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"To Thine Own Self Be True": Robert F. Kennedy, The Inner Cities, and the American Civil Rights Movement 1963-1968

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“TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE”
ROBERT F. KENNEDY, THE INNER CITIES, AND THE
AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

1963-1968

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in
History from the College of William & Mary in Virginia,

by

Dwight A. Weingarten

Accepted for _____

(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

Professor Charles McGovern, Director

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Williamsburg, Virginia
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Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Acknowledgments | 3 |
| Introduction | 5 |
| Part I: Understanding Civil Rights Issues | |
| Time as “Brother Protector” & the Baldwin Meeting (May 24, 1963) | 13 |
| Part II: Searching for Solutions to “Civil Rights Problems” | |
| Time of Transition & the Bedford-Stuyvesant Meeting (February 4, 1966)..... | 34 |
| Part III: Initial Action | |
| Time of Testing & Back to Bed-Stuy (December 10, 1966)..... | 61 |
| Part IV: Standing for Civil Rights | |
| The Presidential Campaign & the Oakland Meeting (May 30, 1968)..... | 92 |
| Conclusion | 123 |
| Bibliography | 132 |

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“To thine own self be true.”¹

---Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

Act 1, Scene 3

“I appeal to all of you to get into this great revolution that is sweeping this nation. Get in and stay in the streets of every city, every village and hamlet of this nation until true freedom comes, until the revolution of 1776 is complete.”²

---John Lewis
March on Washington
August 28, 1963

“What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black.”³

---Robert F. Kennedy
Indianapolis, Indiana
April 4, 1968

INTRODUCTION

¹ Shakespeare, William, and Harold Jenkins. *Hamlet*. London: Methuen, 1982, p. 21.

² University of Maryland. "Lewis, "Speech at the March on Washington," Speech Text." *Voices of Democracy*. <http://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/lewis-speech-at-the-march-on-washington-speech-text/> (accessed March 15, 2014).

³ Robert F. Kennedy -- Statement on the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.. "American Rhetoric". <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rfkonmlkdeath.html> (accessed March 15, 2014).

“[Robert Kennedy] was a man who allied himself not to be stuck in the dark, in the past. When he saw truth, he embraced truth [sic].”⁴

---Civil Rights leader John Lewis

The story of civil rights in America begins with a profound moral declaration. As Thomas Jefferson penned on behalf of the founding fathers in 1776, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”⁵ Yet this statement, while declared on paper, had not reached a full realization in the minds of men. The contradiction of the freedom set forth in the Declaration with the institution of slavery and systems of discrimination tarnished the authenticity of the high values that the nation’s founders professed. From the beginning of the country’s founding, men struggled to reconcile the supreme fact set forth in the Declaration with the outward appearance. Even Jefferson, the author of these words but a slaveholder himself, felt this contradiction, writing in 1781, “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that His justice cannot sleep forever.”⁶

On the eve of the Civil War, standing in Independence Hall in Philadelphia, the newly elected President, Abraham Lincoln, declared that,

“The Declaration of Independence which gave liberty not alone to the people of this country, but hope to all the world, for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights would be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that all should have an equal chance. This is the sentiment embodied in

⁴ Lewis, John. Interview by author. Personal interview. Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C., October 8, 2013.

⁵ National Archives and Records Administration. "The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription." National Archives and Records Administration. http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html (accessed March 19, 2014).

⁶ Federer, William J. *America's God and Country: Encyclopedia of Quotations*. Coppel, Texas: Fame, 1994, p. 323.

the Declaration of Independence... I would rather be assassinated on this spot than surrender it [Sic].”⁷

From 1861 to 1865, the nation would struggle supremely over the beliefs regarding human equality. While Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation took effect in 1863, symbolically freeing slaves across the South, his stand to lift the weights from the shoulders of men contributed to his assassination on April 14, 1865, just five days after the Civil War ended.

Nearly a century after Lincoln’s death, in the first half of the twentieth century, the battle for equality still raged in America. Discrimination in places of public accommodation was legal. Blacks and whites could not attend school together in the Deep South. Nor could they sit down together at lunch counters or sit near one another on buses. John Lewis, just three generations removed from slavery, was born in rural Alabama in 1940 to parents who were sharecroppers. As a young child, Lewis felt “something terribly wrong” about the segregation in his town.⁸ When the Montgomery Bus Boycott, led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., began in December 1955, marking the beginning of the modern Civil Rights Movement, this nonviolent movement for the assertion of rights “felt very, very *right*” to the fifteen year old Lewis.⁹

Lewis, a future leader in this continuing movement for civil rights, would later write on the impetus of the modern movement’s beginning stating, “We believed that if we are all children of the same Creator, then discrimination had to be an error, a

⁷ Ibid., p. 377.

⁸ Lewis, John, and Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998, p. 48.

⁹ Ibid., p. 59.

misconception based on faulty logic.”¹⁰ Nearly two centuries after the nation’s founding, the country still struggled with the contradiction, *the error* at the foundation of the nation. The Constitution had long been rectified and the battles Lincoln led had altered it, but as Lewis explains, “The Civil Rights Movement was more than a struggle over legal rights, it was a spiritual movement led by ministers who wanted to confront the erroneous belief that some of us are more valuable or important than others, and demonstrate the truth of human equality.”¹¹

During the 1960s in the United States, the illusion of differences was so systematic, entrenched, and pervasive that only intense personal internal struggles could overthrow the foundations of the systems of white supremacy that stained the nation from its very founding. As John Lewis writes, the leaders of the modern Civil Rights Movement knew that “many [Americans] would be very disturbed when exposed to the light of [this] truth.”¹² Those in the Deep South were the first to be exposed to this battle, but no one, regardless of color, region, or class was exempt from this struggle. The life of Robert Kennedy demonstrates this fact.

Growing up in the North as the son of a United States ambassador, Robert Kennedy seemed to be as far away from the civil rights struggle as one could be. As he would later admit, the matter of equality between the races “was not a particular issue in our house.”¹³ He admitted in 1960 to Harris Wofford, a young lawyer who would later

¹⁰ Lewis, John. *Across that Bridge: Life Lessons and a Vision for Change*. New York: Hyperion, 2012, p. 23.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Hilty, James W., *Robert Kennedy: Brother Protector*. Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1997, p. 169.

become a special assistant on civil rights to President John F. Kennedy, “I haven’t known many Negroes in my life.”¹⁴ His privileged background kept Kennedy ignorant of civil rights issues that would surface in the 1960s. Robert Kennedy had at first seen civil rights through a political lens; his primary concern was for his brother, the newly elected President John F. Kennedy. As Robert Kennedy would later say in 1968, “Until November 1963, my whole life was built around President Kennedy.”¹⁵ Despite this dedication, Robert Kennedy was ultimately forced to grapple with the issues raised by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement.

“Each person must find his or her own inner compass, the thing one turns to when trying to distinguish truth from lies, and right from wrong,” writes John Lewis.¹⁶ In part through the modern Civil Rights Movement, Robert Kennedy’s inner compass shifted over the course of his life, but his moral center was always evident. As Harris Wofford recalls, “If you follow Robert Kennedy, he always includes the sort of moral issue in coming to his own opinions---from a little boy they say.”¹⁷ During the Red Scare of the 1950’s, Kennedy worked briefly with Senator Joseph McCarthy in his all-out assault on Communism, but he grew to a different understanding of the world, embracing a more righteous cause by the end of his life in 1968.

Through the Civil Rights Movement, Robert Kennedy came to see firsthand the condition of the poor, who Michael Harrington termed “the other America.” They lived throughout the country, dispossessed, often diseased and hungry. Kennedy would see the

¹⁴ Schlesinger, Arthur M.. *Robert Kennedy and His Times*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1978, p. 215.

¹⁵ Robert Kennedy on March 25, 1968. Nine days after he announced his own candidacy for President. Clarke, Thurston. *The Last Campaign: Robert F. Kennedy and 82 days that Inspired America*. New York: Henry Holt, 2008, p. 63.

¹⁶ Lewis, *Across that Bridge*, p. 113.

¹⁷ Wofford, Harris. Interview by author. Personal interview. Wofford Residence, Washington, D.C., November 15, 2013.

faces of these “other Americans,” dwelling largely in the major cities of the North.

Robert Kennedy sought to rectify the condition of these “other Americans,” to bring them into the fold of America and to realize the dignity of all people.

First, in a May 1963 meeting with James Baldwin on the condition of America’s inner cities, Kennedy came to see the truth and justice in the cause for civil rights.

Kennedy pushed his brother in the direction of embracing civil rights, but Robert’s own priorities were still skewed. His brother’s political career came before the interests of the “other America” or their civil rights. In November of 1963, with the assassination of the President, Robert Kennedy lost his brother and his priorities shifted out of necessity. The loss of his brother made Robert Kennedy “think for the first time in his life, what he wanted to do, and what he stood for,” according to journalist Jack Newfield.¹⁸

As Robert Kennedy himself would say in 1968, “Tragedy is a tool for the living to gain wisdom.”¹⁹ Already moving in the direction of embracing civil rights, the death of his brother diminished his political considerations regarding civil rights issues. As John Lewis commented, “After the assassination of his brother, [Robert Kennedy] became stronger. He was much more determined to go all out to do as much as he could.”²⁰

Harris Wofford shares a similar sentiment, stating that, “[Robert Kennedy’s] transformation [...] was well under way by [the time his brother was killed] and the assassination produced the cathartic moment when heart and soul he became part of, not

¹⁸ Newfield, Jack. *Robert Kennedy: A Memoir*. New York: New American Library, 1988, p. 29.

¹⁹ Newfield, p. 233. ;Clarke, Thurston. *The Last Campaign*. p. 45.

²⁰ Lewis, John. Interview by author. Personal interview. Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C., October 8, 2013.

just of the campaign to end poverty or the effort to end the war in Vietnam, but civil rights.”²¹

While much has been written on Robert Kennedy’s views on civil rights, historians have generally underemphasized the effect of the inner city on his evolving views. As historian Taylor Branch writes, “[Robert] Kennedy had been more of an ally to the movement during the Freedom Rides than during Birmingham, which contradicted common notions of steady growth in his character.”²² It was not until *late* May of 1963, not Birmingham in early May, when Robert Kennedy’s political lens on civil rights began to yield to a more personal understanding at a meeting with James Baldwin on May 24, 1963.

Customarily historians have either focused on Kennedy’s views on civil rights during his years as Attorney General (Goduti) or during his years as a United States Senator (Palermo), or during his campaign for President (Clarke). While all of these markers have merit, they miss the real period of Kennedy’s evolving views from late May of 1963 until his passing in June of 1968. Kennedy biographers (Schlesinger and Thomas), covering his entire life, do not adequately address this evolution or its causes and consequences. Historians of the Civil Rights Movement, such as Taylor Branch, have presented Kennedy as an outsider to the movement and as political operator. While this is true during the majority of Kennedy’s time as Attorney General, a shift begins to occur in late May of 1963. This shift brought Kennedy closer to the movement up until the death

²¹ Wofford, Harris . Interview by author. Personal interview. Wofford Residence, Washington, D.C., November 15, 2013.

²² Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988, p. 919.

of Dr. King, after which his Presidential campaign cannot be separated from the movement.

This thesis aims to show that Robert Kennedy's racial and civil rights views were decisively influenced by his own encounters and experiences with urban minorities and systemic poverty. While Robert Kennedy's character and evolving views on civil rights cannot be measured statistically, his progression can be traced through four meetings with inner city residents. First, the Baldwin meeting in New York City in May of 1963, which Kennedy attended as the Attorney General and "Brother Protector," to use historian James Hilty's term, shows his starting point; a man who is beginning to grasp the human element in the civil rights struggle. Second, as a United States Senator, after his personal search for meaning after his brother's passing, Kennedy's meeting with his constituents in Bedford-Stuyvesant, New York in February of 1966 shows his new views; a deepened understanding of the human element of civil rights yet lacking concrete political actions. Third, six months after the initial Bedford-Stuyvesant meeting, Kennedy returned to the community with a different perspective on civil rights; seeing civil rights as primarily a personal issue for which to take a stand and starting to test ideas politically. Finally, Kennedy's meeting in May of 1968 as a Presidential candidate with Oakland community members shows where Kennedy's thinking was on civil rights just days before his passing; standing for civil rights wholeheartedly, personally and politically, with his ideas tested on a small scale, and being embraced by the "Other America" because of his stand.

With these four meetings as markers, I will trace the evolving views of a man as he interacts with a movement that altered the course of the country. In addition to the archival material obtained from the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, I rely on various newspaper accounts from the time period to fill in this story. I also draw on various secondary sources, including Taylor Branch's series *America in the King Years* for information on the movement and Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s seminal Kennedy biography *Robert Kennedy and His Times* for information on Kennedy's life.

These works, coupled with three important memoirs (Jack Newfield's *Robert Kennedy*, John Lewis' *Walking with the Wind*, and Harris Wofford's *Of Kennedys & Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties*) enable me to better understand and convey both Robert Kennedy as an individual and his position within the larger context of the Civil Rights Movement. Utilizing first-hand interviews with Congressman John Lewis and Senator Harris Wofford, men who knew and worked with Kennedy at various points throughout the 1960's, I hope to elucidate Kennedy's path from 1963 to 1968, what Wofford calls, "an amazing transformation," and reposition Robert Kennedy within the context of this larger American story about civil rights.²³

²³ Wofford, Harris. Interview by author. Personal interview. Wofford Residence, Washington, D.C., November 15, 2013.

PART I

UNDERSTANDING CIVIL RIGHTS ISSUES

TIME AS “BROTHER PROTECTOR” & THE BALDWIN MEETING

(MAY 24, 1963)

“[...] The true work of social transformation starts within. It begins inside your own heart and mind, because the battleground of human transformation is really, more than any other thing, the struggle within the human consciousness to believe and accept what is true.”²⁴

---Civil Rights leader John Lewis

²⁴ Lewis, *Across That Bridge*, p. 14.

When I asked Congressman Lewis if this quote applied to the life of Robert Kennedy, he replied, “Oh definitely. I think it applied to Robert Kennedy more than any other elected official or would be elected official that I ever met.”

I. BIRMINGHAM---“WHITE MODERATE” (EARLY MAY, 1963)

“I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate [...] who constantly says: ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action’ [...]”²⁵

---Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In May of 1963, the struggle for civil rights in the South resonated across the world. Images of police dogs and fire hoses being turned on black children in Birmingham appeared in newspapers across the globe. These images educated millions of people to the brutalities of Southern racism and awoke the conscience of the nation.²⁶ In New York City that same month another incident took place that furthered the education and awakening of one man to the anguish felt by blacks across the United States, but especially those living in Northern cities. Robert Kennedy was no stranger to civil rights issues: in his two plus years as Attorney General he dealt with some of the most pressing civil rights problems in the history of the country. The Freedom Rides, James Meredith’s integration of Ole Miss, and the Birmingham crisis were just a few of the emotionally-charged, nationally known, civil rights issues that challenged Kennedy at the Justice Department. Kennedy dealt with these explosive issues as a conduit for his brother, President John F. Kennedy, but a meeting with a famous author in late May would propel Robert far past where his brother was comfortable.

The newly elected President had given hope to the African American community in the midst of a world-wide movement for freedom. Civil rights leader John Lewis

²⁵ King Jr., Martin Luther. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail ." Letter from a Birmingham Jail [King, Jr.]. http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html (accessed August 13, 2013).

²⁶ *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, "Fire Hoses and Police Dogs Quell Birmingham Segregation Protest," May 4, 1963. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/141860504?accountid=15053>. (accessed August 13, 2013).

recalls watching “Kennedy’s inaugural address that January with a great sense of hope” while planning for upcoming sit-in demonstrations in Nashville.²⁷ In Birmingham, a city also involved in sit-in demonstrations in January of 1961, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth told his congregation, “What a wonderful President we have now!”²⁸ President Kennedy’s rhetoric of liberty and his youthful vitality energized the nation, but these alone did not guarantee immediate changes in the field of civil rights. These changes would be brought about by countless oppressed and seemingly powerless peoples asserting their rights. These assertions of rights oftentimes came in direct opposition to President Kennedy’s wishes or Robert Kennedy’s efforts to control the part of the movement that could harm his brother’s presidency or the United States’ image at home and abroad.

At home, President Kennedy faced a divided nation, winning the 1960 election by a narrow margin over the Republican candidate Richard Nixon.²⁹ Both candidates downplayed the issue of civil rights during the 1960 campaign. Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. asserts that John F. Kennedy’s October phone call to a pregnant Coretta Scott King, when her husband sat in prison, provided essential votes from the African American community to Kennedy.³⁰ Thinking forward to the 1964 election, neither John nor Robert wanted to push civil rights aggressively due to fear of alienating white voters, particularly in the South.

²⁷ Lewis, John, and Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998, p. 129.

²⁸ Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988, p. 384.

²⁹ Schlesinger, Arthur M.. *Robert Kennedy and His Times*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1978, p. 220.

³⁰ King faced imprisonment in October of 1960 for a minor traffic charge. When released from prison and hearing of Kennedy’s phone call to his wife he said, “There are moments when the politically expedient is the morally wise.” Schlesinger, p. 218.

In international affairs, the nation remained in the midst of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. The treatment of African Americans in a nation that professed the values of individual liberty and democracy influenced how the world viewed the United States. As historian Mary L. Dudziak asserts in her book *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, “because [lack of civil rights] harmed U.S. prestige abroad, [President] Kennedy would find himself increasingly involved.”³¹ Robert Kennedy, the Attorney General and “Brother Protector,” as deemed by historian James Hilty, fought to uphold the positive image of his brother’s presidency especially in the area of civil rights.

The Civil Rights Movement’s first threat to the Kennedy administration’s image started out as an open secret. In April of 1961, a packet of information detailing “Freedom Ride, 1961” was sent to President Kennedy by James Farmer, the National Director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).³² The packet, which detailed an upcoming trip that would test the new law desegregating interstate travel, was also sent to the Kennedy Justice Department. Neither the Justice Department nor the White House acknowledged Farmer’s letter.³³ On May 4, Farmer, sit-in veterans John Lewis and Jerome Smith, and twelve others set out quietly from Washington, D.C. traveling towards New Orleans with only a few reporters.

Two days later, the Freedom Riders were in southern Virginia; at the University of Georgia Law Day celebration, Robert Kennedy outlined the stance his Justice

³¹ Dudziak, Mary L. *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000. *Google Books*. Web. 29 Mar. 2014.

³² Farmer, James. Letter to John F. Kennedy. 26 April 1961. Papers of John F. Kennedy, White House Central Subject File, Box 374, Folder: Human Rights: 2-6, Transportation (Executive). The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Boston, Massachusetts.

³³ Lewis, John, and Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind*, p. 139.

Department would take on civil rights issues for the first time. Kennedy did not mince words, stating, “You may ask, will we enforce the civil rights statutes? And the answer is yes, we will.”³⁴ With the Attorney General’s brother in the White House, the Southern audience could only see the “we” as including not only the Justice Department, but the President himself. Robert Kennedy separated his own personal beliefs from that of his office later in the speech when he said, “My firm belief is that if we are to make progress in this area, if we are to be truly great as a nation, then we must make sure that nobody is denied an opportunity because of race, creed, or color.”³⁵ From the beginning of his time as Attorney General, Kennedy unequivocally stated his views about *de jure* segregation.

Kennedy ended that speech with a statement that would be tested sooner than he could have imagined. He said, “The road ahead is full of difficulties and discomforts. But as for me, I welcome the challenge. I welcome the opportunity, and I pledge to you my best effort -- all I have in material things and physical strength and spirit to see that freedom shall advance and that our children will grow old under the rule of law.”³⁶ Three days later after Kennedy’s speech, in Rock Hill, South Carolina, Freedom Riders John Lewis, Albert Bigelow, and Genevieve Hughes were beaten bloody by white supremacists for entering a segregated Greyhound bus terminal. Bigelow referred to the

³⁴ Kennedy, Robert. University of Georgia Law School. 6 May 1961. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy, Attorney General Papers (#138.2), Series 10, Speeches, 1961-1964. Folder: University of Georgia Law School 5/6/61. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Boston, Massachusetts.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

Attorney General's speech saying, "We can see whether he's a cock that crows or a hen that lays eggs."³⁷

On Mothers' Day, May 14, 1961, the two buses of Freedom Riders left Atlanta for Birmingham, but only one would arrive at its destination. The Greyhound bus was firebombed in Anniston, Alabama while the passengers were surrounded by a mob wielding clubs and pipes, who sought to keep them on the burning bus. Upon reaching Birmingham, the Trailways bus met an even worse fate. For fifteen minutes, the riders were beaten mercilessly by a mob with no policemen in sight. The next morning President Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Burke Marshall, the new Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, met to discuss the situation in Alabama. To attempt to control the situation, Robert sent his administrative assistant John Seigenthaler to Montgomery.

On May 20, when Seigenthaler drove up to the Montgomery bus depot to meet the riders, he was met by chaos. Seigenthaler saw no police around while a mob attacked the riders. He saw a Freedom Rider, a white girl, trying to escape from being beaten by a fat woman and a skinny kid simultaneously. Seigenthaler tried to rescue the young Freedom Rider, but was clubbed from behind by the mob and left unconscious in the street. The author Peter Maas was in Robert Kennedy's office right after he discovered Seigenthaler was in the hospital. Maas described Kennedy as "possessed by an enormous anger, but not so much physical as that he looked like he'd just been poleaxed *himself*."³⁸ Maas thought that Kennedy "took it as if he had been down in Montgomery himself and

³⁷ Newson, Moses. "Freedom Riders Vowed to Go Despite Danger." *Afro-American (Baltimore)*, May 27, 1961. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.wm.edu/docview/532126165> (accessed February 12, 2013).

³⁸ Stein, Jean, and George Plimpton. *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy*. London: A. Deutsch, 1971. 103.

been hit.”³⁹ Maas concluded that “Bob didn’t change except through experience,” and that Bob changed on that day.⁴⁰

But the truth is Robert Kennedy was not there in Montgomery, he was behind his desk at the Justice Department. He did not see the mob, feel the palpable hatred, or experience the danger. He did, however, have a heightened awareness of the gravity and danger of the situation. Burke Marshall had a similar feeling about the Rides’ effect on Robert Kennedy, stating that “The Freedom Ride was an education to me, to the Attorney General and to the White House. [...] When it started, we were still too ignorant of our jobs to recognize its implications and its dangers.”⁴¹ Kennedy learned the implications and dangers of his job after Montgomery, but the problem of civil rights had not yet become personal for him, it was still in the realm of politics.

For the Kennedys, civil rights was still primarily a political issue when African American school children started marching in Birmingham in May of 1963. After the Freedom Rides, the Kennedys were involved with the movement, but it would be the Birmingham Campaign led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that would deepen the prospect of responsibility. When police dogs attacked the children in Birmingham, Robert Kennedy responded with a statement of support for the end goal of equality stating, “Continued refusal to grant equal rights and opportunities to Negroes makes increasing turmoil inevitable.”⁴² This statement demonstrated the same verbal support that Kennedy had for civil rights in his University of Georgia speech almost exactly two years earlier.

³⁹ Ibid. 103.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ As quoted in Lewis, Lewis, John, and Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind*, p. 148.

⁴² UPI. "Robert Kennedy Warns of 'Increasing Turmoil'." *The New York Times*, May 4, 1963. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.wm.edu/docview/116491219/> (accessed February 12, 2014).

The end goals of freedom and equality shared by the Kennedys and King were the same, but the means by which they were to be achieved were subject to discussion.

Kennedy continued his statement on the Birmingham crisis saying, “However, the timing of the present demonstrations is open to question. School children participating in street demonstrations is a dangerous business. An injured, maimed or dead child is a price that none of us can afford to pay.”⁴³ To King and those engaged in the battle for civil rights in the South, these remarks from the Justice Department were disappointing, but not new. Kennedy had expressed this same sentiment during the Freedom Rides when he asked for a “cooling-off period” in 1961. Dr. King, a month earlier in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” wrote that he was “gravely disappointed with the white moderate [...] who constantly says: ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action’; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom [...]”⁴⁴ In May, at the peak of the Southern civil rights struggle, Robert Kennedy aptly fit King’s description of the white moderate who was “the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom.”⁴⁵ Just weeks after Birmingham, a meeting about civil rights in the North would open Kennedy’s eyes, making these national issues more real to him than ever before.

⁴³ King expressed the sentiment conversely that “it is better to shed a little blood from a blow on the head or a rock thrown by an angry mob than to have children by the thousands finishing high school who can only read at a sixth-grade level.” Ibid.; King Jr., Martin Luther. *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* 2010. Reprint, New York: Harper & Row, 1967, p. 57.

