

Chapter 1 : Top shelves for Kennedy, Johnson, and the Quest for Justice

Kennedy, Johnson, and the Quest for Justice brings the reader into the room as Kennedy argues with Mississippi governor Ross Barnett and the white business leaders of Birmingham, Alabama, and as Johnson makes late-night phone calls to Martin Luther King Jr., NAACP head Roy Wilkins, and Washington Post publisher Katherine Graham. As fly-on-the.

Email Anyone who has wondered just what was said inside the White House during the civil rights struggles of the early s can get an inside look with the new book *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Quest for Justice*. Authors Jonathan Rosenberg and Zachary Karabell weave in actual transcripts of secret recordings that Presidents Kennedy and Johnson made about the racial turmoil in America in the early s, including heated phone calls between Kennedy and government leaders in Birmingham, Ala. Here is an excerpt. The Twentieth-Century Struggle "Let us close the springs of racial poison. Let us pray for wise and understanding hearts. Let us put aside irrelevant differences and make our nation whole. The Civil Rights Act was a milestone in the history of the U. In the eyes of many, the complex legislation, which outlawed discrimination in public accommodation, employment, and federally funded programs, was the most important civil rights law in nearly a century, and leaders in the struggle for racial justice hailed its passage enthusiastically. Martin Luther King, Jr. If the movement to abolish American slavery was the noblest cause of the nineteenth century, then the civil rights struggle was the most heroic crusade of the twentieth. While it had taken a bloody war to sweep slavery from the national landscape, the twentieth-century civil rights movement was wrenching in its own right and, if not as cataclysmic, nearly as dramatic. The story of the civil rights crusade has become part of the mythos of America, as towering heroes, possessed of great dignity and greater courage, labored energetically in the quest for justice. Arrayed against them were less noble figures, who, with equal zeal, worked to thwart the aspirations of the reformers. While many recognize the significance of the civil rights movement of the s and s, few recall that the struggle began not in those years but decades earlier. Emerging late in the nineteenth century, the modern quest for racial justice was peopled by extraordinary figures, many of whom are now remembered only dimly or not at all. Black and white freedom fighters worked tirelessly and often at great personal risk to extract justice from the heart of a nation that had long proclaimed itself the source of freedom and democracy in the world. That the United States was unwilling to provide either to all its citizens was one of the supreme ironies of the struggle, a campaign that unfolded slowly but inexorably over the first half of the twentieth century. To have believed early in the last century that schools would one day be integrated and legal racial discrimination ended would have seemed a case of hope vanquishing reality. Yet in the s and s, it would begin to happen, and the Civil Rights Act of represented the culmination of years of work. With its passage, and the enactment the following year of the Voting Rights Act, the legal wall that had stood for so long between African Americans and full citizenship came tumbling down. The history of the struggle has been told many times before, often as the story of courageous African Americans whose collective actions forced a reluctant federal government to defend and protect the rights of all Americans against a system that had long denied justice to blacks. And that is as it should be told, for what finally compelled the federal government to act were the assiduous efforts of black Americans who were determined to end legal discrimination. Unlike earlier civil rights legislation in and , the legislation of mandated an aggressive expansion of federal power and represented a convergence between grassroots activism and decisions made on the national political level. For a variety of reasons both noble and pragmatic, the Civil Rights Act was supported by northern and western legislators, Justice Department officials, and the White House, all of whom responded to the words and deeds of civil rights leaders and activists who had worked for racial justice in the s and s. Neither by itself would have been sufficient, a fact amply demonstrated by decades of unsuccessful efforts to enact civil rights law. But together, grassroots reformers and national political leaders overcame formidable obstacles that had long made the passage of effective legislation unlikely if not impossible. In many accounts of the civil rights movement, the federal government has been portrayed as either passive or, worse yet, hostile to the aims of the reformers. It has been said that Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy were

