EXECUTIVE INACTION

## John F. Kennedy and the Civil Rights Crisis

*John F. Kennedy maintains a reputation in American memory with respect to civil rights that he does not deserve. He campaigned for presidency advocating the end of racial discrimination, but once he took office his interests shifted towards the nation's foreign policy as the Cold War ever threatened to heat up. However, after Kennedy's assassination, Lyndon B. Johnson re-framed his predecessor's priorities to push for the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts in 1965 as though they were Kennedy's prime concern. Thus, Johnson made Kennedy a martyr for the cause, regardless of his predecessor's agenda. This essay explores Kennedy's action—and inaction—before and during his presidency regarding desegregation in order to explain the dissonance between his life and his reputation.*

By Daniel Ruprecht '17  
Stanford University



President Kennedy addresses the nation on Civil Rights (1963)  
Source: JFK Library

On November 27, 1963, Lyndon Baines Johnson addressed an American public in mourning. John F. Kennedy had been assassinated five days beforehand. “The greatest leader of our time,” Johnson spoke, in his unwavering Texas accent, “has been struck down by the foulest deed of our time.”<sup>1</sup> The speech, written jointly by Kennedy’s speechwriter Theodore Sorensen and Johnson’s close friend Horace Busby, was a rhetorical masterpiece.<sup>2</sup> In a time of crisis—a president murdered, the threat of nuclear annihilation looming, and a racial conflict brewing throughout the country—Johnson needed to assure the American public that he would be an effective and capable president. Therefore, Sorensen and Busby wrote Johnson a speech that appealed to Kennedy’s legacy. Johnson echoed Kennedy’s words from the former President’s inaugural address, when Kennedy

had said: “All this will not be finished in the first 100 days. Nor will it be finished in the first 1,000 days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin.” Johnson added in his inaugural: “Today in this moment of new resolve, I would say to all my fellow Americans, *let us continue.*”<sup>3</sup>

### “LET US CONTINUE”

Johnson paused as the crowd broke out in applause. It cheered again when Johnson declared his determination to continue “the forward thrust of America that [Kennedy] began,” and again every time Johnson said that he planned on building upon Kennedy’s goals.<sup>4</sup> Johnson framed each piece of his presidential plans as an addition or continuation to those of Kennedy. His speech in general served as a good snapshot of the Kennedy administration’s goals and ideas; however, the image was one intentionally altered by the Johnson administration. The way that Johnson portrayed Kennedy effectively redefined the Kennedy administration’s view on one vital issue: civil rights. Johnson’s speech cast “above all” civil rights as the “most immediate” and important issue facing the country, and insisted that it had been Kennedy’s central concern. Thus, the passage of a civil rights bill outlawing racial discrimination would be the way to most “eloquently honor Kennedy’s memory.”<sup>5</sup> While his relationship with civil rights was complicated at best, by examining his speech and deed, it can be seen that civil rights were by no means Kennedy’s primary concern, even though Johnson succeeded in re-framing them as such. The picture offered by Johnson was attractive and effective in a large part due to the Kennedy administration’s skill in turning civil rights issues into public relations victories, portraying Kennedy as a firm civil rights supporter even though the issue was never at the forefront of his policy.

### KENNEDY’S EARLY CAREER AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Kennedy kept a similar cool demeanor in his interactions with people of all races. Even though it is impossible to conclude definitively how he felt about race, his ability to seem

relaxed and comfortable in interactions of people, regardless of race, suggests that he did not hold black Americans in a lower regard based on their skin color. While it is true that during his time as a student, Kennedy was not known to have had any black friends, he was very close to his black valet George Taylor.<sup>6</sup> Taylor later recalled that “when Jack was running for congressman he would ask me what I thought of his speeches.”<sup>7</sup> They had a close and informal relationship which characterized Kennedy’s general attitude towards black Americans; he was the kind of man who could just “walk into a beauty salon in a black neighborhood, go right up to the woman below the hairdryer and say: ‘Hi, I’m Jack Kennedy.’”<sup>8</sup> This relaxed attitude towards people of color had a marked impact on the way Kennedy was viewed by people of color. It made him seem like their natural ally in the Senate and during his campaign for the presidency in 1960. According to his brother Robert Kennedy, John F. Kennedy believed, there “were a lot of people less fortunate and a lot of people who were hungry. White people and Negroes were all put in that same category.”<sup>9</sup>