⁴⁴ King Jr., Martin Luther. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail ." Letter from a Birmingham Jail [King, Jr.]. http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html (accessed August 13, 2013).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

II. THE BALDWIN MEETING----A BEGINNING (MAY 24, 1963)

“You don’t have no idea what the trouble is...Because I’m close to the moment where I’m ready to take up a gun [sic].”⁴⁶

---CORE member Jerome Smith

In November of 1962, the author James Baldwin wrote on the racial crisis that “Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we- and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks [...] do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.”⁴⁷ Robert Kennedy did not see himself as King’s “white moderate,” but rather as Baldwin’s “relatively conscious white.” After Kennedy read Baldwin’s piece in *The New Yorker* that detailed his childhood in Harlem and the anguish felt by blacks across the United States, Kennedy invited Baldwin to his home in Virginia in late May. According to Burke Marshall, the two “had a rather good conversation about the cities,” but their meeting was cut short.⁴⁸ In an impromptu manner, Kennedy asked Baldwin to assemble a group to discuss solutions to the problems of Northern cities for the next day in New York.

On May 24, in a Kennedy apartment in New York City, Robert Kennedy and Burke Marshall, expecting a group of policy experts, were instead met by an eclectic group arranged by Baldwin. Baldwin was joined by nearly a dozen blacks, including his brother David; an attorney who represented Dr. King, Clarence Jones; the playwright

⁴⁶ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, p. 910.

⁴⁷ Baldwin, James. "Letter from a Region in my Mind." *The New Yorker*, November 17, 1962. <http://archives.newyorker.com/?i=1962-11-17#folio=59> (accessed September 13, 2013).

⁴⁸ Schlesinger, p. 331; Stein, p. 118.

Lorraine Hansberry; social psychologist Kenneth Clark; singers Lena Horne and Harry Belafonte; and Jerome Smith, a young CORE member who was one of the original thirteen Freedom Riders.⁴⁹

After Kennedy reviewed the Administration's unprecedented commitment to civil rights, Smith opened by telling Kennedy, "I want you to understand I don't care anything about you or your brother."⁵⁰ Smith's statement set the tone for the meeting; the pleasantries of politics were off. An unknown to many in the room, including Kennedy, Jerome Smith had been on the front lines of the civil rights struggle in the South. Beaten in Mississippi, jailed in Parchman Penitentiary, Smith happened to be in New York for a medical examination. Smith embodied the younger wing of the movement who were not interested in token gestures, but instead concerned themselves with on the ground realities. When Kennedy tried to warn the group of the dangers inherent in the extremism of the Black Muslims, Smith, an advocate of Christian nonviolence during the Freedom Rides, responded, stuttering, "You don't have no idea what the trouble is...Because I'm close to the moment where I'm ready to take up a gun."⁵¹ Smith then told the Attorney General he was nauseated by the necessity of being in the same room as him.

Kennedy, unused to such verbal assaults, turned to the elders of the group, framing Smith's words and rawness as an aberration. Lorraine Hansberry then told Kennedy that she too felt sick, and that, "the only man who should be listened to is that man over there," pointing at Smith.⁵² Lena Horne would say of Smith afterwards that he

⁴⁹ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 810.

⁵⁰ Guthman, Edwin O., *We Band of Brothers*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971. 220.

⁵¹ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 810; Thomas, Evan. *Robert Kennedy: His Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000. 244.

⁵² *Ibid*, 811.

“just put it like it was. He communicated the plain, basic suffering of being a Negro... You could not encompass his anger, his fury, in a set of statistics [...]”⁵³ Yet Kennedy tried to do just that, pointing out the irrationality of some of the group’s ideas. Hansberry summed up the group’s feeling, telling Kennedy, “Look if *you* can’t understand what this young man is saying, then we are without any hope at all because you and your brother are the representatives of the best that a white America can offer; and if *you* are insensitive to this, then there’s no alternative except our going in the streets... and chaos.”⁵⁴ By the end of the meeting, according to Kenneth Clark, Kennedy “no longer continued to defend himself. He just sat, and you could see the tension and the pressure building in him.”⁵⁵ The meeting lasted three hours with no conclusions. Clark called the meeting “one of the most violent, emotional verbal assaults that I had ever witnessed” and also “*the* most dramatic experience I had ever had.”⁵⁶

Robert Kennedy left the meeting shaken, but apparently unchanged. On his way back to Washington, he told Arthur Schlesinger, “They don’t know what the laws are--- they don’t know what the facts are---they don’t know what we’ve been doing or what we’re trying to do [...] It was all emotion, hysteria—they stood up and orated---they cursed--- some of them wept and left the room.”⁵⁷ James Baldwin got the same impression that for all the meeting’s turmoil nothing had been accomplished, stating “Bobby didn’t understand what we were trying to tell him; he didn’t understand our

⁵³ Schlesinger, p. 332.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Stein, p. 120.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 121.

⁵⁷ Schlesinger, p. 334.

urgency. For him it was a political matter.”⁵⁸ The rawness of the meeting had not yet been translated into reason for Kennedy.

The next day Robert called his brother at the White House. The two spoke for fourteen minutes about the Baldwin meeting, interrupting the President’s meeting with Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. While only the President’s side of the conversation is recorded, it was Robert who did most of the talking. President Kennedy asked his brother during the conversation, “they don’t think we’ve done anything?” and “they don’t have any appreciation for our situation?”⁵⁹ In both instances, the President took a defensive approach, sticking up for what his administration was doing in the field of civil rights, essentially echoing Robert’s words the day before. After the President hung up with his brother he told McNamara, “I don’t blame them for being frustrated, but if they [the blacks] go to the extreme you will really have the worst situation in the United States that we’ve ever had.”⁶⁰ In actuality, it was the President that needed to go to the extreme in support of civil rights to prevent “the worst situation in the United States that we’ve ever had,” but he had not yet reached that point. His brother would direct him to a moral stand on the issue.

After reflecting on the Baldwin meeting and speaking with his brother, Robert Kennedy began to work through the bitter hostility he had experienced. He told his aide Edwin Guthman, “I guess if I were in his [Jerome Smith’s] shoes, if I had gone through

⁵⁸ Stein, p. 119.

⁵⁹ JFK Library. "Meetings: Tape 89. Balance of Payments/European Defense (Includes Phone Call from Robert F. Kennedy), 25 May 1963." John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKPOF-MTG-089-002.aspx> (accessed September 13, 2013).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

what he's gone through, I might feel differently about this country."⁶¹ This indicated a change in his empathy, which his brother did not yet have on the issue. Instead of asking "don't [they] have any appreciation for our situation?" Robert began to consider the testimony of Jerome Smith and began to rethink the situations of African Americans all across the country.

Robert Kennedy did not rest there. To tell an aide his feeling in private is one thing, but the Attorney General followed up his statement to Guthman with an appearance on the Voice of America Program on June 3, 1963, just ten days after the Baldwin meeting. When asked why African Americans were demonstrating so vigorously for their rights, Kennedy replied, "We haven't accomplished what we should have accomplished. I think the record is bad. We should have done much more. We intend to do much more."⁶² No longer was Robert Kennedy defending the record of the administration as he had done in the Baldwin meeting, but instead he said that "we realize that we haven't done what we should have done, and we are going to try to make up for it."⁶³

His appearance on Voice of America also revealed Kennedy's primary loyalty to his brother. When asked for his opinion on the President's personal moral leadership on civil rights, Kennedy defended his brother, contending, "I think he has come in personally [on the issue]."⁶⁴ Robert then outlined instances that President Kennedy had personally put his weight on the side of civil rights. The men and women who met with

⁶¹ Guthman, Edwin O., *We Band of Brothers*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971. 221.

⁶² Kennedy, Robert. Voice of America: Press Conference, USA. Series 10, Speeches 1961-1964. Box #254. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts. 1963, June 4, p. 5.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 11.

Robert in the New York apartment had thought these instances were insufficient, but Robert Kennedy would not criticize his brother in public.

III. JFK'S CIVIL RIGHTS SPEECH---A LANDMARK (JUNE 1963)

“He urged it, he felt it, he understood it. And he prevailed. I don’t think there was anybody in the Cabinet—except the President himself who felt that way on these issues, and the President got it from his brother.”⁶⁵

---Burke Marshall

Robert Kennedy’s personal growth would, however, impact his brother and the country. At a June White House meeting to discuss the troubled integration of the University of Alabama, the consideration of the President giving a general speech in support of civil rights arose. Of the many of the President’s closest advisers there, none recommended giving the speech. It was too dangerous politically, but as Burke Marshall would later recall in an oral history with Robert Kennedy, “you [RFK] were the only one who urged him to do it.”⁶⁶ While Robert Kennedy always downplayed his role in pushing his brother to take a stand, Marshall later would say of Robert that “He urged it, he felt it, he understood it. And he prevailed. I don’t think there was anybody in the Cabinet—except the President himself, who felt that way on these issues, and the President got it from his brother.”⁶⁷

On June 11, 1963, on national television, President Kennedy spoke on the issue of civil rights, stating that:

⁶⁵ Wofford, Harris. *Of Kennedys and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992. 172; Thomas, p. 248; Hilty, p. 367; Schlesinger, p. 347.

⁶⁶ Kennedy, Robert F., Edwin O. Guthman, and Jeffrey Shulman. *Robert Kennedy, In his Own Words: The Unpublished Recollections of the Kennedy Years*. Toronto: Bantam, 1988. 199.

⁶⁷ Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings*, p. 172; Thomas, p. 248; Hilty, p. 367; Schlesinger, p. 347.

“We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution [...] One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free. They are not yet freed from the bonds of injustice. They are not yet freed from social and economic oppression. And this Nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free.”⁶⁸

The President’s former special assistant on Civil Rights, Harris Wofford, recalled hearing the speech over shortwave radio while in Ethiopia, “I felt a thrill run down my back.”⁶⁹ He would later write, “It was the speech I had long wanted him to give.”⁷⁰ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. immediately telegrammed the President, congratulating him: “[Your speech] was one of the most eloquent, profound, and unequivocal pleas for Justice and the Freedom of all men ever made by any President. You spoke passionately with the moral issues involved with the integration struggle.”⁷¹ For civil rights advocates and movement leaders, this was the strong moral push from the President they had desired, but ever a political realist, President Kennedy was concerned with the repercussions of his speech.

“[President Kennedy] always felt that maybe that [the stand for civil rights] was going to be his political swan song,” Robert Kennedy would later say in a 1964 oral history.⁷² After the President’s the speech, the *New York Times* reported that “Almost certainly, Mr. Kennedy will lose more than 39 electoral votes in the South in 1964,” crucial votes in the next year’s presidential race.⁷³ While the speech may have been

⁶⁸ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, p. 824.

⁶⁹ Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings*, p. 173.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, p. 824; Clarke, Thurston. *JFK's Last Hundred Days: The Transformation of a Man and The Emergence of a Great President*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2013. 112.

⁷² Kennedy, Robert F., Edwin O. Guthman, and Jeffrey Shulman. *Robert Kennedy, In his Own Words.*, p. 176.

⁷³ Kenworthy, EW. "Politics Clouding Rights Issue." *The New York Times*, June 30, 1963. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/116328083> (accessed March 29, 2014).

costly politically, the President followed up his words with action, reintroducing civil rights legislation to Congress just days after his June 11 speech. Robert saw himself as the impetus for the trouble, recalling that “We used to discuss whether what had been done [in giving the speech] was the right thing to do, just the fact that I’d gotten him into so much difficulty.”⁷⁴ Neither John nor Robert Kennedy had, at that time, completely subjugated political considerations to their moral sense, but nevertheless the speech was a landmark of both commitment and policy.

In a few short weeks, Robert Kennedy had come a long way from the man whom Jerome Smith had berated in the New York apartment. Dr. Kenneth Clark saw the connection between the May meeting and the June speech stating, “Jack Kennedy gave that famous civil-rights speech of his, which contained many of the same ideas. So maybe our conclusion that we had made no dent at all [in Robert Kennedy] was wrong.”⁷⁵ In June of 1963, Robert Kennedy would tell Freedom Rider and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) chairman John Lewis, “I now understand, the young people, the students have educated me.”⁷⁶ Jerome Smith, the young man from New Orleans, furthered Kennedy’s education in the human reality of a movement for civil rights that had in Kennedy’s mind been previously primarily political. As historian Taylor Branch writes, after the Baldwin meeting “What was intensely personal [for Robert Kennedy] no longer seemed so distinct from policy, nor public from private.”⁷⁷ When civil rights leader Medgar Evers was assassinated just hours after his brother’s

⁷⁴ Kennedy, Robert F., Edwin O. Guthman, and Jeffrey Shulman. *Robert Kennedy, In his Own Words*, p. 176.

⁷⁵ Stein, p. 121.

⁷⁶ Lewis, John, and Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind*, p. 213.; Interview with author.

⁷⁷ Branch. *Parting the Waters*, p. 813.

speech, the gap between the political and the personal would shrink for Robert Kennedy even more, as the escalating violence revealed the entrenched nature of white supremacy.

IV. MARCH ON WASHINGTON---TO SHIELD & PROTECT (AUGUST, 1963)

“Listen, Mr. Kennedy [...] the black masses are on the march for jobs and freedom, and we must say to the politicians that there won’t be a ‘cooling-off’ period.”⁷⁸

---SNCC Chairman John Lewis

Medgar Evers, the NAACP Field Secretary in Mississippi, was shot in the back in his own driveway during the early hours of June 12 as his three young children looked on. At Evers’ funeral in Jackson, it was Robert Kennedy who sat next to Medgar’s brother Charles, consoling him. Kennedy gave Charles Evers his personal phone numbers and told him to call any time day or night if he needed anything.⁷⁹ As a military man, Medgar Evers was buried at Arlington National Cemetery; after the burial Mrs. Medgar Evers and her young children were invited to the White House for the rest of the day. The stand the Kennedys made for civil rights had brought tragedy to their doorstep, but yet the brothers still sought to control the terms of the ongoing movement for freedom.

In the immediate months following the speech and Evers’ funeral, the Kennedys were invested in seeing the Civil Rights Movement succeed through securing legislative action. When civil rights leaders met at the White House on June 22, 1963, the President Kennedy said in response to the proposed March on Washington, “We want success in Congress, not a big show on the capitol.”⁸⁰ Burke Marshall told Martin Luther King Jr. at

⁷⁸ Gosse, Van. *The Movements of the New Left, 1950-1975: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005. 77.

⁷⁹ Schlesinger, p. 345

⁸⁰ Hilty, p. 374.

the meeting that the President was about “to put his whole political life on the line” with the civil rights bill.⁸¹ Due, in part, to Robert’s guidance, President Kennedy, too, had come a long way in his thinking on civil rights. King said of the President after the June 22 meeting, “I liked the way he talked about what *we* are getting. [...] It wasn’t something he was getting for you Negroes. You knew you had an ally.”⁸²

Attorney Joseph Rauh recalled President Kennedy declaring, “I may lose the next election because of this [stand for civil rights]. I don’t care.”⁸³ Kennedy knew of the ramifications of his speech, even pulling a scrap of paper from his pocket containing his approval ratings which had fallen from 60 to 47 percent since his address.⁸⁴ Despite moving forward with civil rights, the Kennedy brothers, particularly Robert, still cared about the image of the Kennedy presidency. The proposed March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom would be a reflection of that image. Determining that the March was “very, very badly organized,” Robert employed assistant Attorney General John Douglas to work fulltime with the nominal March organizers.⁸⁵ Robert’s concern for his brother became even more apparent in August when thousands would converge in the nation’s capitol for the March on Washington, but just one speech would be changed.

Recently elected SNCC chairman John Lewis was a sit-in veteran and Freedom Rider. He had been working on the movement’s front lines in the South for nearly three years when, as chairman of SNCC, he was slated to speak at the March in August of 1963. Like Jerome Smith, Lewis was not interested in token gestures by politicians or in

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 375.

⁸² Ibid., p. 374.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Clarke, *JFK’s Last Hundred Days*, p. 9.

⁸⁵ Hilty, p. 378.

the Washington political game, but rather in people all the across the South who were struggling for equal justice and for their God given freedom. Born in 1940 in a small town right outside of Troy, Alabama, Lewis saw firsthand the scarring effects of segregation as a child. He saw the signs that read “white waiting-colored waiting,” “white men-colored men.” He saw his parents struggle to make ends meet as farmers, just one generation removed from being sharecroppers and three generations removed from slavery. He saw the poor education black schoolchildren received relative to white schoolchildren. Lewis lived the injustice that was deeply rooted in the construction of the nation and sought change through non-violent direct action.

The twenty-three year old Lewis’ speech was deeply rooted in his own life’s experience. Lewis criticized the administration directly stating, “In good conscience, we cannot support the administration's civil rights bill, for it is too little, and too late.”⁸⁶ He did not stop with the administration’s bill, but criticized the politicians directly stating, “This nation is still a place of cheap political leaders who build their careers on immoral compromise and ally themselves with open forms of political, economic, and social exploitation.”⁸⁷ If such an indirect accusation were not enough, Lewis followed up by addressing the President directly stating, “Listen, Mr. Kennedy [...] the black masses are on the march for jobs and freedom, and we must say to the politicians that there won’t be a ‘cooling-off’ period,”⁸⁸ referencing Robert Kennedy’s “cooling-off” period from the Freedom Rides two years earlier. Lewis insisted “we won’t stop now.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Gosse, p. 76.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 77.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 77.

However, Lewis' original speech was censored, altered before it ever was delivered. The Archbishop of Washington, Patrick O'Boyle, who was to give the invocation at the March, procured an advanced copy of the speech and contacted the Justice Department. Robert Kennedy, not pleased with the critiques contained in the original text, delegated Burke Marshall to help revise the speech.⁹⁰ After the new speech received approval from both Kennedys, Marshall weaved through the marchers in a police sidecar arriving at the Lincoln Memorial with the revision in hand. In the end, according to *New York Times* journalist Anthony Lewis, John Lewis' previously piercing speech "got no publicity at all."⁹¹ Robert Kennedy would later recall Lewis' prepared text as "a bad speech," an attack on the country and on the President.⁹² Robert wished to see civil rights succeed, but unlike John Lewis and Jerome Smith, President Kennedy's success still came first in Robert's mind.

According to some members of the movement, Robert Kennedy's edits of Lewis' speech undermined the March and administration's credibility on civil rights issues. While Lewis "felt fine" regarding his role at the March, some of Lewis' SNCC colleagues criticized him for agreeing to, as they put it, "sanitize" his text.⁹³ The Black Muslim leader Malcolm X would refer to the March as "The Farce on Washington," saying "the [administration] told those Negroes [...] what speech they could make."⁹⁴ Malcolm X told a Boston crowd in October that the March succeeded only in improving

⁹⁰ Hilty, p. 379.

⁹¹ Kennedy, Robert F., Edwin O. Guthman, and Jeffrey Shulman. *Robert Kennedy, In his Own Words*, p. 229.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Lewis, John, and Michael D'Orso. *Walking with the Wind*, p. 213.

⁹⁴ X, Malcolm, and Alex Haley. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: One World/Ballantine Books, 1992. 284.; Lewis, John, and Michael D'Orso. *Walking with the Wind*, p. 226.

“the image of President Kennedy as a great liberal.”⁹⁵ Robert Kennedy dedicated his life to improving the image of his brother. As Lewis would later say of Robert Kennedy, “He was so committed to seeing President Kennedy succeed. He tried to do as much as he could to shield him and protect him.”⁹⁶

Despite their increased commitment, the Kennedys still had a ways to go to figure out solutions. After the March, the leaders came to the White House to discuss the next steps concerning civil rights. A. Phillip Randolph, one of the organizers of the March, told the Kennedys of the “alarming problem” of inner-city teenagers dropping out of school in epidemic numbers.⁹⁷ Randolph told the President that these youth “have no faith in anybody white. They have no faith in the Negro leadership. They have no faith in God. They have no faith in the government. In other words, they believe the hand of society is against them.”⁹⁸ The President told Randolph that he and the Attorney General had been talking about this very issue, particularly regarding dropouts in Harlem and South Side Chicago.⁹⁹ The President then told Randolph that they believed the African American community should emulate the Jewish community in emphasizing education, not grasping the underlying forces at work.¹⁰⁰ Through the President’s June speech, the Kennedys’ had made an effort, but in August of 1963 they stood a long ways away from fully understanding the African American freedom struggle, especially in the Northern cities.

⁹⁵ UPI. "'Whites made Washington March A Farce,' Declares Malcolm X. ." *chicago daily defender* , October 10, 1963. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/494002553> (accessed March 29, 2013).

⁹⁶ Lewis, John. Interview by author. Personal interview. Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C., October 8, 2013.

⁹⁷ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, p. 883.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 884.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

PART II
SEARCHING FOR SOLUTIONS TO “CIVIL RIGHTS PROBLEMS”
TIME OF TRANSITION & THE BEDFORD-STUYVESANT MEETING
(FEBRUARY 4, 1966)

“GOD gives to each of us the choice between TRUTH and repose. Take which you please, you cannot have both.” ¹⁰¹

---Robert F. Kennedy

Quoting Ralph Waldo Emerson

November 17, 1964¹⁰²

¹⁰¹Senator Kennedy Meets with Mexican Students. 17 November 1964. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy, RFK Senate Papers, Box 1, Speeches & Press Releases- 11/4/64-11/20/65 ,Folder: 11/4/1964-12/31/1964. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Boston, Massachusetts.

¹⁰² RFK in a speech delivered to Mexican Students at the opening of a housing development named in honor of his late brother. As historian Thurston Clarke asserts, Emerson was one of Robert Kennedy’s favorite authors. Kennedy kept a book of essays by Emerson in his desk drawer at his home in Virginia, marking up several passages. Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 50.

V. THE DARKEST HOUR (NOVEMBER 1963)

“My brother barely had a chance to get started--- and there is so much now to be done---for the Negroes and the unemployed and the school kids and everyone else who is not getting a decent break in our society. This is what counts.”¹⁰³

---Robert Kennedy

In October of 1963, Robert Kennedy told a group of theater owners that, “Those of us who are white can only dimly guess at what the pain of racial discrimination must be [...]”¹⁰⁴ The Baldwin meeting made Kennedy aware of the black pain that existed in the country, but yet he had only caught a glimpse of the anguish. Movement veteran John Lewis writes that “Tragedy is the great equalizer, and no individual, regardless of wealth or fame, can escape the challenge tragedy brings.”¹⁰⁵ Robert Kennedy would learn that the depths of tragedy and pain were also independent of the color of one’s skin. As reporter Jack Newfield wrote of Robert Kennedy, “experience began to stretch him,” but it was “tragedy [that would] transform him.”¹⁰⁶

On November 22, 1963, Robert Kennedy received a phone call from FBI director J. Edgar Hoover who told him flatly, “I have news for you. The President’s been shot.”¹⁰⁷ A few hours later, Robert Kennedy would receive the news that his brother had passed away. Kennedy first sought to comfort his family, keeping his composure externally until that evening at the White House. Before retiring, Robert Kennedy told family friend

¹⁰³ Schlesinger, p. 631.

¹⁰⁴ Address to Theatre Owners of America, Annual Convention. 28 October 1963. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy, Attorney General’s Files, Speeches –1961-1964, Folder: Theatre Owners of America, Annual Convention 10/28/63 The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Boston, Massachusetts.

¹⁰⁵ Lewis, *Across that Bridge*, p. 24.

¹⁰⁶ Newfield, p. 29.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas, p. 276.

Charles Spalding, “God, it’s so awful. Everything was really beginning to run so well.”
When the door closed, Spalding heard Kennedy cry out, “Why, God?”¹⁰⁸

“The assassination punctured the center of Robert Kennedy’s universe,” wrote Newfield.¹⁰⁹ Robert’s whole life and identity had been built around his serving and protecting his brother. His wife, Ethel had the same feeling, recalling that, “His whole life was wrapped up in the President. [...] Bobby never thought of himself—or his own life. So when the President died---well, it was like a part of Bobby died too.”¹¹⁰ For Robert Kennedy though, his brother’s death was more than a simply a crisis of identity. As historian and friend Arthur Schlesinger Jr. wrote, “he was struggling with that fundamental perplexity: whether there was, after all, any sense to the universe.”¹¹¹

Reconciling his brother’s death with his deep-rooted Catholic faith was impossible. Kennedy scribbled on a piece of paper after his brother’s death, “The innocent suffer—how can that be possible and God be just.”¹¹² Kennedy posed the question which perplexed mankind for centuries, yet the shattered Kennedy sought solace. On the same sheet, Kennedy wrote, “All things are to be examined & called into question---There are no limits set to thought.”¹¹³ Kennedy was willing to give up any belief he had previously had to put the pieces back together, to make sense of the world. During the gloom of that December, Robert and his brother’s widow Jackie discussed

¹⁰⁸ Thomas, p. 278.

¹⁰⁹ Newfield, p. 29.

¹¹⁰ Hilty, p. 486.

¹¹¹ Schlesinger, p. 617.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

many things, including the ancient Greeks, Catholicism, and spiritualism.¹¹⁴ In his darkest hour, Kennedy glimpsed the infinite nature of human thought, but the direction in which to go was unclear.