unwilling to kneel before the altar of civil rights and that it was not until Lyndon Johnson entered the White House that the executive branch demonstrated a genuine commitment to work for change. If Truman and Kennedy feared that endorsing civil rights would spell the end of their political careers or the fragmentation of their party, Eisenhower seemed at best ambivalent about the moral necessity of the domestic struggle. The former general evinced little willingness to lead the country toward confronting institutionalized racial discrimination in the s, and just as white Americans preferred to maintain the status quo, Eisenhower was content to do the same. The tape recordings made by John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson open a new window onto the civil rights struggle. Although they do not invalidate earlier pictures of presidential uneasiness with civil rights reform, they do demand that we consider the obstacles two presidents faced in working for change. In highlighting the role played by the executive branch, the tapes in no way minimize the determination, skill, and heroism manifested by countless black Americans "leaders and followers" who helped transform the landscape of American race relations. The story of the struggle over civil rights should not be written according to the rules of a zero-sum game: Adding to the list of those who contributed to the passage of the bill does not mean that others need to be removed. But that changed in , largely because of the brutal events in Birmingham that May, which made an often apathetic country sit up and take notice. In response to the violence in Alabama, the Kennedy administration proposed legislation more sweeping than any federal civil rights reform since the s, and while Kennedy never fully overcame his ambivalence about the bill, his reservations were political not moral. But Lyndon Johnson would be different, for unlike his predecessor, he was wholly determined to do whatever was necessary to pass effective civil rights legislation. About this, Johnson was passionate and adamant, and he staked his political future on passing the bill. Had Johnson not made civil rights the number one priority of his first months in office, it might have been some time before Congress passed meaningful legislation. While Johnson has rightly been blamed for his failings in Southeast Asia, it is appropriate to credit him for his achievements on civil rights at home. To be fair, the two Presidents faced different challenges, and the transcripts highlight different aspects of their presidencies. A substantial portion of the Kennedy tapes shows the President responding to crises, whether at Ole Miss or Birmingham. Confronted with dangerous and unpredictable situations, Kennedy did not have the luxury of careful deliberations, and his primary concern was to contain the chaos that threatened to engulf the South. Johnson, on the other hand, faced only a legislative crisis. The moral stakes may have been high, but violence and social disorder were not immediate concerns. Only in the weeks before the passage of the Civil Rights Act, confronted with the murder of three volunteers in Mississippi and the specter of a white backlash against the act, did Johnson have to contend with the same level of immediate danger on a civil rights issue as Kennedy had to in and Both Kennedy and Johnson were political animals, who rarely made a decision without closely considering its political consequences. But civil rights had long been framed as a moral question, and those who led the campaign for race reform based their demands not on the ephemera of domestic politics but on timeless questions of right and justice. In the discussions and debates on the bill, the moral and the political were often merged. In the halls of Congress as well as in the Oval Office, advocates and opponents of the bill made it clear that what was just would have to be reconciled with what was possible in Washington and throughout the country. This tension between morality and pragmatism has led some to question the motives of those political leaders who championed civil rights in the s. Johnson has been susceptible to the charge that he endorsed civil rights reform largely to enhance his political standing, while Kennedy has been criticized for not moving more aggressively on the matter because he feared the political consequences for himself and his party. But if politics was never far from the mind of either man, the morality of civil rights weighed on both. Indeed, Johnson, the quintessential Texan, was more committed to civil rights than was Kennedy, a son of Massachusetts, home of the abolitionists. Just as many said that only a hard-line anti-Communist like Nixon could go to China, it is perhaps equally true that only Johnson "the southern politician par excellence" could engineer meaningful civil rights reform. But the question remains: Why did Kennedy and Johnson come to believe that civil rights reform was the single most important domestic issue facing the nation and decide it was worth fighting for? What the tapes depict is an unfolding process between and At first, a reluctant Kennedy resented civil rights leaders for their failure to understand the obstacles to change. But as events