However, Kennedy’s affability with black Americans does not imply that he cared strongly about the struggle for civil rights in America. In fact, his early political career indicates the opposite. In no way was the civil rights issue one of his primary concerns as a senator, as evidenced by his vote *against* the Civil Rights Act of 1957. In this decision, Kennedy was concerned primarily that the bill would break up the Democratic Party along geographic lines, as the Southern Democrats vehemently opposed desegregation and voting rights for blacks. So, for the better of the party, Kennedy voted against racial equality. As his close friend and speechwriter Ted Sorensen reported, Kennedy “simply did not give much thought” to civil rights during his time as Senator.<sup>10</sup>

In March 1960, *The New York Times* reported that during a filibuster to stop the passage of a civil rights bill in the Senate, “when most civil-rights advocates were stumbling groggily through the pre-dawn hours to answer quorum calls and keep the Senate in session... Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts failed to appear for a single post-midnight call.”<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Lyndon B. Johnson “turned out for every call during the graveyard hours of early morning when the going was roughest.”<sup>12</sup> Taking Kennedy’s poor track record into account, it seems inexplicable that he was able to garner more than seventy percent of the nation’s black vote in the 1960 presidential election.

The reason he did, simply put, was brilliant public relations. In the 1960 presidential race, Kennedy utilized aggressive public relations tactics to make it appear as though he were an extremely vocal civil rights advocate, and thus began to build the image that Johnson would reference in his 1963 speech. In Kennedy’s campaign speeches, he promised to work via executive orders and new legislation to address the nation’s racial inequalities. He threw elaborate dinners with

mixed-race guests and met with activist leaders to discuss what needed to be done.<sup>13</sup> At the July 1960 Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, Kennedy spoke as though civil rights issues would be one of the central planks of his platform.<sup>14</sup> Then in August at a special Senate session, he condemned the previous policy of the Republican Party regarding civil rights issues, proudly declaring that he could desegregate housing “with the stroke of a pen,” meaning with an executive order.<sup>15</sup> *The New York Times* front page read “Kennedy Pledges Civil Rights Fight.”<sup>16</sup>



President Lyndon B. Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act of 1968  
Source: Library of Congress

Finally, two weeks before the election, Kennedy was able to turn the arrest of Martin Luther King, Jr. into a massive public relations victory. Dr. King was arrested along with fifty-two other people of color in Atlanta, Georgia, for refusing to leave a restaurant inside of a Rich’s department store. Kennedy was encouraged by his assistant and friend Harris Wofford, a longtime civil rights advocate, to give Mrs. Coretta Scott King a phone call expressing his concern.<sup>17</sup> Kennedy loved the idea. To Coretta he expressed: “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.”<sup>18</sup> Coretta, apparently shocked, briefly thanked him and then ended the call. The entire affair lasted less than two minutes, but it was a defining moment for the remainder of Kennedy’s campaign. His campaign advertised the call via a pamphlet, now known as the “blue bomb,” which it distributed primarily to black neighborhoods around the country.<sup>19</sup> By targeting only the black audience, he could gain their vote without harming his credibility in the eyes of the white Southern Democrats. His

## Executive Inaction

targeting was so effective that *The New York Times* printed a story about the phone call, fewer than ten sentences, hidden on the twenty-second page—hardly news.<sup>20</sup> Yet black Americans felt differently. The call to Coretta, like so many other of Kennedy's gestures, was an absolute public relations victory which required no substantive action to combat racism or inequality on his part.

Kennedy's election marked the beginning of a swing in the black American population to vote democrat that has yet to subside. From the Civil War to the 1960's, most black Americans had voted for Republican; Lincoln had been the first Republican president, and many Democrats at that time supported continued segregation.

The facts suggest—and so far historians have affirmed—that Kennedy was elected because of his effective targeting of the

As was indicated by his inaugural address' complete omission of the topic, civil rights was not the focal point of Kennedy's policy when he entered office. As time passed, he seemed to have forgotten about the promises that he had made, and no executive orders came. Kennedy was worried at first that any firm action regarding civil rights would alienate Southern Democrats who never wanted to see an end to segregation. He needed political support to work legislation more immediately important to him through Congress, like the creation of a Department of Urban Affairs and his Trade Expansion Bill.<sup>26</sup> As Cold War historian Mary L. Dudziak put it, "moving forward on civil rights legislation would jeopardize his other initiatives in Congress."<sup>27</sup> If racial equality were to be his primary domestic concern, Kennedy would have had to fight a very difficult battle to accomplish his other presidential goals. As such, Kennedy chose not to fight that battle and to take no firm stance on civil rights legislation.