“After the assassination of his brother, [Robert Kennedy] went through a terrible period of sort of wondering,” John Lewis would recall later.¹¹⁵ Three weeks after the assassination, Robert Kennedy was still not seeing anyone. His first public appearance was to be at a Christmas Party at an orphanage in Washington, D.C. Robert Kennedy walked into the room filled with little children, laughing and playing, when suddenly a little black boy about six years old ran up to him and said, “Your brother is dead! Your brother is dead!” The laughter in the room turned to stunned silence. The boy realized he had done something wrong and began to cry. In that moment, Robert Kennedy stepped forward, scooped him up, comforting him, saying, “That’s all right. I have another brother.”¹¹⁶ In this moment, Kennedy comforted another; it was not staged politics, but the reality of compassion. For Robert Kennedy, comforting the little boy at the Christmas party was a first step away from brooding. The period of wondering would continue, but as he gradually worked his way back into public life, he would find more and more of his identity, apart from his brother, rooted in his own experience.

In December of 1963, speaking to his brother’s former speechwriters Richard Goodwin and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. from his Justice Department office, Kennedy said, “My brother barely had a chance to get started--- and there is so much now to be done---

¹¹⁴ Thomas, p. 284.

¹¹⁵ Lewis, John. Interview by author. Personal interview. Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C., October 8, 2013.

¹¹⁶ Guthman, *We Band of Brothers*, p. 247.; Stein, p. 146-47.; Schlesinger, p. 613.

for the Negroes and the unemployed and the school kids and everyone else who is not getting a decent break in our society. This is what counts.”¹¹⁷ Civil rights issues were at the forefront of Kennedy’s mind as he worked his way back into public life, but the way was still very dark both for Kennedy himself and for the movement leaders.

The depth of darkness and despair that Robert Kennedy felt is reflected in his first public speech after his brother’s assassination, which he gave to students at the University of the Philippines in late January of 1964. He closed a speech that touched on his brother’s ideals and beliefs with a story about legislators in the city of Hartford in 1789. Kennedy said:

“[...] it began to grow dark at Noon and by 4 o’clock in the afternoon it became almost completely black. In those days of tremendous religious fervor, men fell down on their hands and knees and begged for forgiveness, because they felt it was the end of the world and their time of judgment had come.

The House of Representatives was in session at the time and members of the House called on their Speaker and said, “We must adjourn.” At once Colonel Davenport, who was the Speaker, turned to them and fired at them with these words: [...] He said that if it has come, if the end has come, and it is the time for Judgment, I wish to be found doing my duty. So therefore, let candles be brought.”¹¹⁸

Kennedy concluded his speech by saying, “I ask all of you to join with me and with my fellow citizens to ask that candles be brought to enlighten the way of our people all over the world.”¹¹⁹ The end of the world was the only apt analogy for Kennedy whose grief was immeasurable. Like the Connecticut legislators, he wished “to be found doing

¹¹⁷ Schlesinger, p. 631.

¹¹⁸ Address of Honorable RFK AG of the US on Accepting Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree from the University of the Philippines. 21 January 1964. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy, Attorney General’s Files, Speeches –1961-1964, Folder: Address at the University of the Philippines. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Boston, Massachusetts.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

[his] duty.” Until now his duty had been to his brother, but now it was up to him to pick up his brother’s legacy and carry the torch.

For many leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, after the death of President Kennedy “that flame of optimism in all of us flickered just a bit lower” wrote John Lewis.¹²⁰ Despite his criticism of the President at the March on Washington just three months before, Lewis recalled feeling “devastated” after Kennedy was assassinated.¹²¹ The civil rights leaders had just begun to develop a positive working relationship with President Kennedy. Now the leaders needed to start a new relationship with Lyndon Johnson, a much less cool and eloquent personality than his White House predecessor. CORE’s James Farmer stated that “while we were criticizing the President from ’60 to ’63 [...], I failed to really understand [...] how important the President had been to us. That hit me all of a sudden at the time of his death, of his assassination.”¹²²

For Farmer, who initiated the 1961 Freedom Rides, President Kennedy, for all his flaws, was one who had held things together until his death. Farmer expounded on the affect of the President’s assassination, “it seemed then, incongruously, as though everything had dropped out of the bottom of the civil rights movement. The bottom had fallen out all of a sudden.”¹²³ The President’s assassination created uncertainty and insecurity in the movement. Historian Taylor Branch writes, “The movement, having seized national attention in 1963, hung in the political balance through national trauma

¹²⁰ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, p. 239

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Farmer, James. Interview by John Stewart. Personal interview. New York, NY, March 10, 1967. 28. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/JFKOH-JLF-01.aspx>.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

after President Kennedy's assassination."¹²⁴ As the terrors of 1963 began to fade, both Robert Kennedy and the movement sought to solidify and push forward without President Kennedy. In 1964, Robert Kennedy, still nominally Attorney General, would cross paths with the movement for civil rights as the course of both, Kennedy and the movement, would change drastically by year's end.

VI. ATLANTIC CITY---TURNING POINT (AUGUST 1964)

"This was the turning point of the civil rights movement. I am absolutely convinced of that."¹²⁵

---John Lewis

In the spring of 1964, the newly inaugurated President, Lyndon Johnson suspended all other legislative business in an attempt to break a Senate filibuster led by Southern Senators in order to pass a comprehensive ban on segregation in public accommodations.¹²⁶ At the American Society of Newspaper Editors convention, in April of 1964, civil rights leaders participated in a panel discussion entitled, "After the Civil Rights Bill, What?" Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, Whitney Young of the National Urban League, James Farmer of CORE, and John Lewis of SNCC all spoke.¹²⁷ Robert Kennedy gave the opening remarks, demonstrating the change in his understanding since the Baldwin meeting.

¹²⁴ Branch, Taylor. *The King Years: Historic Moments in the Civil Rights Movement*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013. 79.

¹²⁵ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, p. 282.

¹²⁶ Branch, *The King Years*, p. 80.

¹²⁷ AP. "Warn of Perils to Rights Bill." *Chicago Tribune*, April 17, 1964.

Calling civil rights, “the major domestic problem,” Kennedy asserted that “the mere passage of legislation is not going to make these difficulties disappear.”¹²⁸ He now realized that civil rights were not a mere political issue, nor was it the concern of individuals living in the South alone. Kennedy himself pointed to “May, June or July of 1963” as the time when people realized civil rights issues were a national problem.¹²⁹ These dates corresponded with the shift in his own thought---from the May 24, Baldwin meeting in New York City, to his brother’s June 11 civil rights speech, to the July preparations for the March on Washington. Kennedy still did not understand that *civil rights* were not a “problem,” but rather were rights. White supremacy, racism, and ingrained institutional inequalities were problems, but Kennedy still viewed civil rights as a problem. Kennedy echoed the sentiment from the Baldwin meeting saying “we can talk about [freedom and loyalty],” but a young black growing up in the some of our cities might ask, “There is a future for the white person, but what is the future for the Negro?”¹³⁰ According to Robert Kennedy this was “the major question.”¹³¹

That civil rights legislation would be passed was Kennedy’s “firm belief,”¹³² but question still echoed, “What next?” Kennedy finished his remarks with what he thought would be next; his remarks would be prescient of the battles to come, battles in which he would fight. Kennedy stated that we must “deal with some of these problems in the

¹²⁸EXCERPTS FROM REMARKS BY ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY AT A PANEL DISCUSSION “AFTER THE CIVIL RIGHTS BILL, WHAT?.” 16 April 1964. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy, Attorney General’s Files, Speeches –1961-1964, Folder: Address at the American Society of Newspaper’s Editors, 1964 Convention. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Boston, Massachusetts, p. 1.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Northern community.”¹³³ It was the South that had been the battleground for the movement, but as *de jure* segregation ended, Kennedy saw the North as the next arena for civil rights.

Kennedy also touched on a more literal battleground in his speech: Vietnam. He told of a Vietnam War veteran’s widow who attended her husband’s burial in Arlington Cemetery. She lived in Alabama, but on her trip back “she wouldn’t know where she could stop for a restroom.”¹³⁴ Kennedy linked fighting for one’s country and the fight against inequality at home, a connection made and broken after both World Wars. “It just doesn’t make sense,” Kennedy said, “and it certainly is not going to make any sense to a Negro brought up under that system.”¹³⁵

Only a year before, James Baldwin had asked Jerome Smith if he would take up arms in defense of America, Smith responded “Never! Never! Never!”¹³⁶ The Attorney General was surprised and outraged, unable to understand. A year later he had committed to the civil rights struggle, but he still saw civil rights as a problem to be solved politically. His education would continue. Kennedy’s role was shifting along with the movement’s direction. These shifts would culminate at the Democratic National Convention in late August of 1964 in Atlantic City.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹³⁶ Stein, p. 120.

In the summer of 1964, college students from across the country journeyed south to Mississippi to register black voters in some of the most viciously racist counties in the nation. While old guard movement leaders such as Roy Wilkins thought the Civil Rights Bill would be enough, younger activists would not stop there. As Bob Moses, the Mississippi civil rights organizer, explained, the movement spurred a dialogue about national questions “much deeper than civil rights.”¹³⁷ These questions like automation, schools, and the nature of cities, according to Moses went “to the very root of our society... [and] it just happens that the civil rights question is at the spearhead of all of these.”¹³⁸ That national dialogue escalated when three young civil rights workers went missing in Mississippi, just weeks after Kennedy spoke at the Editors’ convention. Despite the murders of Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman, hundreds of out-of-state volunteers poured into Mississippi working alongside locals to ensure African Americans had their voices heard in the political process. To this end, the workers formed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) as an alternative to the segregationist establishment Mississippi Democratic Party.

The MFDP hoped to be recognized by the national Democratic Party as the legitimate party of the state of Mississippi at the convention in late August. As the convention drew nearer, Martin Luther King Jr. hoped to convince Robert Kennedy to support the MFDP publically, writing in a telegram, “Your voice on this issue would carry great moral and political weight in favor of a just decision.”¹³⁹ King received a

¹³⁷ Branch, *The King Years*, p. 81.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Telegram from MLK to RFK, 22 August 1964. Burke Marshall Papers, Box 8, Folder: Special Correspondence—Attorney General August-September 1964 + Undated. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Boston, Massachusetts.

response from Burke Marshall in Kennedy's stead, but Kennedy gave no direct response. When asked by a newspaper reporter if the MFDP should be seated, Kennedy said, "I'm studying it at the moment."¹⁴⁰ Kennedy did not weigh in and never did. His adversarial relationship with President Johnson did not help the MFDP either.

Robert Kennedy and President Lyndon Johnson had long been enemies. When John Kennedy was a junior Senator in "his" Senate, Johnson mocked the Kennedys' father and called John Kennedy a sickly absentee, not "a man's man."¹⁴¹ In Robert Kennedy's first recorded meeting with Lyndon Johnson in 1953, he refused to even to look at Johnson when Johnson stopped by his breakfast table in the Senate cafeteria.¹⁴² Robert Kennedy's dislike of LBJ was exacerbated when he ran against his brother in the 1960 election, publically announcing his brother's disease, a well-kept family secret. When Lyndon Johnson joined his brother's ticket, Robert Kennedy reportedly told a friend, "Yesterday [when Jack won the nomination] was the best day of my life, and today [when Johnson joined him] is the worst day of my life."¹⁴³ Despite Johnson's passionate work for civil rights, Kennedy and Johnson's mutual contempt only exacerbated during Johnson's three years as the Vice President and succession to the presidency.

The 1964 Democratic National Convention was supposed to be Lyndon Johnson's moment. He had signed "John Kennedy's Civil Rights Bill" in July, but now would

¹⁴⁰ Madden, Richard L., "Negroes Ask New Law to Win Expanded Civil Rights." *Boston Globe*, August 20, 1964.

¹⁴¹ Wills, Garry. "America's Nastiest Blood Feud ." NY Books. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/may/24/americas-nastiest-blood-feud/> (accessed April 6, 2014).

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

finally cast off the shadow of President Kennedy and secure his party's nomination for himself.¹⁴⁴ The MFDP threatened Johnson's moment. John Connally, the governor of Texas, had warned Johnson days earlier, "If you seat those black buggers, the whole South will walk out."¹⁴⁵ This would mean, Johnson, a Texan himself, could potentially lose his Southern nominators and his presidency. To make matters worse, Johnson feared he could lose the presidency again because of the work of a Kennedy.

President Johnson wrongly suspected the MFDP was "born in the Justice Department," as a product of Robert Kennedy.¹⁴⁶ In reality, Kennedy had no involvement with the MFDP, but Johnson's suspicions hampered his judgment. On Saturday, August 22, the nation watched on television as the MFDP made its case to the Credentials Committee to be seated at the convention. Fannie Lou Hamer, a plainspoken woman who grew up picking cotton in the fields of Mississippi, testified, "if the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings, in America? [Sic]"¹⁴⁷ Her statement shocked the nation, even the President, who cut into the broadcast of her live testimony to deliver an on the spot update about his vice presidential situation. President Johnson tried to steal the show from the MFDP petitioners, but even still the nation felt their impact.

¹⁴⁴ Thomas, p. 295.

¹⁴⁵ As quoted in Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, p. 279.

¹⁴⁶ Branch, *The King Years*, p. 96.

¹⁴⁷ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, p. 279.

President Johnson appointed a subcommittee to deal with the Mississippi situation. Under his instructions, the subcommittee created a proposal to give two seats to the MFDP delegation instead of the whole sixty-eight. To this compromise, Fannie Lou Hamer responded, “We didn’t come all this way for no two seats [Sic].”¹⁴⁸ When Vice Presidential hopeful Hubert Humphrey urged Hamer to take the proposal, reminding her of his liberal views on civil rights and President Johnson’s concern for poverty, Hamer responded:

“Senator Humphrey, I know lots of people in Mississippi who have lost their jobs trying to register to vote. I had to leave the plantation where I worked in Sunflower County. Now if you lose the job of vice president because you do what is right, because you help the MFDP, everything will be all right. God will take care of you. But if you take [the vice-presidential nomination] this way, why you will never be able to do any good for civil rights, for poor people, for peace or any of those things you talk about. Senator Humphrey, I’m gonna pray to Jesus for you.”¹⁴⁹

The MFDP delegates turned down the compromise, Senator Humphrey gained the vice presidential nomination, and President Johnson secured the nomination for president.

The MFDP’s treatment in Atlantic City would have long lasting effects on the Civil Rights Movement, the Johnson presidency, and the country. As John Lewis wrote, “As far as I’m concerned, this was the turning point of the civil rights movement. I am absolutely convinced of that.”¹⁵⁰ Lewis had worked in the Freedom Summer and knew the efforts necessary to bring the MFDP to Atlantic City. The country knew that the three previously missing men, Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman, had been murdered for this cause, and yet the authorities arrested no one. Civil rights workers such as Bob Moses

¹⁴⁸ Branch, *The King Years*, p. 100.

¹⁴⁹ Marsh, Charles. *God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997. *Google Books.*, Web. 22 Dec. 2013, p. 39-40.

¹⁵⁰ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, p. 282.

and Hamer had worked through the system to effect change and the system did not respond. As Lewis explained, we “had played the [political] game exactly as required, had arrived at the doorstep, and found the doorstep slammed in our face.”¹⁵¹ While Johnson won the nomination (and eventually the presidency in a landslide), he lost something much more important, the faith of many black people and many of those in the movement. Fannie Lou Hamer’s heartfelt response to Hubert Humphrey would echo through the next four years, a period when more civil rights legislation was passed than at any point since early Reconstruction.

On the final night of the convention, Thursday, August 27, sergeants-at-arms surrounded the seats of the Mississippi delegation while Bob Moses and others stood on the outside---heads bowed, arms linked facing the white Mississippians.¹⁵² Robert Kennedy, who just days before had announced his candidacy for U.S. Senate in New York, stepped to the podium to introduce a memorial film for his brother. For twenty two full minutes, Kennedy could not speak because of the thundering applause. When he spoke he eulogized his brother, quoting a passage from *Romeo and Juliet*, “When he shall die/ Take him and cut him out in little stars/ And he will make the face of heaven so fine/ That all the world will be in love with night. And pay no worship to the garish sun.”¹⁵³ When he left the podium, he sat on a fire escape and wept.¹⁵⁴ Outside of the hall, Fannie Lou Hamer led farewell choruses of “We Shall Overcome”¹⁵⁵ while the organ

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Hearst, Joseph. "Attorney General Cheered Wildly by Delegates." *Chicago Tribune*, August 28, 1964.; Branch, *The King Years*, p. 100.

¹⁵³ Thomas, p. 296 ; Branch, *The King Years*, p. 100. Many historians interpret the “garish sun” as a indirect jab at President Johnson.

¹⁵⁴ Thomas, p. 296.

¹⁵⁵ Branch, *The King Years*, p. 101.

inside the hall played “Happy Birthday to You, Dear Lyndon” to celebrate the President’s 56th birthday.¹⁵⁶

The next day, exactly a year after the March on Washington, a race riot erupted in nearby Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As the MFDP left Atlantic City, “the movement started turning on itself,” according to John Lewis.¹⁵⁷ Within a week, Robert Kennedy resigned from his post as Attorney General to focus on his own New York Senate campaign. When Kennedy announced his candidacy, two days before his speech at the convention, he deemed New York, “the supreme testing ground for the most acute national problems of our time” and the problem of racial harmony was at the top of his list.¹⁵⁸

Before he left Washington, Kennedy stopped at Cardozo High where 3500 students applauded and thanked him for his work in their community, including his efforts with the Dunbar swimming pool, the Kennedy playground, and a summer job program.¹⁵⁹ Most of all, the students thanked him for giving them hope. In 1964, the hope and promises of the Civil Rights Movement were starting to run thin. As Kennedy left for New York he sought to change the on-the-ground reality and find solutions to the issues involving civil rights.

¹⁵⁶ Hearst, Joseph. "Attorney General Cheered Wildly by Delegates." *Chicago Tribune*, August 28, 1964.

¹⁵⁷ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, p. 283.

¹⁵⁸ "RFK Speeches." Justice Department. <http://www.justice.gov/ag/rfkspeeches/1964/08-25-1964.pdf> (accessed December 20, 2013).

¹⁵⁹ Casey, Phil. "Students Steal show as Kennedy Resigns." *Washington Post, Times Herald*, September 4, 1964. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.wm.edu/chicagotribune/docview/142151515> (accessed December 23, 2013); Guthman, *We Band of Brothers*, p. 293.

VII. NEW YORK CITY---TO THE HEART (1965)

“Why do they go to Selma? Why not to 125th Street?”¹⁶⁰

---Robert Kennedy

When Robert Kennedy defeated Republican Kenneth Keating for the U.S. Senate in November of 1964, the city of New York was in the midst of racial turmoil. That previous July, a fifteen year old boy, James Powell, was shot and killed by a white, off-duty policeman named Thomas Gilligan. Powell, who had attended the March on Washington, was shot while attending a summer school for remedial reading, funded by Johnson’s War on Poverty campaign.¹⁶¹ Two days after his death, rioting broke out in Harlem, setting off other riots across New York City. When CORE’s James Farmer spoke at Powell’s funeral, he was booed almost immediately.¹⁶² Those at the funeral whose neighborhoods were ransacked were not interested in Farmer’s plea to them as “freedom fighters.”¹⁶³ The movement Farmer helped lead did not penetrate their neighborhood; in their locality the Dream of King was far from reality.¹⁶⁴

These boos were for a black man, a Freedom Rider, a civil rights leader. The week after Powell’s death, with his young classmates gathered in the auditorium of Robert F. Wagner Junior High, a classmate of Powell’s said, “We don’t want any more unnecessary talk from white folks. From morning to night, all we see is white folks.

¹⁶⁰ Schlesinger, p. 780.

¹⁶¹ Newfield, p. 90.

¹⁶² Todd, George . "James Powell's Funeral Tears--then Violence." *New York Amsterdam News*, July 25, 1964.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have A Dream” Speech on August 28, 1963 at the March on Washington reads in part, “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” “Martin Luther King I Have a Dream Speech .” *American Rhetoric*.
<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihavedream.htm> (accessed April 4, 2014).

We're just plain sick and tired of white folks over us all the time and everywhere."¹⁶⁵ The same day nearly 200 teens marched on the police station yelling "Killer cops must go."¹⁶⁶ These were the young people. These young people lived the same horrors James Baldwin wrote of a generation earlier, yet nothing had changed. This generation had created the tension in the Baldwin meeting. These youth experienced the problems of the streets. These were the people Kennedy would have to reach to effect change; he knew this as the beginning of his term drew near.

In December of 1964, he helped organize and attended a handful of Christmas parties for youth with his wife and his own children in New York City, benefitting nearly 8,000 children across the city.¹⁶⁷ These parties were the smallest of instances, but when he would tell audiences that "all citizens of this State, must assume the responsibility for other children that we accept for our own," he meant it.¹⁶⁸ Kennedy told his citizens that the problems at hand could not be solved "just by passing laws. For only people educate children."¹⁶⁹ Kennedy spoke to the human element of civil rights, not to the political. At its most basic, Kennedy concluded, "There are children of all ages who have never felt love, or concern, who have never known anyone to care. We can care."¹⁷⁰ Kennedy's vision of civil rights and the issues of poverty and neglect were coming together. And

¹⁶⁵ Slack, Sara. "CORE Official Restrains Students from Staging Downtown Demonstrations." *New York Amsterdam News*, July 25, 1964.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.wm.edu/docview/226793735> (accessed December 26, 2013).

¹⁶⁶ *The Baltimore Afro-American*, "200 teens march on police station," July 25, 1964.

¹⁶⁷ *New York Amsterdam News*, "Bobby Kennedy Fetes Kids All Over Town," December 26, 1964.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.wm.edu/docview/226810317> (accessed December 26, 2013).

¹⁶⁸ Address by Senator Robert F. Kennedy at the Fourteenth Annual Political Conference Women's Division NY State Democratic Committee in Albany, NY. 1 March 1965. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy, RFK Senate Papers, Box 1, Speeches & Press Releases- 11/4/64-11/20/65 ,F older: 3/1/1965-3/15/1965. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Boston, Massachusetts.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

while the country would galvanize for civil rights in the South in March of 1965, Robert Kennedy saw a void of care in the Northern cities as he began his term.

On Sunday March 7, 1965, John Lewis and Hosea Williams led six hundred men, women, and children across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. They were headed for the state capitol in Montgomery to protest exclusion from the voting process. As Lewis and Williams reached the crest of the bridge, they saw a sea of Alabama State troopers waiting for them on the other side. The marchers pressed onward. When the marchers came face to face with the troopers, they stood steadfast. The troopers then advanced on the marchers, clubbing them with nightsticks and spewing tear gas into the air. They fractured Lewis' skull, children bled, police horses trampled people who lay on the ground, while others vomited from the tear gas. That evening ABC cut into its regularly scheduled broadcast in order to show fifteen minutes from the scene in Selma, which came to be known as "Bloody Sunday."

As hundreds of people, many of them ministers, flocked to Selma to join the protest march, Robert Kennedy was surprisingly silent. On Wednesday, March 10, a short statement was released by Kennedy's office calling Sunday's events a "deplorable and unfortunate occurrence" and "a sad setback."¹⁷¹ In private, Kennedy questioned the direction of the movement, asking journalist Richard Rovere, "Why do [the white northerners] go to Selma? [...] Why not to 125th Street?"¹⁷² Kennedy asserted there was work to do in the areas that were much closer to home. Peter Edelman, a legislative

¹⁷¹ Statement by Senator Robert F. Kennedy. 10 March 1965. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy, RFK Senate Papers, Box 1, Speeches & Press Releases- 11/4/64-11/20/65 ,F older: 3/1/1965-3/15/1965. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Boston, Massachusetts.

¹⁷² Schlesinger, p. 780.

assistant to Kennedy, recalled that “for whatever reason he just didn’t react to that Selma-Montgomery thing.”¹⁷³ Edelman posits “a theory that he was still walking around in something of a daze in early ‘65 from November ‘63, and that he only began to come out of that sometime that summer.”¹⁷⁴ While the nation reacted to the events in Selma, again it would be the events in New York that would spur Robert Kennedy.