proceeded, his position shifted, and he became determined to craft meaningful reform, even as he remained unsure about how far to go. Then, in the Johnson period, we see an administration willing to move without hesitation to ensure the passage of the act. Perhaps most interestingly, the tapes suggest that for both administrations, any attempt to separate moral from political concerns is a futile enterprise. It is impossible to determine whether Kennedy cared more about the justness of civil rights than about the domestic political implications of the issue. Nor can one separate morality from politics when talking about Johnson. Each man was fully capable of fusing the two, of compromising moral imperatives because of political concerns, or of ignoring political concerns because of moral imperatives. Had Kennedy not believed that the political climate had changed such that ignoring civil rights was no longer politically feasible, it is difficult to imagine he would have acted as he did. And few would argue that Johnson would have invested his political capital in civil rights had he not been convinced that it was, quite simply, the right thing to do. Civil Rights before The transcripts begin in , but there is, of course, a rich history that preceded the events covered in the following pages, a history that informed and shaped how the various participants approached the issue of civil rights. The leading figures in the brief but intense drama of the early s stood on the shoulders of thousands of committed people who preceded them, some well known, but most obscure. To be black in early-twentieth-century America was by any measure to live a life of deprivation and oppression. Black Americans were poorer, hungrier, and less educated than their white countrymen were, and the black population in the South was victimized by Jim Crow, a wide-ranging system of legalized oppression that denied blacks the right to vote and enforced discrimination in housing, education, transportation, and employment. In addition, the oppressive system, which white southerners had constructed late in the nineteenth century, was made up of countless smaller indignities, which were no less humiliating. If it was demoralizing to be denied the vote in a country that prided itself on its love of democracy, then it was no doubt equally painful to be forced to take the oath on a special "colored" Bible in a southern courtroom. Separation and oppression sometimes took imaginative forms, as in New Orleans, which adopted a law segregating black from white prostitutes. Moreover, an unwritten code of racial deference made additional demands on black citizens, like the custom that forbade a black man in a car from passing a white driver, even if the latter was riding in a wagon. Emerging from the miasma of prejudice and oppression, African American thought at the dawn of the century consisted of two distinct streams. The views of two men, Booker T. Du Bois, both of whom would someday occupy prominent places in the black pantheon, pointed the struggle in different directions. For Washington, born and bred in the rural South, the guiding idea was vocational education, which emphasized practical training, especially cultivation of the soil. Moreover, in a period when the accumulation of wealth had achieved an almost sanctified character in the United States, Washington emphasized hard work and thrift. Had he stopped there, he might have been remembered as a modest advocate of black self-help. But for all his apparent mild-manneredness, he was destined to become a controversial figure in the African American community. Along with his call for education and hard work, in the short term, he explicitly ruled out for blacks what white America feared most of all: For white Americans in , the term social equality was in truth a euphemism for interracial social contact, which might lead to interracial sex and miscegenation. In his most-celebrated speech, he asserted in , "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the five fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress. Du Bois thought differently. Cerebral, assertive, and utterly determined, Du Bois was born and reared in Massachusetts, graduated from Fisk University, studied in Berlin, earned a doctorate from Harvard, and was an altogether different type of leader than Washington was. He would become the leader of the black freedom struggle, and the most important black figure in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. Du Bois believed an elite group of black Americans, which he called the Talented Tenth, should be responsible for helping to elevate the rest of the race, economically, politically, socially, and culturally. In order to prepare for its leadership role, this black elite representing approximately 10 percent of the black population would need solid training in the liberal arts. According to Du Bois, "Progress in human affairs is more often a pull than a push, a surging forward of the exceptional man, and the lifting of his duller brethren. In a celebrated critique of Washington, Du Bois wondered in whether it was possible to achieve racial progress with a philosophy that

allowed only a "meager chance" for the development of "exceptional men. Composed of blacks and whites in the early days, the NAACP was destined to become the organizational engine for race reform for the next fifty years. Well-educated, articulate spokespersons, committed to helping the downtrodden, would spearhead the movement for racial justice by working to challenge segregation, end occupational discrimination, and gain the right to vote. A new spirit of abolitionism had been born. In addition to the emergence of an organized movement for race reform early in the century, a key development in the black experience at this time was the northward migration of large numbers of African Americans. This was the beginning of the so-called Great Migration, which saw hundreds of thousands of blacks leave the South for the North between and Equally significant was the simultaneous black migration within the South, which saw rural blacks move into southern cities in record numbers, a development that in later years would have enormous implications for the civil rights movement.

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