---

### “... Kennedy ‘simply did not give much thought’ to civil rights during his time as Senator.”

---

black population.<sup>21</sup> While Kennedy won the election by less than one percent of the popular vote, he carried more than seventy percent of the nation's black vote, prompting Dwight Eisenhower to comment that the Coretta call had “swung the Negro vote to [Kennedy] and [given] him the election.”<sup>22</sup> Those black American voters in 1960 looked expectantly towards their new president that had promised so much.

#### KENNEDY THE PRESIDENT

Any civil rights supporter or activist would have had their heart dampened by Kennedy's inaugural address. The speech is widely remembered by Americans for its powerful closing lines: “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.”<sup>23</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson remembered it for the phrase “let us begin.” No one remembered it for a strong stance on the need for racial equality legislation, because nowhere in the speech was there an explicit reference to civil rights in any form. The speech laid down Kennedy's goals and plans as president, and remarkably had no mention of the struggle for black freedom within America. The inaugural festivities themselves were an image of integration; Kennedy “danced happily with black women,” and *Jet* magazine reported that “Washington was a truly integrated capital” on that day, but the eerie omission of civil rights in the speech struck many as foreboding.<sup>24</sup>

During the parade to celebrate his inauguration, Kennedy noticed that the Coast Guard had no black members, and remarked to his speechwriter Richard Goodwin “that's not acceptable. Something ought to be done about it.”<sup>25</sup> The President then spent two years doing very little about it.

Regardless of Kennedy's own attitude, his campaign promises were not forgotten by his black constituents. Responding to Kennedy's remark that he could end housing segregation with simply the stroke of a pen, civil rights activists flooded the White House mail with cheap pens, in hopes of reminding the president about his early promise to end housing segregation.<sup>28</sup> Roy Wilkins, the leader of the NAACP, publicly criticized Kennedy's “super-caution.”<sup>29</sup> Kennedy's aides considered him “rather uninterested in civil rights,” and the most concerned activists voiced their disapproval.<sup>30</sup>

On the whole, however, Kennedy was able to portray himself as helping the movement through acts which he believed were not significant enough to anger southern voters. He issued an executive order ceasing racial discrimination in federal government positions and creating the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity to ensure the order's execution.<sup>31</sup> He appointed Thurgood Marshall to the United States Court of Appeals, the first black justice to serve on that court (Johnson would later nominate Marshall to the Supreme Court). He even managed to successfully integrate the Washington Redskins football team by threatening to take away public funding—the story was printed on the front page of *The New York Times*.<sup>32</sup> These were exactly the types of actions that Kennedy wanted the public to see; like his call to Coretta Scott King, these made Kennedy appear to further the cause of civil rights without actually passing any type of civil rights legislation that might alienate Southern Democrats.

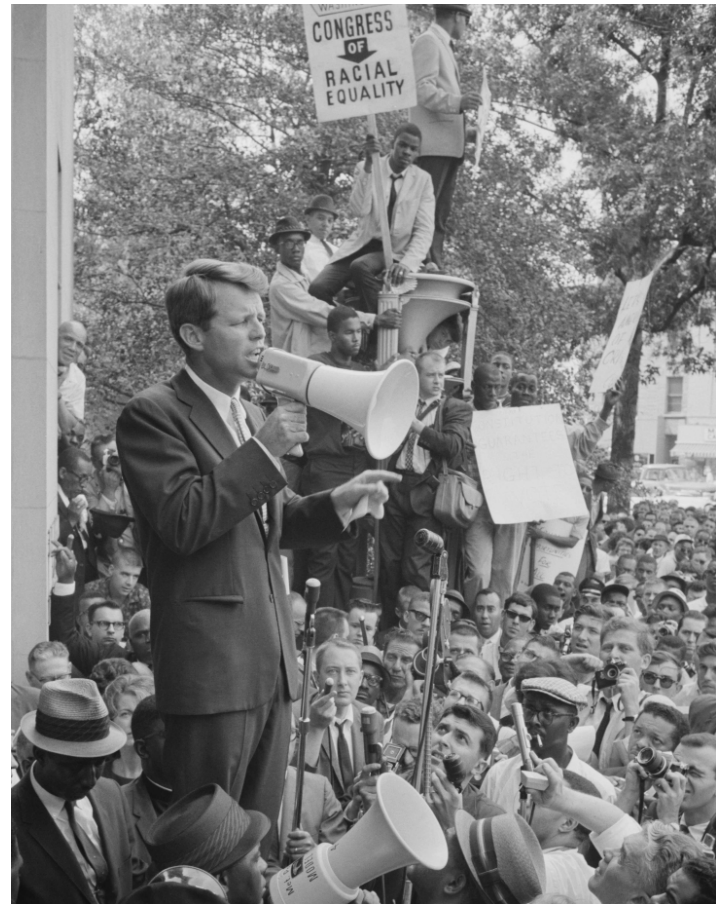
More important to Kennedy than any domestic issue, however, were international relations. All domestic concerns were