As journalist Pete Hamill writes, Robert Kennedy first learned about African Americans living conditions after he became a Senator by going into the slums.¹⁷⁵ He recalled:

“I was with him one time here in Brooklyn, and we went into some *horrible* tenement that was one of the worst I’ve ever seen; there was a little girl with a mangled face all torn up. He said, “What happened to her?” The Puerto Rican mother explained that the rats had bitten her face when she was a baby. [...] He was outraged. [...] He learned viscerally.”¹⁷⁶

It was this visceral education that was awakening Robert Kennedy. Kennedy wondered how these things could be possible “in the richest city on earth?”¹⁷⁷

In late April of 1965, Kennedy would tell the National Council of Christians and Jews that thousands went South to protest the brutalities of Selma, “but the many brutalities of the North receive no such attention.”¹⁷⁸ Robert Kennedy spoke from experience saying, “I have been in tenements in Harlem the past several weeks where the

¹⁷³ Edelman, Peter B., and Larry J. Hackman. "Peter B. Edelman Oral History Interview." *RFK #5, 1/3/1970*. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Web. 30 Dec. 2013. Edelman Oral History, p. 670

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ Stein, p. 89.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ Schlesinger, p. 783

¹⁷⁸ Speech by Senator Robert F. Kennedy National Council of Christians and Jews. 28 April 1965. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy, RFK Senate Papers, Box 1, Speeches & Press Releases- 11/4/64-11/20/65 , Folder 4/21/1965-4/30/1965. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Boston, Massachusetts, p. 2.

smell of rats was so strong that it was difficult to stay there for five minutes, and where children slept with lights turned on their feet to discourage attacks.”¹⁷⁹ This graphic sensory image was followed by several tragic statistics about the conditions of African Americans in New York City. Referencing the Unitarian Universalist minister who was killed in Selma, Kennedy said, “Thousands marched for James Reeb—but who marches for our own dead children?”¹⁸⁰ No longer was Robert Kennedy questioning the timing of protest demonstrations, instead he was calling for them. Alluding to James Powell’s death and the riots of the previous summer, Kennedy said, “The problems, last summer, were here” and prophetically he said, “they will be here again, unless we act.”¹⁸¹

The ghetto, as Robert Kennedy would later say, was “the most terrible and urgent domestic crisis to face this nation since the Civil War.”¹⁸² As he traveled New York that summer of 1965 he told students of a “new revolution” needed to fulfill the nation’s promise of social and economic justice.¹⁸³ He ended his June speech to students referencing the war that ended a century before, saying, “Before the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln wrote: ‘I know there is a God and that He hates injustice. I see the storm coming, and I see His hand in it. If He has a place and a part for me, I believe that I am ready.’”¹⁸⁴ Kennedy would continue telling the students that, “In the 1960s, we see the same God—and new injustice. We see another storm coming.”¹⁸⁵ Two months later that storm would

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, p. 3.

¹⁸² Kennedy, Robert F. *To Seek a Newer World*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967, p. 20.

¹⁸³ Address by Senator Robert F. Kennedy at University College of Buffalo Commencement. 5 June 1965. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy, RFK Senate Papers, Box 1, Speeches & Press Releases- 11/4/64-11/20/65, Folder 6/1/1965-6/10/1965. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Boston, Massachusetts, p. 4

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

come and, now grasping that civil rights issues were fundamentally human issues, there would be a part to play for Robert Kennedy.

VIII. WATTS---EXPLORING THE STORM IN THE CITIES (AUGUST 1965)

“When you’re over fifty and you is black, you can’t get a job no how. [sic]”¹⁸⁶

---Man on street corner in Watts

On August 11, 1965, just five days after Lyndon Johnson signed the landmark Voting Rights Act into law, the Watts area of Los Angeles erupted in flames. A skirmish between the police and Marquette Frye, a 21-year-old black man pulled over for drunk driving set off six days of rioting. Thirty-four people died, nearly a thousand people were injured, over three thousand were arrested, and \$40 million worth of property was destroyed.¹⁸⁷ A. Phillip Randolph called the uprising “perhaps the worst riot which has occurred in the history of the country.”¹⁸⁸ Roy Wilkins, the executive director of the NAACP, not acknowledging the underlying forces that created the riots, said the whole Civil Rights Movement was “set back.”¹⁸⁹

Coming on the heels of the landmark legislation, the riot shocked Johnson and much of the country. The President spoke of African Americans engaged in “the struggle

¹⁸⁶ Edelman, Peter B. Interview by Larry J. Hackman. "Peter B. Edelman Oral History Interview---RFK #5" 1/3/1970. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Web. 30 Dec. 2013. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/RFKOH-PBE-05.aspx>, p. 688.

¹⁸⁷ Stanford University. "Watts Rebellion (Los Angeles, 1965)." Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Global Freedom Struggle. http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_watts_rebellion_los_angeles_1965/ (accessed December 31, 2013).

¹⁸⁸ *The New York Amsterdam news (New York)*, "hat New Yorkers And Others Say About Los Angeles Riots," August 21, 1965. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.wm.edu/docview/226772394> (accessed January 3, 2014).

¹⁸⁹ UPI. "Wilkins Says Nothing Gained By L.A. Riots." *The Chicago Defender*, September 4, 1965. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.wm.edu/docview/493109429> (accessed January 3, 1965).

of men on every continent for their rights as sons of God,” and called this struggle “a compound of brilliant promises and stunning reverses.”¹⁹⁰ Referring to both the passage of the Voting Rights Act and the riots, he said “when the two are mixed on the same pages of our newspapers and television screens, the result is baffling to all the world. And it is baffling to me, and to you, and to us.”¹⁹¹ But while Johnson was confused by the riots, Robert Kennedy apparently was not. He had seen the storm coming, as he was closer to the daily lives of those in the cities than his brother’s successor in the White House.

Just days after the melee, Robert Kennedy spoke to the New York State Convention of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows about the rioting in Los Angeles, but he showed no surprise. He opened, “it is clear that the riots of the last weekend were no isolated phenomenon, no unlucky chance.”¹⁹² Kennedy adeptly elucidated the causes of the riots and “the riots waiting to happen” in the Northern cities, noting poverty, unemployment, lack of leadership, and the law for African Americans “being an oppressor and his enemy.”¹⁹³ Kennedy offered no panaceas, but he did offer broad steps. The first of which was “to move beyond thinking about this as a ‘Negro problem.’”¹⁹⁴ Kennedy possessed an understanding that the issues were multifaceted, diverse, but most importantly, he thought about the issues through the lens of those whom he had met.

Unlike President Johnson who was baffled by the juxtaposition in the “brave story of the

¹⁹⁰“Lyndon B. Johnson: Remarks at the White House Conference on Equal Employment Opportunities.” The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=27170> (accessed January 3, 2013).

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Congressional Record. 24 August 1965. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy, RFK Senate Papers, Box 1, Speeches & Press Releases- 11/4/64-11/20/65 , Folder 8/11/1965-8/20/1965. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Boston, Massachusetts, p. 20692.

¹⁹³ Ibid, p. 20693.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

Negro American,” Kennedy realized that “if our help is to be meaningful, it must be directed to them as people---not as a single class labeled Negro.”¹⁹⁵ Robert Kennedy saw problems in terms of people, not monolithic groups, and this would help him as he continued his search for solutions.

Kennedy knew that if he was to improve the cities of New York, he must find out for himself what really happened in Watts, what was at the heart of the problem. In November of 1965, Kennedy went to the devastated area himself. Legislative aide Peter Edelman stood on street corners with him. Edelman recalled Kennedy asking “a man—he was a perfectly healthy looking man—what the problem was. The man said to him —frustration. Kennedy said, —Excuse me? He said, —frustration. He said, —What do you mean? He said, —Well, man when you’re over fifty and you is black, you can’t get a job no how.”¹⁹⁶ The man’s mispronunciation highlighted a lack of education, but also the man’s despair registered with Kennedy, evident when he returned to New York.

After this visit, Kennedy could diagnose the racial situation. Speaking to students at Long Island University in December, Kennedy said, “The riots of last summer, and those of the summer before, are noteworthy for the depth of misery and frustration which produced them—they are not the disease but its symptom, only a fever which the virus of discrimination and the deprivation has produced.”¹⁹⁷ In Watts, he heard the frustration and felt the agony. In New York, he smelled the stench of rats and saw deprivation. And

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Edelman, Peter B., and Larry J. Hackman. "Peter B. Edelman Oral History Interview." *RFK #5, 1/3/1970*. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Web. 30 Dec. 2013. Edelman Oral History, p. 688.

¹⁹⁷ Address by Senator Robert F. Kennedy at Long Island University. 16 December 1965. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy, RFK Senate Papers, Box 2, Speeches & Press Releases- 11/21/65-9/10/66 , Folder 12/11/1965-12/20/1965. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Boston, Massachusetts, p. 1.

now it was clear, as he told the students, that as a nation, we are falling short of the goals “our Constitution made 190 years ago.”¹⁹⁸

As 1965 waned, the cost of improving the lives of those in the cities would increasingly compete with the cost of the war in Vietnam. As the war progressed, the ironies of the violence became ever more apparent. The first U.S. combat division landed in Vietnam on March 7, 1965, the very same “Bloody Sunday” that the Alabama State troopers clubbed John Lewis and the marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma.¹⁹⁹ Despite having advised his brother in the early stages of the war, Robert Kennedy said simply supporting the war while “postpon[ing] action on our pressing domestic needs— would be a terrible mistake.”²⁰⁰ While Vietnam was the top concern of Americans at the end of 1965, the cities would be Robert Kennedy’s priority as he sought to begin to put his ideas into action in New York in 1966 while quietly biding his time in Washington.²⁰¹

IX. THE INITIAL BEDFORD-STUYVESANT MEETING (FEBRUARY 4, 1966)

“I’m weary of study, Senator. Weary of speeches, weary of promises that aren’t kept...The Negro people are angry, Senator, and judge that I am, I’m angry too.”²⁰²

---New York State Supreme Court Judge Thomas R. Jones

On three consecutive days in late January, Robert Kennedy gave speeches outlining his views on the ways to “break down the ghettos.”²⁰³ The speeches synthesized many of his ideas and more importantly amplified his personal urgency. Kennedy would

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁹⁹ Branch, *The King Years*, p. 124

²⁰⁰ “Address by Senator Robert F. Kennedy at Long Island University,” p. 1.

²⁰¹ Gallup, George . “Vietnam Still no. 1 Concern.” *Los Angeles Times*, December 29, 1965.

²⁰² Schlesinger, p. 786.

²⁰³ Newfield, p. 93.

say in his first speech that “Consciousness of the plight of the urban Negro must pervade our thought and our planning in every program that we undertake to improve our cities.”²⁰⁴ The speeches were just words, but they demonstrated Kennedy’s urgency for immediate action. As legislative aide Peter Edelman recalled, those three speeches became “really kind of our bible,” calling them “a turning point in our efforts around the office because it gave us a major focus.”²⁰⁵ The speeches would not be enough, Robert Kennedy knew this, but it was reinforced for him sooner than he could imagine.

On February 4, just two weeks after he gave his trio of speeches, he visited Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. The depression of the 1930’s coupled with farm mechanization had forced thousands of Southern blacks to the northern slums for work in a war time economy.²⁰⁶ After World War II, real-estate speculators and professional blockbusters capitalized on racial fears, changing Bedford-Stuyvesant, a previously elite, white, middle class community into a community that was 85 percent black by 1960.²⁰⁷ 80 percent of teenagers dropped out of high school in Bedford-Stuyvesant and the area possessed the highest infant mortality rate in the country.²⁰⁸ Reporter Jack Newfield, who grew up in Bedford-Stuyvesant during the 1950’s, called the area “hell,” saying “the everyday reality is filled with the surreal imagery of a bad LSD trip.”²⁰⁹

²⁰⁴ Johnston, Richard. "KENNEDY WARNS ON NEGRO REVOLT." *New York Times*, January 21, 1966. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.wm.edu/docview/117125572> (accessed January 6, 2014).

²⁰⁵ Edelman, Peter B., and Larry J. Hackman. "Peter B. Edelman Oral History Interview." *RFK #5, 1/3/1970*. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Web. 30 Dec. 2013. Edelman Oral History, p. 680.

²⁰⁶ Newfield, p. 89.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

As Newfield recalled of Kennedy's February visit, "He saw what visiting Senators and celebrities have always seen. Unemployed men lounging on street corners, or in bars. Pyramids of uncollected garbage. Children playing in the street without coats in temperatures of thirty degrees."²¹⁰ After touring area, Kennedy met with local leaders at the YMCA. Similar to the Baldwin meeting in New York three years before, Kennedy was berated. One Bed-Stuy resident told Kennedy, "You're another white guy that's out here for the day; you'll be gone and you'll never be seen again. [...] We've had enough of that."²¹¹ State Supreme Court judge Thomas R. Jones echoed the sentiment, "I'm weary of study, Senator. Weary of speeches, weary of promises that aren't kept... The Negro people are angry, Senator, and judge that I am, I'm angry too."²¹² *The New York Times* described Kennedy as sitting "impassively during what were virtually harangues."²¹³ While Kennedy did not try to defend himself during the meeting, as in the Baldwin meeting, he still left the meeting initially aggravated.

Similarly to his reaction to the Baldwin meeting, the rawness of the meeting had not yet been translated into reason. On his drive back to Manhattan, Kennedy said, "I could be smoking a cigar down in Palm Beach. [...] I don't really have to take that. Why do I have to go out and get abused for a lot of things I haven't done."²¹⁴ Kennedy correctly asserted that he had not done anything concrete in New York yet. In his toughest moments after his brother's assassination, Robert Kennedy had wanted to retire from public life. But ultimately, he wished to be found doing his duty. Soon his initial

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

²¹¹ Schlesinger, p. 786.

²¹² Schlesinger, p. 786; Blumenthal, Ralph. "Brooklyn Negroes Harass Kennedy." *The New York Times*, February 5, 1966. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.wm.edu/docview/117231011> (accessed January 6, 2014).

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ Schlesinger, p. 786.

irritation translated to reason, and Kennedy would say “Maybe that would be a good place to try and make an effort.”²¹⁵ That is exactly what Robert Kennedy would do by year’s end, but first a trip overseas would open up his thinking and provide inspiration to countless people at home and abroad.

²¹⁵ *ibid.*

PART III
INITIAL ACTION
TIME OF TESTING & BACK TO BED-STUY
(DECEMBER 10, 1966)

“We have no political panaceas. We will not claim that responsibility either. But we do search for a way of truth.”²¹⁶

---SNCC Member Charles M. Sherrod
October 12, 1964
In the aftermath of the MFDP Crisis at the 1964 DNC

²¹⁶ Sherrod, Charles . "Mississippi at Atlantic City." In *Reporting Civil Rights Part Two: American Journalism 1963-1973*. New York: Library of America, 2003, p. 186.

X. SOUTH AFRICA---A RIPPLE OF HOPE (JUNE 1966)

“Our new closeness is stripping away the false masks, the illusion of differences which is the root of injustice and of hate and of war.”²¹⁷

---Robert Kennedy

While the prospects for change in Bedford-Stuyvesant seemed bleak, “nowhere was injustice more stark, or the prospect for change bleaker, than in South Africa in 1966,” writes historian Evan Thomas.²¹⁸ Apartheid was the law of the land. Not only was racial segregation strictly enforced, but blacks were given few freedoms by the white ruling class and had little to no chance to earn a decent living. As South African student activist Margaret Marshall recalled, “South Africa was in its most mean, oppressive period. It was a nasty time. There was real fear---the first reports of torture. The world seemed to have ignored us.”²¹⁹ Marshall’s National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) had invited Robert Kennedy to speak at the Day of Affirmation. Somewhat surprisingly, the South African government granted Kennedy and his wife visas to travel to the country in June of 1966. This trip to Africa gave Kennedy a greater perspective on those issues he wished to solve at home, but also he realized a larger purpose for himself in the world he sought to improve.

The peak of Kennedy’s whirlwind tour of the continent was the Day of Affirmation speech he came to give. As he rose to speak in front of 15,000 on June 6, 1966 at the University of Cape Town, a tear glimmered in his eye.²²⁰ He opened by speaking of liberty stating that, “At the heart of that Western freedom and democracy is

²¹⁷ "Address of Senator Robert F. Kennedy Day of Affirmation University of Capetown June 6, 1966." National Archives. <http://research.archives.gov/description/194041> (accessed January 6, 2014).

²¹⁸ Thomas, p. 321.

²¹⁹ Anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela was imprisoned in Robben Island beginning in 1964, two years prior to Kennedy’s visit to the country. *Ibid.*, p. 321.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

the belief that the individual man, the child of God, is the touchstone of value, and all society, all groups and states exist for that person's benefit."²²¹ He outlined "the sacred rights of Western society," including the freedoms of speech, of religion, and the freedom to seek work or education or opportunity of any kind to enrich his life.²²² Even in the United States, he acknowledged there have often been "wide and tragic gaps between promise and performance, ideal and reality."²²³

Kennedy spoke to the gains made in civil rights in the United States over the last five years, but told the audience "much, much more remains to be done," mentioning "the streets of Harlem and of Watts and of the South Side Chicago."²²⁴ These were just some areas where the improvements needed to be on the difficult road to equality of freedom. The purpose of these improvements was profound; Kennedy said "We must recognize the full human equality of all of our people before God, before the law, and in the councils of government."²²⁵

This seemingly lofty goal received inspiration from what humans had already achieved. Kennedy provided a stirring visual image: "In a few hours, the plane that brought me to this country crossed over oceans and countries which have been a crucible of human history. In minutes we traced migrations of men over thousands of years; seconds, the briefest glimpse, and we passed battlefields on which millions of men once

²²¹ "Address of Senator Robert F. Kennedy Day of Affirmation University of Capetown June 6, 1966." National Archives. <http://research.archives.gov/description/194041> (accessed January 6, 2014).

²²² *Ibid.*

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

struggled and died.”²²⁶ All of this showed the closeness of man physically, but this closeness symbolized something far greater: “Our new closeness is stripping away the false masks, the illusion of differences which is the root of injustice and of hate and of war.”²²⁷ It would be those in the audience, the youth, who had the responsibility “to strip the last remnants of that ancient, cruel belief from the civilization of man.”²²⁸

Kennedy warned the young audience against the feeling of futility, the sense that they alone could not do anything to ameliorate the world’s ills. He told them, “Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”²²⁹ With his speech on that Day of Affirmation, celebrating liberty, Robert Kennedy sent forth such a ripple of inspiration.

When he finished his speech, Robert Kennedy looked around uncertainly, before the crowd roared in approval. As Margaret Marshall recalled, “He reminded us---me--- that we were not alone. That we were part of a great and noble tradition, the re-affirmation of nobility in every human person.”²³⁰ Robert Kennedy did not affirm this nobility in words alone while in South Africa. On walking tours with his wife in upper-class neighborhoods, Kennedy would stop black servants in the streets to shake hands and introduce himself.²³¹ At first Kennedy frightened blacks because whites and blacks never

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Thomas, p. 323.

²³¹ Ibid., p. 322.

touched in South Africa, but as word spread, crowds of blacks rushed to touch him. Lucy Jarvis provides an account of such an incident:

“when word got out that Ethel and Bobby were at the Mennel household, [blacks] started to come from miles [...] marching up that road...where blacks were not allowed to be. And they were coming in that driveway and filling that enormous lawn in front of the house, and the big, wide staircase that comes up to the house, and pushing so that Bobby and Ethel backed up into the house [...]”²³²

Before long, Robert Kennedy began leading a rendition of the civil rights song “We Shall Overcome,” while “looking out at this sea of black faces inside the house and spilling out onto the lawn [...] and all of them singing “We Shall Overcome.”²³³

While Robert Kennedy left the country and soon the continent, the effects of Kennedy’s visit would indelibly make an impact on South Africa. As the country’s only anti-government newspaper, *The Rand Daily Mail* wrote, “The effects of Senator Kennedy’s visit will be felt for a long time to come. [...] He has stirred up ideas long in disuse.”²³⁴ The trip also stirred up Kennedy’s own ideas. He felt the impact of fundamental moral truths across the globe, even in bleak South Africa. Despite his global impact, Kennedy’s priorities were unchanged, but his commitment strengthened. He wrote his aide Adam Walinsky, “I’m not going anywhere this fall.”²³⁵ Together, he said, they would “walk through the ghettos of New York.”²³⁶

²³² Stein, p. 156.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ *The New York Times*, "Kennedy Warns on Racial Issue," June 10, 1966. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/117565108> (accessed January 7, 2014).

²³⁵ Thomas, p. 324.

²³⁶ Ibid.

XI. BLACK POWER & A DECLARATION OF WAR (JUNE-DECEMBER 1966)

“I’m not sure all of this is going to work. [...] Even if we fail, we’ll have learned something. But more important than that, something has to be done. People like myself just can’t go around making nice speeches all the time. We can’t just keep raising expectations. We have to do some damn hard work, too.”²³⁷

---Robert Kennedy

Things had changed on the civil rights front at home during the short time while Robert Kennedy was in South Africa. John Lewis had been voted out of his chairman position at the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee in part because of his commitment to maintaining an integrated SNCC.²³⁸ James Meredith, who integrated Ole Miss, had been shot walking solo down the highway in a “March against Fear,” on the same day Kennedy gave his Day of Affirmation speech. When civil rights activists went to pick up the march, newly elected SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael called for “black power,” and the cry echoed across the country, reverberating acutely in the northern ghettos. Martin Luther King Jr., who in January of 1966 had come to Chicago to seek solutions, recalled “The only time that I have been booed was one night in a Chicago mass meeting by some young members of the Black Power movement.”²³⁹ The Black Power movement split the civil rights coalition irrevocably, creating tension throughout the nation and revealing how little had been done, especially in the North. In this climate of heightened tension, solving the problems of the northern ghettos or even gaining the respect of those who lived there would be no easy task for Robert Kennedy.

To earn the respect of the people in the ghetto, Robert Kennedy needed to be with them. Just days after returning from Africa, Kennedy and former CORE leader James

²³⁷ Newfield, p. 96.

²³⁸ Lewis, John, and Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind*, pp. 364-369.

²³⁹ Schlesinger, p. 781.

Farmer rode through Harlem in an open convertible, speaking at street corner rallies in a surrogate judge battle.²⁴⁰ While the image of his brother's assassination still lingered in public memory, Kennedy did not avoid the potential danger. Farmer recalled the dangers: "Harlem could have erupted any time," but "this was the period when many blacks, movement-conscious blacks, carried guns. And there was much talk of political killings and assassination and guerilla warfare and urban guerilla warfare, and all of that."²⁴¹ Being with Farmer, who was booed in Harlem at James Powell's funeral two years earlier, did not necessarily guarantee security for Kennedy. Despite the fears and rising black power emotion, Farmer recalls, "Nobody showed any hostility, though this was in a rough period when anti-white sentiment in Harlem was at its height."²⁴² Through simply being there, Kennedy made a statement and this resonated with people. As he passed by people hollered his name and shouted "Kennedy for President."²⁴³

Sharing moments of adoration with people in Harlem was one thing, but the battleground was the project in the works for Bedford-Stuyvesant. Aides Adam Walinsky and Tom Johnston spent all summer working on the project, talking to everyone from

²⁴⁰In 1962, as Attorney General, Kennedy refused to even be seen with Farmer, telling the hosts of a conference in Aspen, Colorado, "If Farmer's there I'm not coming." This was during Kennedy's stage as "brother protector." In April 1964, during his period of searching for solutions, Kennedy graciously greeted Farmer and John Lewis at the Editor's convention in Washington, D.C. Kennedy's relationship hints at the transition Kennedy made from shield in 1962, to searcher in 1964, to friend (or at least political companion) in 1966. Farmer, James. Interview by Sheldon Stern. Personal interview. Washington, D.C., April 25, 1979. James L. Farmer Oral History Interview JFK #2, p. 23.

²⁴¹ Ibid., p. 24.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid. Farmer recalls one such incident from their time: "One place we were passing by, a vacant lot where kids were playing baseball, they recognized Kennedy and one of them yelled, 'Hey, Bobby? Gimme five!' Kennedy looked and said, 'What does gimme five mean, Jim?' I guess he thought he wanted \$5 dollars. I said, 'No, that's an expression of affection. It mean give me five fingers. Shake hands.' He said, 'Oh, I see.' Then somebody else yelled when they recognized him. They said, 'Hey, Bobby, we want Kennedy for president.' Bobby thought that was very funny."

banking millionaires to street radicals in the neighborhood.²⁴⁴ Attacking one problem area would not be enough. By October, Kennedy, his staff, and the community leaders, who had berated him in February, had reached a consensus to attempt an ambitious community development project.²⁴⁵ At the heart of the Bedford-Stuyvesant project, wrote reporter Jack Newfield, was the “idea of a holistic, systemic attack on the ghetto itself.”²⁴⁶

The attack was well-developed and extensive, as Newfield detailed in his memoir:

“The initial plan included coordinated programs for the creation of jobs, housing renovation and rehabilitation, improved health sanitation and recreation facilities, the construction of two ‘super blocks,’ the conversion of an abandoned bottling plant into a town and community center, a mortgage consortium to provide low-cost loans for homeowners, the starting of a private work-study community university geared towards dropouts, and a campaign to convince industry to relocate in the community.”²⁴⁷

Under Kennedy’s leadership, there would be two non-profit corporations working hand-in-hand. One comprised an all-white board of business leaders designed to bring in outside investment and supply administrative assistance. The other corporation, composed of the civic and religious leaders of Bedford-Stuyvesant, including the local Judge Thomas Jones, would draft programs for the community.²⁴⁸ Just ten months after the Judge Jones told Senator Kennedy he was weary of speeches, the plan for action in Bedford-Stuyvesant was complete.