pushed to the background as the Cold War escalated to a fever pitch. According to Wofford, Kennedy's "chief concern was foreign policy and peace and relations with the Soviet Union."<sup>33</sup> Civil rights historian Mark Newman echoes the sentiment, writing that Kennedy "was primarily concerned with foreign policy and reviving the American economy."<sup>34</sup> The American U2 plane shot down in Soviet airspace, the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the threat of African nations turning to communism, and finally the Cuban Missile Crisis made the racial equality movement seem less pressing to Kennedy.

As the Cold War escalated abroad, civil rights activists increased the pressure at home. Kennedy showed a general reluctance to have his administration involved, "only acting when forced to by a political crisis," according to historian John Walton Cotman.<sup>35</sup> In May of 1961, for instance, the SNCC sent Freedom Riders to the South to protest segregated bus systems. The riders were beaten and a bus firebombed by white southerners. Kennedy's response to the Riders was to tell his friend Wofford, "Stop them! Get your friends off those buses!"<sup>36</sup> According to Wofford, Kennedy felt as though the Riders were "embarrassing him and the country on the eve of the meeting in Vienna with Khrushchev."<sup>37</sup> As violence in the South was becoming more prevalent, Kennedy was forced to act and reluctantly sent 600 federal troops to stop the violence and preserve an image of the U.S. more presentable abroad.<sup>38</sup> A similar situation occurred in 1962 when the University of Mississippi, with support of the governor Ross Barnett, refused to allow black student James Meredith to enroll. Meredith's arrival on campus caused an absolute riot, injuring 375 and killing two. Belatedly, after seeing the carnage, Kennedy sent in the army to maintain peace, once again showing "unwillingness to intervene directly in a crisis unless state and local authorities failed to maintain order."<sup>39</sup> His reluctance aside, in both of the aforementioned cases the fact that Kennedy did send in troops lent itself to the image that Johnson would build upon of Kennedy as a champion of the civil rights movement.

Perfectly indicative of his attitude towards the issue was Kennedy's solution to the particularly nagging problem of Highway 40: African diplomats driving from New York to Washington, D.C. were being denied gas, hotels, and food by white store-owners. Kennedy's reported response: "It's a hell of a road... Tell them to fly!"<sup>40</sup> His responses were calculated to avoid controversy, acting only when forced to keep peace in an absolute political crisis. None of these actions were those of a leader to whom civil rights were central. 1962, according to Dr. King, was "the year that civil rights was displaced as the dominant issue in domestic policies... The issue no longer commanded the conscience of the nation."<sup>41</sup> The issue never seemed to have commanded Kennedy's conscience.

The most well-known examples of civil rights crises during the Kennedy administration would come during the summer of 1963. On May 3, the Birmingham police, under or-



Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy outside the Justice Department (1963)  
Source: Library of Congress

ders from Birmingham's Commissioner of Public Safety Eugene "Bull" Connor, responded to civil rights protesters with violent force. Fire hoses and attack dogs were turned on the activists, in the presence of a multitude of reporters capturing photographs to broadcast around the world. In a meeting the next day with the Americans for Democratic Action in response to the Birmingham crisis, Kennedy said, "the most important problem is to try to prevent this economy from going down again... The other problem is the problem of civil rights... What a disaster that picture is. That picture is not only in America but all around the world."<sup>42</sup> The brutal image to which the President referred depicted a black man being attacked by one of the police dogs, but even it was not enough to force Kennedy to take a stance with new legislation. Instead, the president hoped that the people of Birmingham could solve the issue themselves.<sup>43</sup> The rioting was quelled eventually by Dr. King, who personally visited Birmingham pool halls to try and stop activists from committing acts of violence. Once again, to Kennedy, civil rights issues mattered most when he thought they would have a negative effect of the nation's international image.