On December 10, 1966, Kennedy unveiled the plan in the auditorium at Public School 305 on Monroe Street in Bedford-Stuyvesant. In front of almost a thousand

²⁴⁴ Newfield, p. 95.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Palermo, Joseph A.. *In his Own Right: The Political Odyssey of Senator Robert F. Kennedy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, p. 168; Schlesinger, p. 788; Newfield, p. 97.

people, Kennedy told the audience, “We are all in this together. [...] Today on this platform and in this room, there are Democrats and Republicans, white and black, businessmen and government officials, rich and poor, and people from every part of this varied community. This is a unique effort--the only one of its kind and scope in the country. We have to show that it can be done.”²⁴⁹ Kennedy had brought an unlikely group together. By enlisting private enterprise, Kennedy’s small project differed from President Johnson’s larger scale, government funded “Great Society” programs. Time would tell if the project would be successful, but it was an effort, and an unordinary one at that.²⁵⁰

Doubts plagued Kennedy on the specifics of the plan, but he knew the objective was right. As Kennedy said a few days before the unveiling ceremony, “I’m not sure all of this is going to work. [...] Even if we fail, we’ll have learned something. But more important than that, something has to be done. People like myself just can’t go around making nice speeches all the time. We can’t just keep raising expectations. We have to do some damn hard work, too.”²⁵¹ Jackie Robinson, who broke major league baseball’s color barrier in 1947, recognized that what happened in at PS 305 “was not just another talk meeting,” but rather a “declaration of war on the Bedford-Stuyvesant slum.”²⁵² The war in Bedford-Stuyvesant would continue into 1967 and beyond, but a different war that would jeopardize that effort, placing Kennedy in a moment of decision.

²⁴⁹ Palermo, p. 168.

²⁵⁰ Bedford-Stuyvesant got off to a rough start. There were divisions between the white and black boards, and also within the black board. In March of 1967, Kennedy found himself playing referee at a board meeting. Robert Kennedy failed to win over big business as he had hoped, but his idea did help create better housing and some new jobs. Three decades later, Robert Kennedy’s original idea was the model for dozen of inner city development corporations. Thomas, p. 342.

²⁵¹ Newfield, p. 96.

²⁵² Robinson, Jackie. "A Giant Step in Right Direction." *New York Amsterdam News*, December 24, 1966. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/226797992> (accessed January 10, 2013).

XII. VIETNAM & THE MORAL NEIGHBORHOOD (MARCH, 1967)

“Bedford-Stuyvesant will have no meaning if we don’t end that terrible war.” ²⁵³

--- Investment Banker André Meyer

Even while recruiting investment for Bedford-Stuyvesant, Robert Kennedy knew the effect Vietnam War could have on the race relations and the cities. André Meyer, an investment banker, told Kennedy he would support the Bedford-Stuyvesant project if Kennedy stood up in the Senate and opposed the Vietnam War. Meyer told Kennedy frankly, “Bedford-Stuyvesant will have no meaning if we don’t end that terrible war.”²⁵⁴ Robert Kennedy, who had advised his brother in sending advisers to Vietnam, stepped back from his previous Cold Warrior position in favor of civil rights at home. As early as December of 1965, Robert Kennedy spoke to the financial costs the Vietnam War would have on improving the urban slums.²⁵⁵ In February of 1966, Kennedy had begun to separate from the Johnson administration’s hardnosed Vietnam policy, stating that the United States may have to accept a “compromise government fully acceptable to neither side.”²⁵⁶ Personality battles and politics prolonged a more decisive split, but as President Johnson escalated the war into the spring of 1967, Robert Kennedy reached another point of separation.

On March 2, before he was slated to deliver a decisive speech on Vietnam that afternoon, Kennedy boarded a school bus outside of his Senate office filled with mostly African American school children visiting the Capitol. Kennedy joked with the kids,

²⁵³ Schlesinger, p. 787.

²⁵⁴ Schlesinger, p. 787.

²⁵⁵ “Address by Senator Robert F. Kennedy at Long Island University,” p. 3.

²⁵⁶ Palermo, p. 21.

inviting them to visit him before going into his office to prepare for his speech.²⁵⁷ When asked by a reporter in a pre-speech press conference if this type of speech was, as President Johnson deemed, a disservice to our boys fighting in Vietnam, Kennedy paused. His instincts toward patriotism coupled with his own familial history of military service caused him to ponder before responding, “You have to balance that against what you think does the greatest amount of good.”²⁵⁸ As he spoke in Senate that afternoon, Kennedy’s priorities became clear.

Kennedy first acknowledged President Johnson’s efforts for peace. To stir up a feud between the two men would detract from the issues at hand. History also threatened to detract from the issues at hand. With the Vietnam War encompassing three presidencies, including his brother’s, Kennedy opened by saying he sought “not to curse the past or to praise it.”²⁵⁹ While not “cursing” his brother’s decisions, he acknowledged the past error testifying that “if fault is to be found or responsibility assessed, there is enough to go around for all--including myself.”²⁶⁰ Free from distractions of personality and past transgressions, Kennedy recast his stance on the war.

Kennedy proposed a halting of the bombings of North Vietnam to enable the United States to “test the sincerity” of the statements made by the North Vietnamese Premier that negotiations would start when bombing was stopped.²⁶¹ Underlying this proposal was a search for peace, not military victory. The majority of the country still sought military victory as a means to peace, however. Only 15% of the country approved

²⁵⁷ Palermo, p. 47.

²⁵⁸ Palermo, p. 47.

²⁵⁹ Smith, Hedrick . "KENNEDY ASKS SUSPENSION OF U.S. AIR RAIDS ON NORTH; ADMINISTRATION UNMOVED." *The New York Times*, March 3, 1967. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/117528962> (accessed January 16, 2014).

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ Palermo, p. 48.

of Kennedy's peace proposals in March of 1967.²⁶² As historian Joseph Palermo indicates, "Given the political climate, Kennedy's call to stop the bombing was probably the strongest position he could take without damaging the Democratic Party for the 1968 elections and risking his own political future."²⁶³ The concern for his own political future weighed on Kennedy.

In the United States, the war had provoked too much violence and division for Americans to embrace what he had told students at Haile Selassie University in Ethiopia some months earlier: as members of a world community we lived in a "moral neighborhood."²⁶⁴ The Vietnamese were certainly included in this neighborhood as were those constituents in Bedford-Stuyvesant and Harlem. In this moral neighborhood, which Kennedy called "the search for peace," he said "all wars are fratricidal; in every war, we kill our brothers."²⁶⁵ Kennedy now felt acutely the agony of the war, as President Johnson escalated the bombing just weeks after his speech. The politics, the deaths, the war weighed on the Senator. "An indefinable sense of depression hung over him," wrote Arthur Schlesinger in his diary after visiting with Robert Kennedy in April, "as if he felt cornered by circumstance and did not know how to break out."²⁶⁶

²⁶² Palermo, p. 54.

²⁶³ Palermo, p. 54

²⁶⁴ "Haile Selassie University Speech." 15 June 1966. Papers of Robert F. Kennedy, RFK Senate Papers, Box 2, Speeches & Press Releases- 11/21/65-9/10/66 , Folder-6/11/1966-6/20/1966. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Boston, Massachusetts, p. 6.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ As written in Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s diary on April 18, 1967. Schlesinger, pp. 776-777

XIII. THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA & THE URBAN SLUM (APRIL, 1967)

“He said, [...] is poverty really that bad in Mississippi? I said, “Bobby, words can’t express it.”²⁶⁷

---Medgar Evers’ brother, Charles Evers

Foreign affairs were not the only contributors to this feeling of depression and helplessness that Kennedy seemed to have when Schlesinger saw him in mid-April. In early April, he was tasked by the Senate Labor Committee’s Subcommittee on Poverty to investigate conditions in the Mississippi Delta.²⁶⁸ This was the region in which Civil Rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer grew up, picking 200 to 300 hundred pounds of cotton a day by the time she was thirteen in 1930.²⁶⁹ Now with increased mechanization, thousands of blacks were out of work in the Delta region. When Robert Kennedy had asked his friend Charles Evers if poverty was bad down in Mississippi, Evers responded, “Bobby, words can’t express it.”²⁷⁰ In April, Robert Kennedy would discover firsthand what it was like in Mississippi, and see a connection from the city slums he left to the rural dwellings he entered.

With Senator Joseph Clark of Pennsylvania, Charles Evers, NAACP lawyer Marian Wright, and his aide Peter Edelman, Kennedy began his tour of the Delta.²⁷¹ The group went to what Evers called, “one of the worst places I have ever seen,” a house with hardly any ceiling and a floor with holes in it.²⁷² The smell was, according to Evers, “so bad you could barely keep the nausea down.”²⁷³ Nevertheless, Robert Kennedy went into

²⁶⁷ Stein, p. 279

²⁶⁸ Schlesinger, p. 794.

²⁶⁹ Mills, Kay. *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*. 1993. *Google Books*. University Press of Kentucky, Web. 20 Jan. 2014, p. 8.

²⁷⁰ Stein, p. 279.

²⁷¹ Marian Wright and Peter Edelman would wed in 1968 several months after the passing of Robert Kennedy.

²⁷² Stein, p. 279.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*

the kitchen with a little child who lived there. Evers remembered, “This lady came out with hardly any clothes on, and we spoke to her, and he told her who he was. She just put her arms out and said, Thank God.”²⁷⁴

A child came out from the back room. Evers recalled, Kennedy looked down at him “and picked him up and sat on that dirty bed. He was rubbing the child’s stomach.”²⁷⁵ Kennedy tried to evoke a response from the child, talking, tickling, caressing, as if it were one of his own children, but the child never looked up, sitting as in a trance.²⁷⁶ Kennedy just sat with the child as tears rolled down his [Kennedy’s] cheeks. The NAACP’s Marian Wright originally thought the Senators were there for publicity, but then when she saw what Kennedy did, she recalled, “[Kennedy] did things I hadn’t done. He went into the *dirtyest, filthiest, poorest* black homes, [...] and he would sit with a baby who had open sores and whose belly was bloated from malnutrition, and he’d sit and touch and hold those babies.”²⁷⁷ Kennedy’s compassion moved Marian Wright, but he, too, was moved.

Upon returning to New York, Kennedy grabbed Amanda Burden, the wife of one of his aides and said, “You don’t know what I saw! I have done nothing in my life! Everything I have done was a waste! Everything I have done was worthless!”²⁷⁸ The trip to Mississippi deepened Kennedy’s resolve to work for justice, he would even tell his own young children upon returning, “Do something for your country.”²⁷⁹ Kennedy would tell his aide Peter Edelman that what he saw in the Delta were “the worst conditions that

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Schlesinger, p. 795.

²⁷⁷ Stein, p. 124.

²⁷⁸ Thomas, p. 339.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

he'd ever seen in the United States."²⁸⁰ When asked by a reporter if he had ever seen anything similar; Kennedy responded "I've seen it in Harlem and Southeast Asia."²⁸¹ In all three areas, the ghettos, Vietnam, and now Mississippi, Kennedy saw the ills of mankind. What linked them was not their skin color or their poverty, but rather their humanity. Robert Kennedy felt this connection and his compassion brought him to understanding. When the ghettos erupted again that summer, the tests Kennedy had faced prepared him better than any other politician in America to understand the twin crises, the cities and Vietnam.

XIV. DETROIT RIOTS---TO THE BRINK (JULY 1967)

"There were dark days before, [...] but this is the darkest."²⁸²

---Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

On July 23, 1967, Detroit police raided an unlicensed speakeasy, finding eighty-two people celebrating the return of two black soldiers from Vietnam.²⁸³ Their arrests incited rioting in the surrounding neighborhoods and soon the city was set ablaze. The next day after seven hundred arrests and deploying 1,500 national guardsmen, President Johnson addressed the nation.²⁸⁴ The connection of the violence in Vietnam and the urban unrest was becoming clearer. "I just got back from Vietnam a few months ago," said one African American veteran while standing amongst broken glass and in the smoke filled

²⁸⁰ Edelman, Peter B., and Larry J. Hackman. "Peter B. Edelman Oral History Interview." *RFK #8*, 3/13/1974. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Web. 20 Jan. 2013. Edelman Oral History, p. 16.

²⁸¹ Schlesinger, p. 795.

²⁸² Branch, Taylor. *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King years, 1965-68*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006, p. 631.

²⁸³ Ibid. Speakeasy is another name for a bar.

²⁸⁴ Governor George Romney of Michigan is the father of 2012 U.S. Presidential candidate Mitt Romney. AP. "Detroit Is Swept by Rioting and Fires; Romney Calls In Guard; 700 Arrested." *The New York Times*, July 24, 1967. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/117834034> (accessed January 22, 2014).

streets, “but you know, I think the war is here.”²⁸⁵ After Johnson’s directive to send in troops, Dr. Martin Luther King would tell his advisers on a conference call, “There were dark days before, [...] but this is the darkest.”²⁸⁶

Robert Kennedy would share King’s feeling after hearing the President’s speech to send in troops. “It’s over,” he told his press secretary Frank Mankiewicz, “The President is just not going to do anything more. That’s it. He’s through with the domestic problems, with the cities.... He’s not going to do anything. And he’s the only man who can.”²⁸⁷ The President was the only man who had “the pulpit,” as Kennedy described to Mankiewicz, to lead and to show that he cares.²⁸⁸ Meaningful action to solve the urban unrest could only come from the Executive Branch. Congress would not be able to remedy the ills fast enough, even if the legislative body desired. “The tragic truth is that Congress, more than the American people,” as Dr. King told the annual Southern Christian Leadership Conference in late July, “is now running wild with racism.”²⁸⁹

Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia proposed to his fellow members of the Senate a way to stop the rioting. “These insurrections should be put down with brute force. Adult looters should be shot on the spot... There’s only one way to deal with rioters bent on destruction of property of life---swiftly and mercilessly.”²⁹⁰ He ended his prescription for the urban crisis by saying, “Slums are developed by slummy people.”²⁹¹

Robert Kennedy had a different view of the urban unrest than his fellow Senator, and as a

²⁸⁵ *The Los Angeles Times*, "CRISIS: Ominous Riots Touch Off Partisan Quarrels Among Leaders," July 30, 1967. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/155702352> (accessed January 22, 2014).

²⁸⁶ Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, p. 631.

²⁸⁷ Mankiewicz, Frank. Interview by Larry J. Hackman. Personal interview. Bethesda, Maryland, August 12, 1969, Frank Mankiewicz Oral History Interview---RFK #3, p. 86, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/RFKOH-FM-03.aspx>; Schlesinger, p. 797.

²⁸⁸ Schlesinger, p. 798

²⁸⁹ Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, p. 636.

²⁹⁰ *The Los Angeles Times*, "CRISIS: Ominous Riots Touch Off Partisan Quarrels Among Leaders," p. 1

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

result, he had a different prescription to the problem than to have “adult looters [...] shot on the spot.” As Burke Marshall explains, Kennedy’s perspective “was much closer to the people in the city, the blacks particularly, than almost any white man I can think of.”

²⁹² It was not just his physical closeness to those in the cities that set Kennedy apart, but, as Marshall explains, it was that Kennedy “understood how they felt.”²⁹³

When Mankiewicz asked Kennedy what he would do to address the rioting if he were President, Kennedy gave a thoughtful and empathetic answer. First, he would contact the heads of the three television networks to produce a prime time two hour documentary, showing what it was like to live in a ghetto.

“Let them show the sound, the feel, the hopelessness, and what it’s like to think you’ll never get out. Show a black teenager, told by some radio jingle to stay in school, looking at his older brother---who stayed in school---and who’s out of a job. Show the Mafia pushing narcotics; put a Candid Camera team in a ghetto school and watch how rotten a system of education it is really is. Film a mother staying up all night to keep the rats from her baby.... Then I’d ask people to watch it--- and experience what it means to live in the most affluent society in history---without hope.”²⁹⁴

Secondly, he would find the racial data on every major city and have meetings at the White House for each city in danger. At these meetings would be the politicians, real estate men, union bosses, ministers, and other people who had power in the city. Robert Kennedy wished to put the problem onto these leaders and solve the problem in a similar manner to the approach used in Bedford-Stuyvesant. The local community would define the problems and plans while the government would define the available resources and the two would work in tandem to save the cities. Kennedy’s ideas differed from the

²⁹² Marshall, Burke. Interview by Larry J. Hackman. Personal interview. Bedford, New York, January 19-20, 1970, Burke Marshall Oral History Interview---RFK #1, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/RFKOH-BM-01.aspx>, p. 79.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Schlesinger, p. 798.

White House's current actions, but the proving ground of Bedford-Stuyvesant was still in its early stages.

In the summer of 1967, Kennedy did not have the proof or "the pulpit" to say the things he desired. As he told Mankiewicz, "When I do, it's a political speech," fueling the fire in the feud with President Johnson.²⁹⁵ The "pulpit" of the Presidency would be up for election the next year in 1968, and while Kennedy was generally against running, as Frank Mankiewicz said, "what put him in a position to have his mind changed was the Detroit riots and the terrible feeling he had as he watched Johnson that night that nothing was going to happen anymore, that the Administration was through with domestic reform of any kind, that he wasn't going to do anything for the cities."²⁹⁶ Kennedy understood that riots would push many Americans away from urban reform and domestic aid. As the months progressed, a tide of anti-war movements would surface, pushing Kennedy into the decision of his life.

XV. VIETNAM---TO THE BRINK (NOVEMBER, 1967)

"Those of us who stay here in the United States, we must feel it when we use napalm, when a village is destroyed and civilians are killed. [...] This is a moral obligation and a moral responsibility for us in the United States. And I think we have forgotten that."²⁹⁷

---Robert Kennedy

The November anniversary of his brother's passing was always a tough time for Robert Kennedy. As author and friend Jack Newfield writes, "He spent each anniversary

²⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 799.

²⁹⁶ Mankiewicz, Frank. Interview by Larry J. Hackman. Personal interview. Bethesda, Maryland, November 6, 1969, Frank Mankiewicz Oral History Interview---RFK #6, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/RFKOH-FM-06.aspx>, pp. 4-5.

²⁹⁷ Newfield, p. 56-57.

of Dallas in prayer and brooding seclusion.”²⁹⁸ Even in 1967, a friend recalled, “All of November is a bad time for him.”²⁹⁹ This was the mindset Robert Kennedy was in when he appeared on the television program *Face the Nation* on November 26, 1967, just four days after the fourth year since his brother’s assassination.

Early in the program, panelist Tom Wicker pressed Kennedy on the contradiction between his opposition to the war and his reluctance to run against Johnson. “No matter what I do, I am in difficulty,” Kennedy sheepishly responded. “I don’t know what I can do except to perhaps try to get off the earth in some way.”³⁰⁰ Coming on the heels of November 22, this statement makes more sense. The depths of despair he had felt over the loss of his brother were immeasurable, but he had a responsibility to do his duty to mankind. As the hosts continued to badger Kennedy about the war, the moral outrage that erupted was unscripted and “he began to say everything he had so cautiously cut out of his speeches,” as Jack Newfield recalled.

“ We’re going in there and we’re killing South Vietnamese, we’re killing children, we’re killing women, we’re killing innocent people because we don’t have to have the war fought on American soil, or because they’re 12,000 miles away, and they might get to be 11,000 miles away.

Do we have the right, here in the United States to kill tens of thousand, make millions of people, as we have, millions of people refugees, killing women and children, as we have?

Those of us who stay here in the United States, we must feel it when we use napalm, when a village is destroyed and civilians are killed. This is also our responsibility. This is a moral obligation and a moral responsibility for us in the United States. And I think we have forgotten that... I think we’re going to have a difficult time explaining that to ourselves....

I think that the picture in the paper of a child drowning should trouble us more than it does, or the picture last week of a paratrooper holding a rifle to a woman’s head---it must trouble us more than it does....

When we say we love our country, we say it for what it can be, and for the justice that it stands for, and what we’re going to mean for the next generation. It

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

is not just the land, it is not just the mountains, it is for what the country stands for. And that is what I think is being seriously undermined in Vietnam, and the effect of it has to be felt by our people.”³⁰¹

This denunciation of the war encapsulated his humanity, and as Newfield wrote, it seemed “to define his authentic dimensions.”³⁰² These words were devoid of political calculation and came from the heart, but they also led to the contradiction Wicker broached. The contradiction was complicated by Kennedy’s history. “If his [last] name had been something else,” as Kenneth O’Donnell, a JFK adviser, later said, “I think Bobby Kennedy would have announced for President in 1967 and taken Johnson on without any question whatsoever.”³⁰³ He was dealing with his past image as a ruthless political calculator from when he was his brother’s shield. A more authentic self had surfaced, but it was not just his established image that shaped his indecision---it was the memory of his brother.³⁰⁴

“For me to run against Johnson,” as Robert Kennedy told Jack Newfield, “I have to run against President Kennedy’s judgment [about the Vietnam War].”³⁰⁵ His brother had played a role in starting the war, but now he would have to decide whether or not to run against his brother’s legacy. These factors, plus the plethora of friends and family giving him contradictory advice, lengthened his indecision. As he would write to his friend and *New York Times* writer Anthony Lewis in London on November 29, 1967, just

³⁰¹ Ibid., p. 56-57.

³⁰² Ibid., p. 56.

³⁰³ Schlesinger, p. 831.

³⁰⁴ As John Lewis said in our interview, “In the African American community, some people say we have another sense that they could tell when someone was real, and they thought Bobby Kennedy was real, that was authentic and he displayed that.” After the death of his brother, especially in moments devoid of political calculation such as the *Face the Nation* interview, this authenticity increasingly surfaced. Lewis, John. Interview by author. Personal interview. Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C., October 8, 2013.

³⁰⁵ PBS. “RFK-American Experience Transcript.” PBS. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rfk/filmmore/pt.html> (accessed April 7, 2014).

a few days later after his *Face the Nation* appearance, “Washington is dreadful but what to do?”³⁰⁶

XVI. “A CRAZY MOMENT IN HISTORY,” 1968

“The polls and the politicians are all wrong. This is a crazy moment in history. The anger and alienation are all just below the surface. You can feel it, but you can’t measure it in a poll. The politicians are blind.”³⁰⁷

---Reporter Jack Newfield

The events of the decade had built up to this moment in history, the 1968 election. The assassinations of President Kennedy and Medgar Evers symbolized the violence of the decade. The bombing in Saigon and the bombing in Birmingham brought America to examine its values. As historian Thurston Clarke writes, “In 1968, America was a wounded nation. The wounds were moral ones, and the Vietnam War and three summers of inner-city riots had inflicted them on the national soul, challenging Americans’ belief that they were a uniquely noble and honorable people.”³⁰⁸ With the divisions and violence at home and abroad, this was what was at stake in 1968.

Kennedy felt tremendous pressure; as friend and former aide John Seigenthaler said, “Everything he was about in life was suddenly on the line.”³⁰⁹ For Kennedy, the battle was internal. As friend and reporter Jack Newfield wrote in the December 28, 1967

³⁰⁶ Schlesinger, p. 832.

³⁰⁷ Newfield, p. 202.

³⁰⁸ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 1. This belief of the United States as an exceptional nation emanated from John Winthrop’s words on the way to the new land in 1630. Winthrop stated that the new colony would “be as a city upon a hill,” an example for the rest of the world. John Kennedy quoted Winthrop in 1961 before taking office. University of Virginia. ““City Upon a Hill” Speech (January 9, 1961).” Miller Center. <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3364> (accessed April 7, 2014). Robert Kennedy would say in his April 28, 1965 speech that because of the lack of fulfillment of civil rights to all Americans, “we are still in the middle of our journey.” Speech by Senator Robert F. Kennedy National Council of Christians and Jews, p. 3.

³⁰⁹ PBS. “RFK-American Experience Transcript.” PBS. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rfk/filmmore/pt.html> (accessed April 7, 2014).

issue of *The Village Voice*, “If Kennedy does not run in 1968, the best side of his character will die. [...] Kennedy’s best quality is his ability to be himself, to be authentic [...] it is the quality Kennedy will lose if he doesn’t make his stand now against Johnson. He will become a robot mouthing dishonest rhetoric like all the other politicians.”³¹⁰ This was time to be honest with himself and his experiences, regardless of what the politicians said.

Many politicians did not support a Kennedy Presidential run. Even many of the doves (those against the war) in the Senate did not support Kennedy running because it would make their reelection campaigns more difficult. Additionally, the polls made a Kennedy victory look unachievable. As aide Adam Walinsky recalls, “he did not see how it was practical to run,” a poll, taken in New Hampshire in January of 1968, “had Johnson beating him there 67 to 9.”³¹¹ Yet there was a more human side to the race than the polls could indicate. As Jack Newfield told Kennedy on January 19, “The polls and the politicians are all wrong. This is a crazy moment in history. The anger and alienation are all just below the surface. You can feel it, but you can’t measure it in a poll. The politicians are blind.”³¹² Kennedy still was caught up in “practical” politics, telling Newfield, “The politicians, who know something about it, they say it [a successful Presidential run] can’t be put together.”³¹³ At the end of January, Kennedy sided with the

³¹⁰ Newfield 196

³¹¹ PBS. "RFK-American Experience Transcript." PBS.
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rfk/filmmore/pt.html> (accessed April 7, 2014).

³¹² Newfield, p. 202.

³¹³ Newfield, p. 203.

politicians and told reporters at the National Press Club that he would not oppose the President under “any conceivable circumstances.”³¹⁴

That same day circumstances changed when news of the Tet Offensive, an attack by the North Vietnamese on U.S. troops, broke into the United States, damaging President Johnson’s credibility. “The Tet Offensive changed everything,” wrote historian Arthur Schlesinger, inciting Kennedy to give his strongest anti-Vietnam speech to date, February 8 in Chicago. On the plane back to Washington, Kennedy read a letter from his friend Pete Hamill, the author who had been with him in the slums of New York. The letter had been written in the small window after Kennedy had withdrawn, but before the news of Tet broke. Hamill wrote:

“I had long wanted to write you a long letter explaining my reasons why I thought you should make a run for the Presidency this year. But that’s too late [...] I wanted to say that you should run because if you won, the country might be saved [...] I wanted to remind you that in Watts I didn’t see pictures of Malcolm X or Ron Karenga on the walls. I saw pictures of JFK. That is your capital in the most cynical sense; it is your obligation in another, the obligation of staying true to whatever it was that put those pictures on those walls. I don’t think we can afford five summers of blood. I do know this: if a 15-year-old kid is given a choice between Rap Brown³¹⁵ and RFK, he *might* choose the way of sanity. It’s only a possibility, but at least there is that chance. Give that same kid a choice between Rap Brown and LBJ, and he’ll probably reach for his revolver.”³¹⁶

Kennedy would later tell Newfield and others that the letter “marked the turning point in his thinking about whether to seek the Presidency in 1968.”³¹⁷ It was the image of the urban young that had started to change Kennedy’s mind about civil rights in 1963,

³¹⁴ Press Secretary Frank Mankiewicz changed the press release to read “any foreseeable circumstances.” Thomas, p. 356.

³¹⁵ H. Rap Brown, the black power leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, told a Detroit crowd five weeks after Detroit’s riot, that the rioters “did a good job,” “the honky [white man] is your enemy,” and “I am glad the civil rights movement is dead.” He was cheered. On other occasion’s Brown told audiences that violence is as American as cherry pie and that blacks should burn America down. UPI. “Detroit Negroes Hear Praise by Rap Brown.” *The Los Angeles Times*, August 28, 1967.

³¹⁶ Newfield, p. 208.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

with James Baldwin, and this image again made him turn the corner in 1968. Robert Kennedy had pushed his brother to make the June Civil Rights speech in 1963 after he had been prompted by Jerome Smith. It was his obligation to stay “true to whatever it was that put those pictures on those walls,” specifically himself and his highest sense of right. The letter would, according to Newfield, “daze” Kennedy and for days he would carry it around his attaché case, rereading it many times.³¹⁸

Two days after initially reading Hamill’s letter, Kennedy published a piece in the *New York Times* Topics section entitled, “Things Fall Apart; the Center Cannot Hold...” The article began by addressing the divisions and the tumult in the country; the H. Rap Brown-esque anarchists who “threaten to burn the country down [...] while tanks have patrolled American streets.”³¹⁹ Kennedy wrote, “Indeed, we seem to fulfill the vision of Yeats: ‘Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;/ Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.’”³²⁰ Kennedy spoke of the 1968 elections as a choice for not only who will lead us, but “where we [as a nation] wish to be led.”³²¹

Kennedy wrote of the inadequacy of the Gross National Product to measure the quality of life in America. The GNP, he wrote, measures everything except “that which makes life worthwhile” and “why we are proud to be Americans.”³²² “The strength of our marriages,” “the joy of [our children’s] play,” and “the integrity of our public officials” were all absent from the GNP. It was the values that the country was founded upon which made us proud to be Americans and these very values were not being upheld

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Kennedy, Robert F.. "Topics: 'Things Fall Apart; the Center Cannot Hold . . . ' ." *The New York Times*, February 10, 1968. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/118255758> (accessed January 29, 2014).

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Ibid.

in the major cities. Kennedy alluded to the urban youth, writing of children “idling their lives away in the ghetto,” and he wrote “no television sets---not even 70 million of them --can bring us pride in that kind of wealth.”³²³ The promise of America was to ensure that everyone had equal rights and opportunity. Recapturing this “national spirit,” in essence, the values that the country was built upon, “is what the 1968 elections must really be about,” concluded Kennedy.³²⁴

The “national spirit” was also examined by the Kerner Commission, the President’s committee to investigate the 1967 urban riots, and on February 29 the report leaked. The report described a “society increasingly divided into two parts, separate and unequal.”³²⁵ This was the division Robert Kennedy was trying to bind up, to heal. The report blamed “white racism” for the ghetto conditions, stating that, “What white Americans have never fully understood — but the Negro can never forget — is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.”³²⁶ The foundation of white supremacy, the issue that the Civil Rights Movement brought to the surface at the beginning of the decade, created the ghetto. Robert Kennedy wished to bring the problem out again into the open to address it, but the White House wished to hide it and largely ignored the report. As historian Jules Witcover writes, “For Kennedy, this was the last straw.”³²⁷

President Johnson ignoring the Kerner Commission report pushed Kennedy to follow his moral center instead of his political instincts. On March 10, as Kennedy flew

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ "Full text of "The Kerner report revisited; final report and background papers"." National Archives. http://www.archive.org/stream/kennerreportrevi00asse/kennerreportrevi00asse_djvu.txt (accessed April 7, 2014).

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Witcover, Jules. *85 Days: The Last Campaign of Robert Kennedy*. New York: Putnam, 1969, p. 53.

to California to support Cesar Chavez, the leader of the farm workers whom he had befriended in 1966, his mind was clearer. On the flight, John Seigenthaler, his friend and aide for nearly a decade, told him not to run, giving him political advice. Kennedy replied differently than he had two months earlier to Newfield, “I recognize the logic of everything you say....But I’d feel better if I were doing what I think ought to be done and saying what I know should be said.”³²⁸ His mind was all but made up that he would run, but seeing Chavez would give him inspiration for his announcement.

Upon arriving in Delano, Kennedy called Chavez, who was ending a hunger strike that had lasted over three weeks, “a hero of our times.”³²⁹ After the two men broke bread together, Kennedy listened intently as Chavez’s speech was read for him, as he was too weak to speak:

“When we are really honest with ourselves, we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of men we are. It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find life. I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness, is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us be men.”³³⁰

Kennedy’s journey had brought him to understand these words and on the plane away from Delano, he told aide Peter Edelman, “Yes. I am going to do it [I am going to run for President].”³³¹

On March 16, in the Old Senate Office Building, Robert Kennedy declared his candidacy for the Presidency of the United States. Robert Kennedy first spoke to the feud with President Johnson that had long held him back saying, “I do not run for the

³²⁸ Schlesinger, p. 847.

³²⁹ Schlesinger, p. 847; As quoted in Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings*, p. 424.

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Schlesinger, p. 847.

presidency merely to oppose any man but to propose new policies.”³³² Those new policies were ones he had grown to understand, “policies to end the bloodshed in Vietnam and in our cities.” These were the two different main issues, but the conflicts were based on the same lie.

As he had said in South Africa, it was “the false masks, the illusion of differences which is the root of injustice” and now, as he declared his candidacy, Robert Kennedy wished to enact “policies to close the gaps that now exist between black and white, between rich and poor, between young and old, in this country and around the rest of the world.”³³³ His personal path had showed him the course that the country must take to remove the false masks and to racial reconciliation. For Robert Kennedy, the Presidency was not about him or his ego; it was about something far greater in his opinion. “At stake,” with the Presidency he said, “is not simply the leadership of our party and even our country. It is our right to moral leadership of this planet.”³³⁴ During the 1968 campaign, Robert Kennedy would seek to exhibit that moral leadership through his words and actions.

³³² "Robert F. Kennedy For President Announcement." 4president.
<http://www.4president.org/Speeches/rfk1968announcement.htm> (accessed April 7, 2014).

³³³ *Ibid.*

³³⁴ *Ibid.*

XVII. KANSAS---“I FEEL LIKE A MAN AGAIN!” (MARCH, 1968)

“Even if we act to erase material poverty, there is another greater task, it is to confront the poverty of satisfaction-purpose and dignity-that afflicts us all.”³³⁵

---Robert Kennedy

On Monday, March 18, Robert Kennedy began his campaign for President, speaking at Kansas State University in Manhattan. He started nervously, reading his prepared text to over 14,000 students who packed the basketball stadium. Then he turned to Vietnam, acknowledging his own fault in shaping the early policies, stating that “past error is no excuse for its perpetuation. Tragedy is a tool for the living to gain wisdom, not a guide by which to live.”³³⁶ Those words were something he had lived over the last five years of his life, continuously reshaping his views. His words registered with the crowd, as the apology received the loudest cheers of the morning.³³⁷ Kennedy would attack the war in Vietnam at KSU, telling the audience his concern that “the course we are following at the present time is deeply wrong.”³³⁸ As Kennedy finished his speech, the overwhelmingly conservative audience erupted in deafening applause.

As historian Thurston Clarke writes, “At Kansas State, Kennedy had explained how Vietnam had wounded the national soul.”³³⁹ At the University of Kansas, just a few hours later, Kennedy would give another speech. As Clarke writes, “The first speech had contained the diagnosis; the second, the remedy.”³⁴⁰ Kennedy told the audience at Kansas

³³⁵ John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum. "University of Kansas (March 18, 1968)." Robert F. Kennedy Speeches. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/RFK-Speeches/Remarks-of-Robert-F-Kennedy-at-the-University-of-Kansas-March-18-1968.aspx> (accessed April 7, 2014).

³³⁶ Newfield, p. 233; Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 45.

³³⁷ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 45.

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Ibid., p. 48.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

that “the spirit of honest confrontation is what America needs today,” and in essence, he would speak as he believed.³⁴¹ Telling the truth as he saw it was what was most important even above winning the Presidency; he told the crowd that, “I don’t want to win support of votes by hiding the American condition in false hopes or illusions.”³⁴² He would touch on the illusions about Vietnam, but what needed to be remedied was the condition of what he called the “other Americans,” those “whose names and faces are completely unknown.”³⁴³

To the Kansas students, Robert Kennedy spoke from experience. He transported them through his life experience saying, “I have seen children in the Delta area of Mississippi with distended stomachs, whose faces are covered with sores from starvation [...] I have seen Indians living on their bare and meager reservations...with so little hope for the future that for young men and women in their teens the greatest cause of death is suicide.”³⁴⁴ All these experiences were vivid for Kennedy, but he concluded with what had started to open up this thinking stating, “I have seen the people of the black ghetto, listening to ever greater promises of equality and of justice, as they sit in the same decaying schools and huddled in the same filthy rooms-without heat-warding off the cold and warding off the rats.”³⁴⁵ At their core, these conditions raised the fundamental question: “What would Americans do about the conditions?”

³⁴¹ John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum. "University of Kansas (March 18, 1968)." Robert F. Kennedy Speeches. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/RFK-Speeches/Remarks-of-Robert-F-Kennedy-at-the-University-of-Kansas-March-18-1968.aspx> (accessed April 7, 2014).

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Ibid.; Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 48.

³⁴⁵ John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum. "University of Kansas (March 18, 1968)." Robert F. Kennedy Speeches. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/RFK->

“If we believe that we, as Americans, are bound together by a common concern for each other, then an urgent national priority is upon us,” Kennedy told the students, “We must begin to end the disgrace of this other America.”³⁴⁶ The disgrace was not simply about material poverty, the minimum wage, or finances. It was about something greater than material things, human dignity. “Even if we act to erase material poverty,” Kennedy told the students, “there is another greater task, it is to confront the poverty of satisfaction-purpose and dignity-that afflicts us all.”³⁴⁷ Human dignity, not specifically finances or even race, was what was of paramount importance to Kennedy.

As Kennedy finished this portion of the speech by repeating his attack on the GNP as a measure of national worth, the students cheered, to the surprise of aide Adam Walinsky. Robert Kennedy was miles away from the nearest ghetto, miles away from Mississippi, and Indian reservations, in what would seem to be a bastion of conservatism in Kansas, yet his audience applauded thunderously. Walinsky believed that Kennedy’s remarks moved the crowd because they recognized that his words were “an authentic expression of Kennedy’s life as a political figure and as a human being.”³⁴⁸ Kennedy not only believed what he said, he lived what he said, and the Kansas crowds perceived and appreciated that.

Civil Rights were no longer a political issue for Robert Kennedy as they had been in 1963, they had become a personal issue of great depth---it was authentic. Kennedy, having tested his ideas of private sector investment in the ghetto Bedford-Stuyvesant, felt

Speeches/Remarks-of-Robert-F-Kennedy-at-the-University-of-Kansas-March-18-1968.aspx (accessed April 7, 2014).

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 49.

confident in his plans for the inner cities and for the country.³⁴⁹ John Lewis, who had offered to campaign for Robert Kennedy when he heard the announcement of his candidacy, would later say of Kennedy's concern for civil rights, "It was not just a message, he was not being just a politician, he was being human and people saw that, they understood that."³⁵⁰ Robert Kennedy embodied the value of appreciation for human dignity that ignited the Civil Rights Movement. On the plane out of Kansas, back to Washington, Kennedy told others stopping by his seat, "I feel free! I feel like a man again!"³⁵¹ For Kennedy, who prided himself since boyhood on acts physical courage, it was an act of moral courage, speaking his true beliefs that brought freedom. Taking his stand for his beliefs had liberated him and now he would seek to liberate others.

³⁴⁹In 1968, it was still too early to see concrete gains in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Six months after Kennedy's assassination, two years after the experiment was launched, skeptical Bedford-Stuyvesant residents saw concrete improvements, however. Fourteen, new black-owned business opened, creating 570 jobs. The exteriors of 400 brownstones and tenements had been restored and 1200 residents received vocational training. IBM located a computer cable plant in the area and City University of NY agreed to build a new community college. Newfield, p. 108.

³⁵⁰ Lewis, John. Interview by author. Personal interview. Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C., October 8, 2013.

³⁵¹ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 50.

PART IV

STANDING FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN & THE OAKLAND MEETING

(MAY 30, 1968)

**“Sometimes it seem like to tell the truth today is to run the risk of being
killed [sic].”³⁵²**

---Fannie Lou Hamer

³⁵² Marsh, Charles. *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997. *Google Books.*, Web. 22 Dec. 2013, p. 24.

XVIII: MEMPHIS SANITATION WORKERS & DR. KING (MARCH 1968)

“I AM A MAN”³⁵³

---Signs held by the striking Memphis Sanitation Workers

“We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools.”³⁵⁴

---Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Even as Kennedy was proclaiming his rediscovered manhood, Dr. Martin Luther King was leading a movement for purpose, dignity, and manhood amongst sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee. On February 1, 1968, after almost a full day of collecting garbage for poverty wages, Echol Cole and Robert Walker climbed into the storage cylinder of their garbage truck, seeking refuge from stormy weather. There was no more room in the cab of the truck where the driver and two other workers sat. City laws did not allow the men to take shelter in residential neighborhoods after citizens had complained about the black sanitation workers taking “unsightly ‘picnics.’”³⁵⁵ With the men amongst the garbage inside the storage cylinder, a fuse shorted on the truck, the compressor began to run, and Cole and Walker were crushed to death.

Ten days later, the Memphis sanitation workers, many of whom earned wages so low that they were on welfare or food stamps, decided to strike.³⁵⁶ A few weeks into their strike, on March 18, the same day Robert Kennedy spoke to students in Kansas, Martin

³⁵³ Rugabers, Walter. "DR. KING TO MARCH IN MEMPHIS AGAIN." *The New York Times*, March 30, 1968. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/118216501> (accessed February 15, 2014).

³⁵⁴ Stanford University. "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution." The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute. http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/kingpapers/article/remaining_away_through_a_great_revolution/ (accessed February 15, 2014).

³⁵⁵ Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, p. 684.

³⁵⁶ Stanford University. "Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike (1968)." Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Global Freedom Struggle. http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_memphis_sanitation_workers_strike_1968/ (accessed February 15, 2014).

Luther King Jr. came to speak in Memphis to a crowd of 25,000 gathered in support of the sanitation workers. Referencing his visionary words from his 1963 Letter from a Birmingham Jail, King told the crowd, “You are demonstrating that we are all tied in a single garment of destiny, and that if one black person suffers, if one black person is down, we are all down.”³⁵⁷ In Memphis, King confronted his biggest challenge to date, in essence, what Robert Kennedy called “the poverty of satisfaction-purpose and dignity-that afflicts us all.”³⁵⁸ The sanitation workers did not carry signs asking for government handouts or supplemental incomes to end their material poverty. The sanitation workers would march through Memphis to assert their innate human dignity, carrying signs that simply read “I AM A MAN.”³⁵⁹

On March 31, at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., Martin Luther King Jr. gave what would be his final sermon entitled, “Remaining Awake Through A Great Revolution.”³⁶⁰ While King did not directly mention the Memphis sanitation workers, he went to the heart of both the strike and the Civil Rights Movement as a whole. Echoing Kennedy’s South African speech, King told the crowd that, “Through our scientific and technological genius, we have made of this world a neighborhood and yet we have not had the ethical commitment to make of it a brotherhood.”³⁶¹ In Memphis, the ethical commitment of brotherhood was missing when men rode next to garbage to escape a storm when residences lined the streets. King went on to say what was required for the

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

³⁵⁸ Stanford University, “Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike (1968).”

³⁵⁹ Rugabers, “DR. KING TO MARCH IN MEMPHIS AGAIN.” *The New York Times*.

³⁶⁰ Stanford University. “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution.”

³⁶¹ Ibid.

future saying, “Somehow, and in some way, we have got to do this. We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools.”³⁶²

King spoke of needing brotherhood not only in the United States, but across the globe where “two-thirds of the people of the world go to bed hungry.”³⁶³ King also spoke directly from experience. He told his audience of his saddening and unforgettable trip to India saying, “How can one avoid being depressed when he sees with his own eyes God’s children sleeping on the sidewalks at night?”³⁶⁴ Again, King realized and spoke to the unity of mankind saying, “As I noticed these things, something within me cried out, ‘Can we in America stand idly by and not be concerned?’ And an answer came: ‘Oh no!’ Because the destiny of the United States is tied up with the destiny of India and every other nation.”³⁶⁵ King knew the battle of building this brotherhood would have to start in America and now would take the form of the Poor People’s Campaign.

King spoke of bringing the poor people of America to Washington “to ask America to be true to the huge promissory note that it signed years ago,” the note which proclaimed that “these truths [are] self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”³⁶⁶ This was what the marches in Memphis were about, the assertion of human dignity emanating from a higher source. This was what the Civil Rights Movement was about, the fulfillment of that ideal declaration. It would be this fulfillment on a global scale that King urged his audience to remain awake through.

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

And thus King ended his final sermon, to go back to Memphis to be with the sanitation workers, by declaring, “We shall overcome because James Russell Lowell is right—as we were singing earlier today, Truth forever on the scaffold,/ Wrong forever on the throne./ Yet that scaffold sways the future./ And behind the dim unknown stands God,/ Within the shadow keeping watch above his own.”³⁶⁷

XIX. “BE TRUE TO WHAT YOU SAID” (MARCH 31-APRIL 3, 1968)

“All we say to America is to be true to what you said on paper.”³⁶⁸

---Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The same day King ended his sermon in Washington, D.C. to travel back to Memphis, President Johnson disrupted the clear course of Robert Kennedy’s campaign. Since his Kansas speeches, Kennedy had traveled the country across thirteen states in what his press secretary Frank Mankiewicz began calling “The Free At Last Tour.”³⁶⁹ Kennedy stood again on street corners in Watts, the same areas he visited after the riots three years earlier. People hung from the branches of oak trees and stood on car roofs to hear him speak.³⁷⁰ Children ran alongside his car. Newfield, who rode along with Kennedy, wrote that in Los Angeles he “saw the joy, the happiness, in the faces that lined the curb to see him. I had not seen happiness in politics since the early days of the civil rights movement.”³⁷¹

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ Stanford University. “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Global Freedom Struggle. http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/ive_been_to_the_mountaintop/ (accessed February 15, 2014).

³⁶⁹ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 51

³⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 58.

³⁷¹ Newfield, p. 240.

In Watts, Robert Kennedy did not cater to a primarily black audience, but his authenticity registered with his audience. He stood on a chair in the street on the corner of Graham Avenue and 103rd Street telling the crowd, “I want jobs for the black people of Watts, and the white people of Eastern Kentucky. I want a reconciliation of blacks and whites in the United States.”³⁷² Kennedy had insisted that no police accompany him into the ghetto and was protected only by “the grass-roots cadre of militants called the Sons of Watts.”³⁷³ When Newfield asked one of the blacks guarding him why he liked Kennedy, the man replied, “Because he is the only cat who can get this country’s [stuff] together.”³⁷⁴ Robert Kennedy ran for reconciliation, but also intertwined in his thoughts and motives was his battle with President Johnson and the course of policy in Vietnam.

Unexpectedly, on the evening of March 31, 1968, President Johnson would forfeit that battle. Johnson shocked the country when he announced that he would “not seek, and [would] not accept, the nomination of [his] party for another term as [...] President.”³⁷⁵ Robert Kennedy had lost his chief opponent and two major issues in his opposition to Johnson and his opposition to the Vietnam War. Many Americans supported Senator Eugene McCarthy who also campaigned on an anti-war platform, but had entered the primary races in the period of Kennedy’s indecision. McCarthy realized how Johnson’s departure from the race would affect the Kennedy campaign saying, “Bobby has to shoot straight pool now [...] When he was banking shots off Lyndon [Johnson] it was a

³⁷² Newfield, p. 241.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁵ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 72.

different game.”³⁷⁶ To win, Kennedy would have to make true his statement that he did not run “to oppose any man but to propose new policies.”³⁷⁷

After Johnson’s announcement, however, Kennedy initially reverted back to political calculations. In an attempt to win Johnson’s constituency, Kennedy praised the man he had finally denounced in his stirring speeches in Kansas and across the country. Kennedy told a crowd, for instance, in Camden, New Jersey that, “We take pride in President Johnson.”³⁷⁸ As journalist Jules Witcover notes, many of the issue-oriented students did not like this type of equivocation, “they looked for truth in a sterilized jar, even in politics---especially in politics; to them, pragmatism was a synonym for opportunism.”³⁷⁹ The students were right, as John Kennedy aide Larry O’Brien would say later, “He became a John Kennedy rather than a Bob Kennedy.”³⁸⁰ The prospects of victory altered Kennedy’s course from high moral purpose to seemingly practical politics and his campaign suffered.

“Without an issue, without a target, and without a purpose, Kennedy floundered awkwardly in the next few days, groping for a new beginning,” wrote Newfield of the campaign after Johnson dropped out.³⁸¹ “It’s hard to get it all going again,” Kennedy himself would say privately, “Here you were in a fight you knew was right. Then one night it was gone.”³⁸² The smoke from the battle of personalities that had long existed between the two men clouded Kennedy’s vision. The election was not about him or Lyndon Johnson, Eugene McCarthy, or even the Republican Richard Nixon. As Kennedy

³⁷⁶ Witcover, p. 134.

³⁷⁷ "Robert F. Kennedy For President Announcement." 4president.
<http://www.4president.org/Speeches/rfk1968announcement.htm> (accessed April 7, 2014).

³⁷⁸ Witcover, p. 133.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁸¹ Newfield, p. 245.

³⁸² Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 76.

himself had written, only a month earlier before he declared his candidacy, recapturing the “national spirit [...] is what the 1968 elections must really be about.”³⁸³

No other figure of the era embodied that “national spirit” better than Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. On April 3, 1968, amidst a struggling movement in Memphis, Dr. King spoke to this “national spirit.” King told the crowd at Bishop Charles Mason Temple that “we’ve got to go on in Memphis just like that [struggle in Birmingham],” referencing the climactic victory five years earlier.³⁸⁴ After addressing his crowd, he spoke on behalf of the movement directly to the “national spirit” saying, “All we say to America is to *be true* to what you said on paper.”³⁸⁵ The ideals the country was founded upon were at stake in Memphis, Tennessee, in cities, and other places across the country where men and women could not live life fully nor pursue happiness due to the effects of racial discrimination and economic deprivation. With these goals in mind, King urged those in the Temple that day to “move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge, to make America what it ought to be.”³⁸⁶

As King concluded his speech, he told his audience of the challenge and uncertainty of the future, “Well, I don't know what will happen now; we've got some difficult days ahead.”³⁸⁷ Then with fervor in his eyes, “he unloaded his heart,” as John Lewis would later write, “with words that sounded almost like a farewell.”³⁸⁸

“But it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over, and I’ve seen

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ Stanford University, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.”

³⁸⁵ Ibid. Italics added by author.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Lewis, John, and Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind*, p. 385.

the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And so I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."³⁸⁹

And with that King stumbled off the podium, falling, as if exhausted, into the arms of Reverend Ralph Abernathy.