Later, in May of that year, the President's conduct changed when Alabama Governor George Wallace stubbornly tried

## Executive Inaction

to keep the University of Alabama segregated. This time, the President sent in the National Guard before any violence erupted. Yet the shift in policy may have been more utilitarian than moral, as Robert Kennedy suggested when he said street demonstrations were likely to continue, and it would be “bad for the country. It’s bad for us around the world.”<sup>44</sup>

The Kennedy brothers both targeted the bad press that the civil rights crisis was giving America on the world stage as one of the largest concerns regarding civil rights. Also, in the same month, Johnson delivered a speech at Gettysburg calling for new civil rights action, and Kennedy denounced him privately for “trying so hard to be a liberal.”<sup>45</sup> Johnson would “accomplish nothing.”<sup>46</sup> Before the March on Washington in August, the President expressed concern that it would turn into a riot and destroy the American image altogether. Kennedy saw the march as a “pistol pointed directly at the collected head” of the country.<sup>47</sup> But his mentality really may have been shifting.




Civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr., and President John F. Kennedy in the Oval Office (1963)  
*Source: Library of Congress*

### “A QUESTION WE’RE WRESTLING WITH AND CANNOT ANSWER”

In June 1963, in what is remembered as one of the greatest American speeches of all time, Kennedy took a firm stance in support of civil rights. The televised address reintroduced civil rights as “primarily a moral issue.”<sup>48</sup> The speech called for new legislation to be passed to secure black rights, as “the time has come for this Nation to fulfill its promise.” Each American, Kennedy pleaded, ought to question his own moral standing regarding an issue “as old as scriptures and as clear as the American Constitution.”<sup>49</sup> For the first time in his political career, Kennedy seemed poised to become more than just a reluctant peacekeeper, more than a bystander. It seemed as though he was experiencing a serious moral re-evaluation as he saw violence escalate throughout the coun-

try, and this shift indicated that either he was confident that he could win the next election without the Southern Democrats, or that he thought his message would be powerful enough to shift even their opinion. Perhaps he even believed the cause to be more important than an election.

Regardless of a moral shift that may or may not have happened, whether Kennedy’s domestic policy was going to radically change with civil rights issues at the center cannot be divined. The truth of the matter is, as civil rights activist John Mack said, what Kennedy’s views may have evolved into is “a question we’re wrestling with and cannot answer.”<sup>50</sup> Kennedy was assassinated in November of 1963, and Johnson became president. For the majority of Kennedy’s political life, civil rights was nothing close to his central concern, regardless of what Johnson said or Sorensen and Busby wrote. In an extended series of interviews between Jackie Kennedy and Arthur Schlesinger regarding her husband’s life and legacy conducted weeks after his assassination, the transcript of which takes up about 350 pages, it is significant to note that fewer than two of those pages reference the civil rights movement in any way.<sup>51</sup> When Schlesinger asked Jackie if John often spoke about the movement, she very effectively avoided answering the question and moved on to a different topic.<sup>52</sup>

Kennedy’s actions in support of civil rights generally followed a pattern: in his campaign and afterward he wanted to appear publicly to be a supporter without angering southern voters. When later crises forced him to act, he did so reluctantly. Civil rights simply were not his concern; however, because he did act, regardless of his motive, he was seen as sympathetic to the cause. That sympathy, in conjunction with Kennedy’s original campaign promises, and his movements to work with civil rights leaders (albeit not as much as they wanted), all came together to create an image of a man who could have been a civil rights leader. It is that idea of Kennedy which Johnson appealed to when he stated that Kennedy had seen civil rights as his primary concern, and that new legislation would be the best way to honor Kennedy’s memory. In Johnson’s words, “martyrs have to die for causes. John Kennedy has died, but his cause was not really clear. That was my job.”<sup>53</sup> Thus Kennedy became a martyr for civil rights. Johnson’s words, “let us continue” really marked a new beginning and a new legal emphasis on civil rights. Johnson declared that the best eulogy for Kennedy would be the passage of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act in 1965, and when they passed they became part of the Kennedy legacy. John F. Kennedy, a man who only peripherally cared about the struggle for black freedom in America, was for years remembered as one of the cause’s strongest political supporters. 