XX. THE SPEECH IN INDIANAPOLIS (APRIL 4, 1968)

"The words, they just rang...they just chilled your body. And he did it not in a...loud, but almost in a prayerful manner"³⁹⁰

---Kennedy campaign worker John Lewis

Five years earlier at the March on Washington, minutes before King's "I Have a Dream speech," John Lewis critiqued both Kennedys for moving too slowly in regards to civil rights. After the nonviolent movement which he had helped forward began to evaporate after the climactic convention in Atlantic City, Lewis had "started identifying" with Robert Kennedy as "the only political leader" discussing the "real issues of the United States."³⁹¹ When Kennedy announced his candidacy, Lewis offered his support. The two men had begun the decade seemingly worlds apart, one a young Freedom Rider and the other the Attorney General, but they reconciled their differences and came together. On April 4, 1968, Lewis was setting up a campaign rally in a downtown black neighborhood in the inner-city of Indianapolis where Robert Kennedy was scheduled to speak later that night.

³⁸⁹ Stanford University, "I've Been to the Mountaintop."

³⁹⁰ PBS. "RFK-American Experience Transcript." PBS.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rfk/filmmore/pt.html> (accessed April 7, 2014).

³⁹¹ Schlesinger, p. 873.

This is where Lewis received the news that Dr. King had been shot and killed in Memphis, Tennessee. To Lewis, King was “like a big brother” and “a hero.”³⁹² When he initially received the news he had “no words,” simply in a state of shock.³⁹³ As his plane touched down in Indianapolis, Robert Kennedy received the news. John J. Lindsay of *Newsweek*, who was next to Kennedy on the plane, recalled that upon hearing the news Kennedy “seemed to shrink back [...] as though struck physically.”³⁹⁴ Covering his face with his hands, Kennedy said, “Oh God. When is this violence going to stop?”³⁹⁵

Several aides recommended that Kennedy not make his scheduled speech in the Indianapolis ghetto. Richard Lugar, the Republican mayor of Indianapolis, told Kennedy that it would be too dangerous to go to the area.³⁹⁶ The chief of police in Indianapolis, Winston Churchill, warned that riots were certain to erupt, saying “It’s not safe for you to go there.”³⁹⁷ John Lewis had a differing opinion, however. Lewis argued that Kennedy had to attend, saying, “You can’t have a crowd like this come and something like this happen, and send them home without anything at all. Kennedy has to speak, for his own sake and for the sake of these people.”³⁹⁸ Many in the crowd at the rally had not heard the news yet. It was up to Kennedy to decide whether to cancel the rally completely, send a statement, or go himself.

“I’m going to Seventeenth and Broadway,” Kennedy told his aide Jim Tolan who had presented him the three options, “I’m going there and that’s it, and I don’t want any

³⁹² Lewis, *Across that Bridge*, p. 112.

³⁹³ Lewis, John, and Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind*, p. 386.

³⁹⁴ Schlesinger, p. 874.

³⁹⁵ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 89.; Schlesinger, p. 874.

³⁹⁶ Palermo, p. 179.

³⁹⁷ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 90.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

police going in with me.”³⁹⁹ As he rode to the campaign site, he spoke only once, as he stared out of the window. As Kennedy rose to the impromptu stage on the windy April night, he spoke not from clever speechwriting, but rather his own experience. On stage, he would ask an aide, “Do they know about Martin Luther King?”⁴⁰⁰ The aide told him that informing the crowd was left up to him. Having declined his speechwriter’s drafts on the way to the stage, Robert Kennedy stood alone.

And “that evening,” in the words of John Lewis, “Robert Kennedy spoke from his soul.”⁴⁰¹ He began:

“I have some very sad news for all of you, and, I think, sad news for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world; and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and was killed tonight in Memphis, Tennessee. [The crowd gasped]

Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice between fellow human beings. He died in the cause of that effort. In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it’s perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in. For those of you who are black -- considering the evidence evidently is that there were white people who were responsible -- you can be filled with bitterness, and with hatred, and a desire for revenge.

We can move in that direction as a country, in greater polarization -- black people amongst blacks, and white amongst whites, filled with hatred toward one another. Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand, and to comprehend, and replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand, compassion, and love.

For those of you who are black and are tempted to [...] be filled with hatred and mistrust of the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I would only say that I can also feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man.”⁴⁰²

³⁹⁹ Kennedy recognized that for many African Americans the police were the enemy, symbolic of repression and brutality. *Ibid.*, p. 90

⁴⁰⁰ YouTube. "Robert Kennedy Announces Death of Martin Luther King, Jr.." YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MyCWV_N0EsM (accessed April 8, 2014).

⁴⁰¹ PBS. "RFK-American Experience Transcript." PBS. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rfk/filmmore/pt.html> (accessed April 7, 2014).

⁴⁰² "Robert F. Kennedy -- Statement on the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.." American Rhetoric. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rfkonmlkdeath.html> (accessed April 8, 2014).

This was something Robert Kennedy never did in public, mention the assassination of his brother. As he spoke, he groped for each word, and as John Lewis recalls, “The words, they just rang...they just chilled your body. And he did it not in a...loud, but almost in a prayerful manner.”⁴⁰³ Kennedy continued by quoting the Greek poetry, which he had studied in the aftermath of his brother’s passing:

“But we have to make an effort in the United States. We have to make an effort to understand, to get beyond, or go beyond these rather difficult times.

My favorite poem, my -- my favorite poet was Aeschylus. And he once wrote:

*Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget
falls drop by drop upon the heart,
until, in our own despair,
against our will,
comes wisdom
through the awful grace of God.”*⁴⁰⁴

Suffering had brought wisdom for Robert Kennedy. It helped humble him and instill in him a sense of common equality with all of humanity. As John Lewis would later write of the speech, “He stripped himself down. He made it personal. He made it real.”⁴⁰⁵ His life since his brother’s assassination, his time in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant and South Africa and Mississippi, pointed him in the direction of the real cause of Martin Luther King, namely “love and justice between fellow human beings.” Kennedy and King had united as opponents of the Vietnam War in 1967 for those very reasons. The men shared as Andrew Young would later say “a distant camaraderie which needed no formal tie or physical link---a genuine spiritual brotherhood which leaped

⁴⁰³ PBS. "RFK-American Experience Transcript." PBS.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rfk/filmmore/pt.html> (accessed April 7, 2014).

⁴⁰⁴ "Robert F. Kennedy -- Statement on the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.." American Rhetoric. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rfkonmlkdeath.html> (accessed April 8, 2014).

⁴⁰⁵ Lewis, John, and Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind*, p. 386.

across the widest chasms of our time.”⁴⁰⁶ And now after the loss of King, Robert Kennedy pointed the country in the direction to which they had come. He concluded his speech in Indianapolis with a prescription directly in line with the life of Dr. King:

“ What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black.

So I ask you tonight to return home, to say a prayer for the family of Martin Luther King [...] but more importantly to say a prayer for our own country, which all of us love -- a prayer for understanding and that compassion of which I spoke.

We can do well in this country. We will have difficult times. We've had difficult times in the past, but we -- and we will have difficult times in the future. It is not the end of violence; it is not the end of lawlessness; and it's not the end of disorder.

But the vast majority of white people and the vast majority of black people in this country want to live together, want to improve the quality of our life, and want justice for all human beings that abide in our land.

And let's dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world. Let us dedicate ourselves to that, and say a prayer for our country and for our people.”⁴⁰⁷

The speech was, what aide Fred Dutton called, “pure Bob Kennedy.”⁴⁰⁸ The people felt that realness and the speech resonated with the crowd. Even a group of young black militants, the Ten Percenters, who had come to the rally to incite a riot, felt the impact of the speech. As one militant would say in an interview a month later, “We went there for trouble, after he [Kennedy] spoke we couldn't get nowhere.”⁴⁰⁹ Another in the crowd that night would confirm the militant's view saying, “The black power guys didn't

⁴⁰⁶ Schlesinger, p. 782.

⁴⁰⁷ "Robert F. Kennedy -- Statement on the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.." American Rhetoric. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rfkonmlkdeath.html> (accessed April 8, 2014).

⁴⁰⁸ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 97.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

get no place after the man speak. [Sic]⁴¹⁰ While riots took place in 110 cities across the country after the death of Dr. King, there was no violence in Indianapolis.⁴¹¹

XXI. KENNEDY IN THE AFTERMATH OF KING'S DEATH (APRIL 5-APRIL 9, 1968)

“No martyr’s cause has ever been stilled by his assassin’s bullet.”⁴¹²

---Robert Kennedy

If his brother’s assassination had been a turning point for Robert Kennedy so too was the assassination of Dr. King. Jack Newfield writes “Martin Luther King’s assassination was, I believe, a significant turning point not only in Robert Kennedy’s campaign, but also in the way he thought about himself. It altered his own consciousness.”⁴¹³ Kennedy spoke in Cleveland the day after King’s assassination on the “mindless menace of violence.”⁴¹⁴ He told his audience at the City Club of Cleveland that “No martyr’s cause has ever been stilled by his assassin’s bullet.”⁴¹⁵ It would be up to Kennedy to advance the cause for which King stood---to end violence, not just in the streets, but also the “violence of institutions” which perpetuated the great social ills of mankind.⁴¹⁶ Historian Thurston Clarke interprets the Cleveland speech, as Kennedy’s call not for “a revolution in the streets,” but rather “a revolution of the heart.”⁴¹⁷

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Schlesinger, p. 877.

⁴¹² John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum. "Cleveland Speech (4/5/1968)." Robert F. Kennedy Speeches. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/RFK-Speeches/Remarks-of-Senator-Robert-F-Kennedy-to-the-Cleveland-City-Club-Cleveland-Ohio-April-5-1968.aspx> (accessed April 8, 2014).

⁴¹³ Newfield, p. 250.

⁴¹⁴ John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum. "Cleveland Speech (4/5/1968)."

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

⁴¹⁷ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 109.

It was his evolution of views, his own revolution of the heart, coupled with the death of Dr. King which, in the words of Newfield, “enabled Kennedy to glimpse the deeper roots of America’s internal disease, and to imagine himself as the possible healer of that disease.”⁴¹⁸ When he flew from Cleveland to Washington, Kennedy saw the symptoms of the disease that afflicted America. The Capitol was under a blanket of smoke while army trucks encircled the White House. Kennedy asked the pilot to circle the city again before he said, “I think I can do something with these people.”⁴¹⁹

As Stokely Carmichael, the Black Power advocate, told looters to go get their guns on the street corners of Washington, Robert Kennedy reluctantly went home, following the advice of his aides. Two days later, Robert and Ethel Kennedy entered the riot zone to attend the Palm Sunday Service at New Bethel Baptist Church, where their friend and movement leader Walter Fauntroy was pastor.⁴²⁰ Carmichael was also in the congregation, and as historian Thurston Clarke speculated, “probably carrying [his] gun this morning.”⁴²¹ After the service, Robert Kennedy stood at the door with Reverend Fauntroy, shaking hands with the congregation while asking Fauntroy about the riot devastated neighborhood which surrounded them. Fauntroy told Kennedy, “Let me show you,” before Kennedy, Ethel, Fauntroy and a small group walked through the riot torn streets.

⁴¹⁸ Newfield, p. 250.

⁴¹⁹ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 113.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*

Fauntroy recalls “the stench of burning wood and broken glass were all over the place.”⁴²² As they walked through the streets, people cheered Kennedy and an impromptu crowd gathered behind them. When the troops on patrol saw this crowd from a distance, they put their gas masks on and pointed their guns. As Fauntroy recollects, it was only when “they saw it was Bobby Kennedy [that] they took off their masks and let us through. [The troops] looked awfully relieved.”⁴²³ When Kennedy stopped in one of the few grocery stores that remained open, a woman stared at him before asking, “Is that you? [...] I knew you’d be the first to come here, darling.”⁴²⁴ From his days in Washington as Attorney General, visiting students at Cardozo High, Kennedy had built a reputation in the Washington black community.⁴²⁵ When he walked through the streets, Kennedy was not simply a political figure, or just an icon, but he was someone who had been there before. Kennedy had shown that he cared and this is why people looked to him to lead. What exactly Kennedy should do was still to be determined.

At the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Atlanta on April 8, the night before King’s funeral, Robert Kennedy met with civil rights leaders. The leaders, including James Bevel and Andrew Young, were, in Young’s words, “angry and bitter and grieving” and “decided to take it out on [Kennedy].”⁴²⁶ Harry Belafonte, who had been at the meeting with James Baldwin and Robert Kennedy five years earlier, was also there, but Kennedy was a changed man.⁴²⁷ As Young recalls, “I was impressed with the way he was reacting. He listened while we blew off steam. But I mean, he wasn’t upset. He just handled himself

⁴²² Stein, p. 261.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 114.

⁴²⁵ Cardozo High School is less than one mile away from New Bethel Baptist Church.

⁴²⁶ Stein, p. 259.

⁴²⁷ Lewis, John, and Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind*, p. 390.

very well.”⁴²⁸ Instead of telling the leaders what he had done like he did at the Baldwin meeting, John Lewis recalls Kennedy asking the leaders, “What *should* I do?”⁴²⁹

Kennedy also did not want to make the funeral a political event, telling the group, “I didn’t come here to discuss politics. That would be in the worst taste.”⁴³⁰ Some were angered by Kennedy’s refusal to talk politics at the funeral, but as Kennedy told them “I just came to pay a tribute to a man that I had a lot of respect for.”⁴³¹ As men, Kennedy and King were never that close in life, but their paths were inexorably linked. King had moved both Kennedys, but especially Robert. That evening Kennedy concluded by telling the group, “If I get elected, I’ll do my best,” as John Lewis recalls, before telling the men, “I think it’s time for us to go to bed, get some sleep, we have to bury our leader tomorrow.”⁴³² As others went off to bed, at about three o’clock in the morning, John Lewis took Robert and Ethel Kennedy to see King’s body at Ebenezer Baptist Church.⁴³³ The Kennedys knelt before the casket and prayed.

At the funeral the next day, Robert Kennedy sat near Charles Evers, as Reverend Ralph Abernathy pronounced the day “one of the darkest hours in the history of the black people of this nation, one of the darkest hours in the history of all mankind.”⁴³⁴ From Ebenezer, those at the funeral took one last march with King, as his body was pulled by a mule-drawn wagon to Morehouse College, where a second service was to take place. In

⁴²⁸ Stein, p. 260.

⁴²⁹ Lewis, John, and Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind*, p. 390.

⁴³⁰ Stein, p. 260.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*

⁴³² Lewis, John. Interview by author. Personal interview. Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C., October 8, 2013.

⁴³³ Lewis, John, and Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind*, p. 391.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*

the blazing heat, Kennedy walked the several miles alongside with some 50,000 people.⁴³⁵ Walking behind him was Harris Wofford, the former special assistant to President Kennedy on Civil Rights, who noted that Kennedy was “the person at the center of attention [...] on the march.”⁴³⁶ Wofford compared the Senator to “a lightning rod in an electric storm: black leaders headed for him, children were drawn to him, people along the way reached out to touch him.”⁴³⁷ While the marchers, black and white, walked arm in arm, they sang. “We Shall Overcome,” “This Little Light of Mine” and “Keep your Eyes on the Prize” highlighted the march, but amidst the songs, as former freedom rider John Maguire noticed, only two people were constantly applauded, the singer Sammy Davis Jr. and Robert Kennedy.⁴³⁸

On the march, Harris Wofford discovered that “Robert Kennedy had emerged as the one point, the central person, around whom black and white, young and old civil rights workers were ready to rally.”⁴³⁹ As John Lewis began to emerge from his period of mourning, “it was with the thought that, Well, we still have Bobby Kennedy. We still have hope.”⁴⁴⁰ Hosea Williams, who with Lewis led the march over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, said after the death of Dr. King, “I guess the thing that kept us going was that maybe Bobby Kennedy would come up with some answers for this country.”⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁵ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 131; Lewis, John, and Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind*, p. 392.

⁴³⁶ Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings*, p. 226.

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

⁴³⁸ Stein, pp. 258-259.

⁴³⁹ Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings*, p. 227.

⁴⁴⁰ Lewis, John, and Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind*, p. 392.

⁴⁴¹ Stein, p. 261.

For John Lewis, Kennedy and his campaign were the last hope. As Lewis would later write, “I saw [the campaign] as the final extension of the movement.”⁴⁴²

XXII: INDIANA---ONWARD (APRIL 9-MAY 7, 1968)

“He spoke from the heart, and the sincerity and compassion wrapped around every word reached out and pulled that audience to its feet”⁴⁴³

---Kennedy campaign aide John Bartlow Martin

After the funeral of Dr. King, Kennedy pressed onward, returning to Indiana to campaign. With the country on edge after the death of Dr. King, many aides advised Kennedy to stay away from issues of race and poverty in Indiana. Kennedy did not yield, however, and as one of those aides John Bartlow Martin recalls,

“He went yammering around Indiana about the poor whites of Appalachia and the starving Indians who committed suicide on the reservations and the jobless Negroes in the distant great cities, and half of the Hoosiers didn’t have any idea what he was talking about; but he plodded ahead stubbornly making them listen, maybe even making some of them care, by the sure power of his own caring. Indiana people are not generous nor sympathetic; they are hard and hard-hearted, not warm and generous; but he must have touched something in them, pushed a button somewhere. He alone did it.”⁴⁴⁴

In downtown Gary, to a primarily black audience, Kennedy finished a dull prepared speech by speaking from the heart, saying that, “The violent youth of the ghetto is not simply protesting his tradition, but making a destructive and self-defeating attempt to assert his own worth and dignity as a human being.”⁴⁴⁵ On the way to the airport, Kennedy’s motorcade was chased by hosts of children running or riding their bikes hurriedly alongside Kennedy’s car. When Kennedy noticed a boy of about ten, carrying

⁴⁴² Lewis, John, and Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind*, p. 393.

⁴⁴³ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 181.

⁴⁴⁴ Thomas, p. 370.

⁴⁴⁵ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 151.

his sister of about four, the car stopped and Kennedy's bodyguard lifted the two into the convertible, sitting them on either side of him. The boy, Michael, reached over taking his sister's head in both his hands and turned it to Kennedy, saying, "Look, here's Senator Kennedy."⁴⁴⁶ The motorcade took the children home and the children's mother served the presidential candidate iced tea on their front steps. These types of experiences were not separate from Kennedy's politics, but were interwoven in the fabric of his life.

On April 26, Kennedy spoke about medical care for the poor at the University of Indiana Medical School. After the students asked a chain of questions challenging Kennedy's views, the Senator snapped when someone asked, "Where are you going to get all the money for these federally subsidized programs you're talking about?"⁴⁴⁷ "From you!" Kennedy replied emphatically. Before continuing,

"Let me say something about the tone of these questions. I look around this room and I don't see many black faces who will become doctors. You can talk about where the money will come from. Part of civilized society is to let people go to medical school who come from the ghettos or off the Indian reservations to medical school. You are the privileged ones here. It's easy to sit back and say it's the fault of the federal government, but it's our responsibility too..."⁴⁴⁸

Kennedy turned the tide. Through his genuine concern and honest candor, he won over the students and they cheered and applauded him as he left. The same thing would happen at Purdue University, a week later, when a crowd gathered originally in "hostile disinterest" rose to its feet after Kennedy spoke about the life of a child growing up in the ghetto.⁴⁴⁹ As John Bartlow Martin recalls of the Purdue speech, "He spoke from the heart, and the sincerity and compassion wrapped around every word reached out and

⁴⁴⁶ Witcover, p. 149.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁹ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 181.

pulled that audience to its feet in a roaring, whistling, cheering, standing ovation. You knew that the audience had discovered that this was not just a politician, but a man who cared and truly believed that we could do better.”⁴⁵⁰

The crowds could sense Kennedy’s sincerity and compassion when he spoke, but also children like the boy Michael from Gary or children at an Indianapolis daycare could sense, if not even verbalize, Kennedy’s compassion. At a campaign stop in Indianapolis, children from broken homes were playing at a playground next door. The children ran over to see him and Kennedy walked into their playground. According to David Murray of the *Chicago Sun-Times*,

“Two little girls came up and put their heads against his waist and he put his hands on their heads. And suddenly it was hard to watch, because he had become in that moment the father they did not know or the elder brother that couldn’t talk to them.... The word that came on strongest as he sat and listened to the children and made a quiet remark now and then, was the word ‘compassion.’ This because---and anyone who has ever dealt with five-year-olds knows this---you can fool a lot of people in a campaign...But lonely little children don’t come up and put their heads on your lap unless you mean it.”⁴⁵¹

Kennedy’s compassion was not a limited to any one race, but bridged the most outwardly unusual gaps. Black Americans considered him their “blue eyed soul brother” while future supporters of the segregationist candidate George Wallace told reporters, “I like him. I don’t know why, but I like him.”⁴⁵² On May 7, a month after he had walked the riot torn streets of D.C., Kennedy won the Indiana primary. After Kennedy declared

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., p. 211; YouTube. "Sen. Robert F. Kennedy @ An Indianapolis Daycare-AUGMENTED." YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1uRXwGAu8k> (accessed April 8, 2014).

⁴⁵² Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 201.

victory, he told Larry O'Brien, "I've proved I can really be a leader of a broad spectrum. I can be bridge between blacks and whites without stepping back from my positions."⁴⁵³

What bridged the gap was not clever political maneuvering, but rather his own expression of the words, which he had spoken to the crowd in Indianapolis after the death of Dr. King. Kennedy told the crowd that "what we need in the United States [...] is love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black."⁴⁵⁴ In Indiana, Kennedy showed these qualities, bringing into the fold thousands of white people who in his absence would vote for George Wallace, the segregationist.⁴⁵⁵ In the Civil Rights Movement, "unity was our ultimate goal," reflects John Lewis, but "The Civil Rights Movement, above all, was a work of love."⁴⁵⁶ Without Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and through the context of a political campaign, Robert Kennedy was, in his own way, pushing forward the purpose of the Civil Rights Movement.

XXIII. OAKLAND---THE ULTIMATE TEST (MAY, 1968)

"No matter how insulting they are, they're just trying to communicate what's inside of them."⁴⁵⁷

---Robert Kennedy

In 1968, nowhere was Dr. Martin Luther King's nonviolent philosophy more needed than in Oakland, California. The Black Power movement that had swept through cities across the country crystallized in the Black Panther Party, which took root in West

⁴⁵³ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 219.

⁴⁵⁴ "Robert F. Kennedy -- Statement on the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.." American Rhetoric. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rfkonmlkdeath.html> (accessed April 8, 2014).

⁴⁵⁵ Schrag, Peter. "The Forgotten American." Ed. Chafe, William Henry, Harvard Sitkoff; In *A History of Our Time: Readings on Postwar America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983. 347-359. 359

⁴⁵⁶ Lewis, *Across that Bridge*, p. 149.

⁴⁵⁷ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 256.

Oakland in late 1966. The Panthers advocated armed self-defense and often found themselves in gun battles with the police. The most recent conflict, a ninety minute shootout on April 6, sparked by death of Dr. King, left seventeen year old Black Panther Bobby Hutton dead.⁴⁵⁸ James Baldwin, one of hundreds who attended Hutton's service, condemned the racism of the ghettos in the Bay area.⁴⁵⁹ It is safe to say that in 1968, Oakland was one of the most volatile cities in the country.

After campaigning and being beaten by Eugene McCarthy in the Oregon primary, a loss described by the *Los Angeles Times* as "a body blow," Kennedy turned his attention to California. When asked if California was now "the ultimate test" of his candidacy, Kennedy replied, "That would be very close to describing how I feel."⁴⁶⁰ In downtown Los Angeles in late May, Kennedy was again mobbed in a two hour motorcade, where his cufflinks were torn off and his shoes were taken from his feet.⁴⁶¹ Kennedy had reached the masses of people in Los Angeles, but on May 30, he would attempt to reach the most desolate in Oakland, California.

John Seigenthaler, his longtime aide who had been beaten unconscious during the Freedom Ride crisis, set up a meeting for hundreds of Bay Area black leaders and activists at the Taylor Memorial Methodist Church in West Oakland.⁴⁶² Kennedy knew what he was getting into, telling Seigenthaler, "It's going to be a very disordered

⁴⁵⁸ AP. "BLACK PANTHER CHIEF DEMANDS INDICTMENT.." *The Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 1968.

⁴⁵⁹ Baldwin, James , Ossie Davis, Elizabeth Hardwick, LeRoi Jones, Oscar Lewis, and Norman Mailer. "Police Shooting of a Oakland Negro." *The New York Times*, May 6, 1968.