## Endnotes

- [1] Lyndon B. Johnson, "Let Us Continue," *American Rhetoric*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/lbjletuscontinue.html>.
- [2] Robert N. Hall, "Lyndon Johnson's Speech Preparation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 51, no. 2 (1965): 170.
- [3] John F. Kennedy, "Inaugural Address: Friday, January 20, 1961" *Bartleby*, <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres56.html>; Johnson, "Let Us Continue."
- [4] Johnson, "Let Us Continue."
- [5] Ibid.
- [6] Nick Bryant, "Give the Kid a Break," *The Bystander: John F. Kennedy and the Struggle for Black Equality* (New York, NY: Basic, 2006), 24.
- [7] Ibid.
- [8] Doris E. Saunders, *The Kennedy Years and the Negro* (Chicago, IL: Johnson Publishing Co., 1964), 11.; Bryant, *The Bystander*, 24.
- [9] Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1965), 471.; Arthur Krock, *Memoirs: Sixty Years in the Firing Line* (New York, NY: Funk & Wagnalls, 1968), 339.
- [10] Bryant, *Bystander*, 25.
- [11] Russell J. Baker, "Candidates Shun Filibuster Calls," *New York Times*, 10 Mar. 1960.
- [12] Ibid.
- [13] Malcolm E. Smith Jr., *Kennedy's 13 Great Mistakes in the White House* (Washington, DC: National Forum of America, 1968), 79.
- [14] "Democratic National Political Conventions 1832-2008," *Library of Congress*, 2008, 19-20.
- [15] Smith Jr., *Kennedy's 13 Great Mistakes*, 80.; Mary L. Dudziak, "Losing Control in Camelot," *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000), 155-56.
- [16] Russell Baker, "Kennedy Pledges Civil Rights Fight," *New York Times*, 2 Sep. 1960.
- [17] Bryant, *Bystander*, 183-185.
- [18] Ibid.
- [19] Caroline H. Cooper, "JFK: Civil Rights Leader or Bystander?" *Al Jazeera America*, 25 Nov. 2010, <http://america.aljazeera.com/watch/shows/america-tonight/america-tonight-blog/2013/11/25/jfk-civil-right-leaderorbystander.html>.
- [20] "Kennedy Calls Mrs. King," *New York Times*, 27 Oct. 1960, 22.
- [21] Bryant, *Bystander*, 211.
- [22] Smith Jr., *Kennedy's 13 Great Mistakes*, 83.
- [23] Kennedy, "Inaugural Address."
- [24] Bryant, *Bystander*, 211.
- [25] Richard N. Goodwin, *Remembering America: A Voice from the Sixties* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1988), 4-5.
- [26] Smith Jr., *Kennedy's 13 Great Mistakes*, 87.
- [27] Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 156.
- [28] Ibid.
- [29] Russell Baker, "Kennedy Tactics Disturb Wilkins," *New York Times*, 29 Dec. 1960, 13.
- [30] Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 155.
- [31] Mark Newman, "The Kennedy Administration and Civil Rights." *The Civil Rights Movement* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 78.; "John F. Kennedy on Civil Rights." *John F. Kennedy on Civil Rights*, OnTheIssues, n.d., 26 May 2014.
- [32] David Halberstam, "Football Team Told To Avoid Hiring Bias," *New York Times*, 25 Mar. 1961, 1.
- [33] Ibid.
- [34] Newman, *The Civil Rights Movement*, 77.
- [35] Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 170.
- [36] Ibid., 158.
- [37] Ibid.
- [38] Ibid.
- [39] Newman, *Civil Rights Movement*, 84.
- [40] Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 168.
- [41] Smith, *Kennedy's 13 Great Mistakes*, 88.
- [42] Bryant, *Bystander*, 388.
- [43] Ibid.
- [44] Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 179.
- [45] Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Caroline Kennedy, and Michael R. Beschloss, *Jacqueline Kennedy: Historic Conversations on Life with John F. Kennedy* (New York: Hyperion, 2011), 260.
- [46] Ibid.
- [47] Smith Jr., *Kennedy's 13 Great Mistakes*, 92.
- [48] John F. Kennedy, "Address on Civil Rights," *Miller Center*, 11 Jun. 1963, <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/speech-3375>.
- [49] Ibid.
- [50] Jesse Washington, "JFK Holds Complex Place in Black History," *The Big Story: AP Press*, 23 Feb. 2013.
- [51] Onassis et al., *Jacqueline Kennedy*.
- [52] Ibid., 260.
- [53] Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 178.