⁴⁶⁰ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 240.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

⁴⁶² Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 256.

meeting... and there's going to be some anger."⁴⁶³ On the way to the event, Kennedy told the astronaut John Glenn, "This won't be a pleasant experience, John. These people have a lot of hostility towards whites and a lot of reasons for it."⁴⁶⁴ Kennedy experienced this anger before, at the Baldwin meeting, at the Bedford-Stuyvesant meeting, and at the King funeral. He knew what was coming, telling Glenn, "They're just going to tell me off, over and over. I've been through these before, and you don't do anything. You listen and try to respond thoughtfully."⁴⁶⁵ All of this could be seen as a political façade, if not for what Kennedy told Glenn next, "No matter how insulting they are, they're just trying to communicate what's inside of them."⁴⁶⁶ This statement demonstrated his understanding and his evolution regarding his views on civil rights, as he too had struggled to articulate his feelings especially in the period after his brother's passing.

The first questioner accused the government of building concentration camps for blacks, when Kennedy denied their existence, there were shouts of "We don't believe you."⁴⁶⁷ Kennedy continued to be blasted, "Why don't you just take your family fortune and redistribute it to the people?" asked another.⁴⁶⁸ Expletives flew loosely towards Kennedy, people attacked his family, and the entourage with Kennedy was harangued as well. Rafer Johnson, the Olympic decathlon champ and friend of Kennedy, apologized

⁴⁶³ Stein, p. 305.

⁴⁶⁴ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 252.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 253.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

for the assaults. To which Kennedy replied, “No, just be quiet, [...] these people have come to tell me things.”⁴⁶⁹

Curtis Lee Baker, a community organizer who the people called “Black Jesus,” told Kennedy, “Look, man, I don’t want to hear none of your [stuff]! What the [expletive] are you going to do, boy....”⁴⁷⁰ Baker then told Kennedy that in order to secure the vote he would have to put up a black bank and put his family money in it. Kennedy simply listened, as Baker would later say, “[Kennedy] was being questioned by what I’m concerned is the sharpest black cat in the world [...] the cat that been to hell and back.”⁴⁷¹ Many of the Kennedy aides thought that was where the meeting had gone, to hell, and the meeting was nearly two hours in. As Willie Brown, the assemblyman running the meeting, called for the last question, Kennedy said, “You know there are two other people who have their hands up. Could I answer those questions [too]?”⁴⁷² Brown was impressed, “When I wanted to let him out of that trap, he didn’t want to escape from it.”⁴⁷³ Kennedy answered the questions and left for the night. And thus, the “rough, gut-cutting meeting,” as described by Seigenthaler, ended.⁴⁷⁴

After leaving Kennedy asked his aides Seigenthaler and Glenn what they thought of the meeting. While Glenn just shook his head in despair, Kennedy told his aides, “Well, I am glad I went. I feel better because... [now] they know that, while there’s nobody that’s going to solve their problems overnight, that I’ll at least be here to listen

⁴⁶⁹ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 253.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ Stein, p. 306.

⁴⁷² Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 254.

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁴ Stein, p. 305.

and that I won't make any false promises to them."⁴⁷⁵ Kennedy concluded his eighteen hour day in his hotel in San Francisco, eating ice cream, and insisting that he was very glad he had gone to Oakland. This instance demonstrates Kennedy's views on civil rights in the days before his passing: realizing that remedying the structures built by white supremacy would be difficult, but he would listen patiently, continue to work for change, and personally maintain his commitment to stand up for "the Other America."

The next day, Kennedy went back to Oakland to a rally in a city park. As Kennedy aide Fred Dutton recalls, "The crowd was almost all black, and there was Black Jesus [...] telling everyone who would listen what a great man Kennedy was."⁴⁷⁶ Black Jesus spread the word that he wanted Kennedy "treated with the utmost respect."⁴⁷⁷ Kennedy had won over even "Black Jesus," who had cursed him the day before. The crowd cheered wildly, silencing the Black Panthers shouts of "Free Huey!"⁴⁷⁸ The community organizer Reverend Héctor López recalls that the fervor was so great that when Kennedy went to leave "he couldn't go anywhere!"⁴⁷⁹ Kennedy's car was surrounded by seven thousand people, López estimates, all reaching out to touch Kennedy. The car was immobile until the Black Panthers who had originally come to disrupt the rally, according to López, "got out in front of the car and started shoving people aside so the car could carry on."⁴⁸⁰ Kennedy had turned the tide even with the Black Panthers.

⁴⁷⁵ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 254.

⁴⁷⁶ Stein, p. 307.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 308. Huey P. Newton was one of the leaders of the Black Panther Party.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

What moved the Panthers? Was it something Kennedy said? Was it Kennedy “magic”? The community organizer Reverend Héctor López offered a clearer answer, “No one who has run for office, other than a city councilman of Oakland, has ever come into West Oakland *or* East Oakland to talk to the people. And, you know, politicians don’t understand this. I guess they never will.”⁴⁸¹ Kennedy being there showed that he cared. Through listening and not reacting, he showed that he cared. Through being honest and not making false promises, he showed that he cared. Through coming back after being verbally assaulted, Kennedy showed that he cared. All of this registered with those in the crowd that day. As Black Jesus rode in Kennedy’s car to San Francisco, Kennedy told him, “I won’t forget you [...] I won’t let you down... or your people.”⁴⁸² Robert Kennedy would not get the chance to make good on his promise to or test his ideas on a national level. He had no definite political panacea to the urban crisis, but during his campaign he stood by his political beliefs through his personal example.

XXIV. LOS ANGELES---“SOMETHING LOOSE IN THE COUNTRY” (JUNE 1968)

“I know that there will be an attempt on my life sooner or later. Not so much for political reasons, but through contagion [...]”⁴⁸³

---Robert Kennedy

The night after Dr. King’s assassination, Robert Kennedy told his aides, “You know, that fellow, Harvey Lee Oswald—whatever his name is---set something loose in this country.”⁴⁸⁴ His brother’s assassination in November of 1963 might have been the point where hatred was most evident for him. Though for many in the movement,

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

⁴⁸² Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 257.

⁴⁸³ Ibid., p. 115.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 106.

including John Lewis, the “season of darkness for the movement” began in September of 1963 when four little girls were killed in Sunday school after the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham.⁴⁸⁵ After the Sixteenth Street Church bombing, Robert Kennedy blamed political and business leaders and newspapers for “in the last analysis, [...] creat[ing] the climate that made those kinds of actions possible. Otherwise they would never have occurred.”⁴⁸⁶

The same could be said of the climate in 1968. Andrew Young would say ten years later, “I think now that Dr. King’s assassination was directly related to the fear that officialdom had of his bringing large numbers of poor people to the nation’s capital, demanding some response from them... [At the time] I didn’t see the Poor People’s Campaign as the threat to Washington and the Establishment that I now see it was.”⁴⁸⁷ With Robert Kennedy embracing King’s causes, as Kennedy told Joan Braden on the night of King’s assassination, “It could have been me.”⁴⁸⁸ When King was assassinated, the movement put their greatest hopes in Robert Kennedy to lead them forward. As King’s aide, Hosea Williams recalls, “We kept telling ourselves that God has someone who’s going to along to lead us out of the land of Egypt, so to speak.”⁴⁸⁹ As the hopes shifted from King to Kennedy, so too did the threat of assassination. Williams recalls, “I remember telling [Kennedy] he had a chance to be a prophet. But prophets get shot.”⁴⁹⁰

During the campaign, the threat to Kennedy’s life was constant. Everyone who traveled with him knew this. Kennedy had a heightened awareness of this, especially

⁴⁸⁵ Lewis, John, and Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind*, p. 227.

⁴⁸⁶ Kennedy, Robert F., Edwin O. Guthman, and Jeffrey Shulman. *Robert Kennedy, In his Own Words.*, p. 230.

⁴⁸⁷ Schlesinger, p. 873.

⁴⁸⁸ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 115.

⁴⁸⁹ Stein, p. 261.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

after the death of Dr. King, telling Walter Fauntroy as they walked through the riot torn streets of D.C., “I’m afraid there are guns between me and the White House.”⁴⁹¹ While Kennedy could walk safely through the toughest neighborhoods of Indianapolis, D.C., or Oakland, the hatred often came from clandestine and influential sources. For instance, the FBI’s Clyde Tolson, Director J. Edgar Hoover’s right hand man, said of Kennedy in 1968, “I hope someone shoots and kills that [S.O.B.]”⁴⁹² Even at a dinner party in New York City, Harris Wofford found “more hostility to Robert Kennedy, among highly literate, usually liberal people, than we had imagined outside of extremist hate groups.”⁴⁹³ Wofford writes of the period, “There was hate all around, to an extent I had not known before.”⁴⁹⁴ Kennedy was cognizant of the climate of hatred, telling author Romain Gary in May of 1968, “I know that there will be an attempt on my life sooner or later. Not so much for political reasons, but through contagion [...]”⁴⁹⁵

A strong believer in fate, Robert Kennedy felt helpless against the hatred. He would tell author Romain Gary, “There is no way to protect a candidate during this campaign. You must give yourself to the crowd, and from then on take your chances.”⁴⁹⁶ Kennedy did not think he had great chances either. To Warren Rogers of *Look* magazine Kennedy said, “[...] doing anything in public life today is Russian roulette.”⁴⁹⁷ As Arthur Schlesinger Jr. articulates, “Man against fate was very much his sense of life.”⁴⁹⁸ When people broached the threat of assassination to him, Kennedy would often reply,

⁴⁹¹ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 115.

⁴⁹² Schlesinger, p. 808.

⁴⁹³ Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings*, p. 426.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 115.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 118.

⁴⁹⁸ Stein, p. 146.

“Whatever happens, happens.”⁴⁹⁹ As Schlesinger concludes, “There was a sense of fatality about it all.”⁵⁰⁰

On June 4, 1968, victory would preface fatality. On that day, Robert Kennedy won the California Presidential Primary. It was a triumphant victory, not just because of the Presidential implications, but because of what it meant for Kennedy personally. Speaking on the phone to JFK aide, Kenny O’ Donnell, moments after winning, Kennedy said, “I think I may [win the nomination] [...] I feel now for the first time that I’ve shaken off the shadow of my brother. I feel I made it on my own.”⁵⁰¹ The atmosphere was ecstatic at the Ambassador Hotel, Kennedy’s campaign headquarters. Kennedy told his aides in the room across the hall that he would be right back; he just needed to make an acceptance speech downstairs. John Lewis recalls “he looked as if he could have floated out of the room. He was in such wonderful spirits.”⁵⁰²

As Kennedy stepped to the podium for what would be the final time, he, in essence, summed up his own personal revolution and spoke to the heart of America saying,

“What I think is quite clear [is] that we can work together in the last analysis, and that what has been going on within the United States over a period of the last three years — the division, the violence, the disenchantment with our society; the divisions, whether it’s between blacks and whites, between the poor and the more affluent, or between age groups, or on the war in Vietnam — is that we can start to work together. We are a great country, an unselfish country, and a compassionate country. I intend to make that my basis for running.”⁵⁰³

Over the period of the last five years, Robert Kennedy finally understood the human reality of the movement, searched for solutions, tested ideas, and finally stood for

⁴⁹⁹ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 118.

⁵⁰⁰ Stein, p. 146.

⁵⁰¹ Clarke, *The Last Campaign*, p. 269.

⁵⁰² Lewis, John, and Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind*, p. 395.

⁵⁰³ Witcover, p. 263.

civil rights for all Americans, bridging the seemingly insurmountable gaps of which he spoke. He spoke of his own conception of the values of the country, unselfishness and compassion. For Kennedy, these values were equated with the nation's greatness. Kennedy told the nation that "we can start to work together," but he would never get the chance to put his stand into practice. As he stepped down from the podium to head through the kitchen of the hotel, Kennedy told the crowd, "My thanks to all of you, and now it's on to Chicago and let's win there."⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰⁴ YouTube. "RFK Part 2 Last Speech Ambassador Hotel." YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ae7H0aWFWNY> (accessed April 8, 2014).

CONCLUSION

“You can kill a man, but the truth that he stood for will never die.”⁵⁰⁵

---Congressman John Lewis

Robert Kennedy was shot dead by twenty-four year old Palestinian Sirhan Sirhan as he walked through the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel the night he won the California Presidential Primary. He would not get the chance to go on to Chicago.

The Democratic National Convention in Chicago would epitomize the turmoil and violence felt in the period of the previous five years. On August 28, 1968, exactly five years after the peaceful protest of the March on Washington, Chicago police beat protesters after their arrest and attacked reporters on the streets outside the convention hall.⁵⁰⁶ Inside the convention hall, according to many observers, Chicago mayor Richard Daley shouted anti-Semitic obscenities at Connecticut Governor Abraham Ribicoff.⁵⁰⁷ Hubert Humphrey, the sitting Vice President, accepted the nomination for President even as tear gas rose into his hotel room from the police on the street. Among those arrested in Chicago was Harris Wofford, who from his jail cell “had the sense that the curtain was finally coming down on the decade of Martin King and John and Robert Kennedy.”⁵⁰⁸ It would be Richard Nixon, employing a strategy of polarization and resentment, who would be elected President in 1968.

⁵⁰⁵ Lewis, *Across That Bridge*, p. 114.

⁵⁰⁶ Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings*, p. 427

⁵⁰⁷ Kurlansky, Mark. *1968: The Year that Rocked the World*. New York: Ballantine, 2004. *Google Books*. Web. 08 Mar. 2014, p. 283.

⁵⁰⁸ Wofford, *Of Kennedys and Kings*, p. 427.

"[...] and now it's on to Chicago and let's win there," were Kennedy's last public words.⁵⁰⁹ The inspirational political victory would not come in 1968; a different one, postponed forty years, would come in 2008. At Grant Park in Chicago, where protestors had been beaten forty years earlier during the Democratic National Convention, Barack Obama stepped to the stage to accept victory in the Presidential election, becoming the nation's first African American President. With civil rights leader and Robert Kennedy campaign aide, John Lewis (a United States Congressman) in the crowd at a Chicago rally, Obama spoke to the fulfillment of the American ideals that had been set forth in the Declaration.⁵¹⁰ Obama, in essence, spoke to the values of the country saying, "If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer."⁵¹¹

While an answer to whether "the dream of our founders is alive in our time" may have come politically on November 4, 2008, still Robert Kennedy's last public words echo in a larger sense, *"[...] and now it's on to Chicago and let's win there."* The question arises whether we, as a nation, have "won" in Chicago and in our other inner cities like Robert Kennedy desired. By the end of his life, Robert Kennedy stood with and for those who were oppressed by the mainstream society. Senator Harris Wofford remarking on Robert Kennedy's moral conviction asked rhetorically, "who in our body

⁵⁰⁹ YouTube. "RFK Part 2 Last Speech Ambassador Hotel." YouTube.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ae7H0aWFWNY> (accessed April 8, 2014).

⁵¹⁰ Goduti, Philip A. *Robert F. Kennedy and The Shaping of Civil Rights, 1960-1964*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2012, p. 224.

⁵¹¹ Cable News Network. "Obama Transcript." CNN.

<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/11/04/obama.transcript/> (accessed April 8, 2014).

politic right now is like Robert Kennedy?”⁵¹² Few politicians on a national level are bringing these domestic issues of race and peace and poverty to the fore as Robert Kennedy did in 1968. Robert Kennedy did not necessarily have the answers, but he was willing to investigate the questions and stand with those who still suffered.

In Chicago, like so many of our major cities, there is no victory when Americans kids do not graduate from high school. In 2013, Chicago Public Schools posted its highest graduation rate ever. The rate was 63%.⁵¹³ There is no victory when people live in poverty. In 2011, Chicago’s poverty rate was 23.7%; meaning over 600,000 Americans were living in poverty.⁵¹⁴ And maybe most importantly, there is no victory when loved ones are murdered on our city streets. In 2013, Chicago’s homicides were at their lowest rate since 1965. Still in 2013, 415 Americans were killed.⁵¹⁵ To say that there has not been great change would be a lie, but to simply accept these disturbing figures as permanent realities would be even more troubling. It will take an unprecedented, determined, and continued battle to defeat these varying problems, not only in Chicago, but in cities and other places across the country.

Robert Kennedy gained the faith of many African Americans through his life and actions.⁵¹⁶ Historian Taylor Branch writes that “The Baldwin meeting made Robert

⁵¹² Wofford, Harris. Interview by author. Personal interview. Wofford Residence, Washington, D.C., November 15, 2013.

⁵¹³ AP. "CPS Graduation Rate Rises To 60.6 Percent." NBC Chicago.

<http://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/CPS-Schools-158453195.html> (accessed March 17, 2014).

⁵¹⁴ Chicago Jobs Council. "Poverty." WIRE. <http://wire.cjc.net/related-data/poverty/> (accessed March 17, 2014).

⁵¹⁵ Erbenraut, Joseph. "Chicago Homicides Down Drastically In 2013 To Fewest Murders Since 1965, Police Say." The Huffington Post. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/02/chicago-homicides-down-dr_n_4531328.html (accessed March 17, 2014).

⁵¹⁶ Roy Wilkins would write an editorial that would be published in both the *L.A. Times* and *Baltimore Afro-American* just days after Kennedy’s death. Wilkins would write of Kennedy, “I suggest, also, that [his love for minorities] was because he saw the oneness of humanity. The ambitions he had for his children

Kennedy a pioneer in the raw, interracial encounters of the 1960s.”⁵¹⁷ Beginning in May of 1963, Robert Kennedy started to *understand* civil rights issues, to live and experience what he spoke of, to a degree. As John Lewis recalls though, “I think he was somewhat living in the shadow of his brother.”⁵¹⁸ It would be the period of *searching* for solutions to “civil rights problems” after his brother’s passing that deepened his understanding. When Kennedy returned from South Africa, he began *testing* his ideas, differing from the Johnson policies in the period leading up to the 1968 Presidential election. This period of testing prepared him to take a moral *stand* for civil rights issues during the 1968 campaign, a stand which resonated with those who saw him.

People recognized this change. Dr. Kenneth Clark, present at the 1963 Baldwin meeting, would say of Kennedy in 1967, “You know, it is possible for human beings to grow. This man has grown.”⁵¹⁹ As aide Peter Edelman acknowledged, “You know, the Kennedy of 1964 could get into a big shouting match with James Baldwin, but the Kennedy of 1968 was a much, much different customer about those kinds of things. He had been, he had seen, he had felt and he had touched.”⁵²⁰ As John Lewis explains, “[Robert Kennedy] emerged [from despair] as someone who was anchored in his own self and you saw it during the campaign in 1968.”⁵²¹ Others could sense this growth of

were one with the ambitions that ghetto residents have for theirs.” Wilkins, Roy. “Some Reasons Robert Kennedy Captured Hearts of Negroes.” *Los Angeles Times*, June 17, 1968.

Wilkins, Roy . “Some Reasons Robert Kennedy Captured Hearts of Negroes.” *Los Angeles Times*, June 17, 1968.

⁵¹⁷ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, p. 813.

⁵¹⁸ Lewis, John. Interview by author. Personal interview. Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C., October 8, 2013.

⁵¹⁹ Schlesinger, p. 790.

⁵²⁰ Edelman, Peter B. Interview by Larry J. Hackman. “Peter B. Edelman Oral History Interview---RFK #8” 3/13/1974. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Web. 20 Jan. 2013. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/RFKOH-PBE-03.aspx>, p. 27-28

⁵²¹ Lewis, John. Interview by author. Personal interview. Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C., October 8, 2013.

compassion even if the connection was not audible, as a ghetto youth told psychiatrist Robert Coles, “Kennedy.... *is* on our side. We know it. He doesn’t have to say a word.”⁵²² As Coles pontificates, this connection “was in his eyes. It was in a gesture. And [others] felt he could suffer with them and pick up their suffering; and yet appreciate them as equals.”⁵²³

Through his experiences, Kennedy humbled himself and came to feel his equality with others. He had the ability to empathize and others felt that genuineness. As Kwesi Mfume, just a nineteen year old from Baltimore at the time Robert Kennedy was assassinated, remembers, “The one thing that Bobby Kennedy emphasized for me at that time was the belief that every person could make a difference [and] that resonated all the way down to the smallest corner in the ghettos of Baltimore.”⁵²⁴ As the train carrying Kennedy’s body passed through Baltimore, hundreds of people, who had waited for hours, lined the track and with joined hands sang “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” as the train pulled into the station.⁵²⁵

While on the funeral train, Lucy Jarvis remembered Robert Kennedy singing “We Shall Overcome” with blacks two years before in South Africa and thought, “My God, what kind of an effect can Bobby’s death have on people like this all over the world?”⁵²⁶

While Robert Kennedy attempted to reconcile the differences of the races, the

⁵²² Schlesinger, p. 799.

⁵²³ Ibid.

⁵²⁴ Mfume would later become the President of the NAACP, but in 1968 he was living in Baltimore taking GED classes and working at a bakery part time. Brewington, Kelly. "From RFK, A Living Legacy." The Baltimore Sun. http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2008-06-06/news/0806060007_1_rfk-assassination-kathleen-kennedy-townsend-robert-kennedy/2 (accessed March 28, 2014).

⁵²⁵ 103 years earlier, a crowd had sung the same song in Baltimore as the assassinated President Abraham Lincoln’s funeral train passed through the city. Schlesinger, p. 2; Eppridge, Bill. *A Time it Was: Bobby Kennedy in the Sixties*. New York: Abrams, 2008, p. 181.

⁵²⁶ Stein, p. 156.

background of Kennedy's assassin Sirhan Sirhan is demonstrative of another fracture--- the fracture in the Middle East. According to Sirhan, a Palestinian, he shot Kennedy for "his sole support of Israel."⁵²⁷ Kennedy's assassination points to the divide in the Middle East. As Alan Dershowitz, a Harvard law professor, explicates, "It was in some ways the beginning of Islamic terrorism in America. It was the first shot. A lot of us didn't recognize it at the time."⁵²⁸

The situation between Arab and Jew, in some ways, parallels the course between the black and white in America. After traveling to the Middle East as a young man, Robert Kennedy remarked of the situation, "The loathing and hatred between Arab and Jew was an all-consuming thing. It was impossible in those days to talk to any representative of either side without becoming immediately aware that every person on both sides had been caught up in the conflict. Men had lost their reason."⁵²⁹ Despite his support of Israel, Kennedy would say a year before his passing, "Let us hold out our hand of friendship to the Arab people---so long living in poverty and disease and misery."⁵³⁰ At least in word, Kennedy made an attempt to dissolve the hostility. Kennedy's evolving views on civil rights at home points the way for the future of a civil rights movement on an international scale, a revolution for individual dignity that must come.

⁵²⁷ AP. "Sirhan Felt Betrayed by Kennedy." The New York Times. <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/02/20/us/sirhan-felt-betrayed-by-kennedy.html> (accessed March 8, 2014).

⁵²⁸ Issenberg, Sasha. "RFK's Death Now Viewed as First Case of Mideast Violence Exported to U.S." The San Diego Union-Tribune. http://www.utsandiego.com/uniontrib/20080608/news_1n8rfk.html (accessed March 8, 2014).

⁵²⁹ Ross, Douglas. *Robert F. Kennedy: Apostle of Change*. New York: Trident Press, 1968, p. 454.

⁵³⁰ Ross, p. 463.

“I think Robert Kennedy would say today, if you believe in something, that is so right, so just, so necessary, you have to live it, you have to do something,” says Lewis.⁵³¹ Robert Kennedy had become a man increasingly anchored in his own self and this realization is what moved people. This anchor from his own life experiences is what gave him conviction, strength, and determination. As Harris Wofford recalls of Robert Kennedy at the time of his assassination, “He was charged with determination to make radical change, not the radical of the left, but radical on things that needed that passion to see it through.”⁵³²

In an age in which politics are more divided than ever before, Congressman John Lewis points the way for politicians to pick up Kennedy’s legacy, “I think other politicians should not just follow him [...] to get votes, but do it because you feel it. If you feel it then you have to show some signs.”⁵³³ Robert Kennedy showed signs of what he said. He spent time with the disenfranchised. As Senator Jacob K. Javits of New York said in his eulogy for Kennedy on the Senate floor,

“To put it in very blunt terms, he had deep concern for the people whom our society, notwithstanding its many blessings—and it does have them—had disfranchised in terms of opportunity and in terms of the legacy to which we feel all Americans are entitled. He was not the only man in public life to have this feeling in his heart. But in my judgment, it burned in him more brightly than in any other man I have ever known.”⁵³⁴

⁵³¹ Lewis, John. Interview by author. Personal interview. Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C., October 8, 2013.

⁵³² Wofford, Harris. Interview by author. Personal interview. Wofford Residence, Washington, D.C., November 15, 2013.

⁵³³ A testament to this fact, John Lewis was arrested by Capitol Police for protesting at an Immigration Rally just a few hours after I conducted my interview with him. Lewis, John. Interview by author. Personal interview. Cannon House Office Building, Washington, D.C., October 8, 2013.

⁵³⁴ Glenn, John. Interview by Roberta Greene. Personal interview. New York, NY, June 30, 1969, John Glenn Oral History Interview--RFK #2, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Archives/RFKOH-JHG-02.aspx>, p. 26; As John Lewis said in another way during my interview with him, “[Robert Kennedy] embraced the goodness of America and the goodness of the people.” Lewis Interview.

Robert Kennedy left his example, he finished his course, but the work for civil rights continues. As Coretta Scott King remarked after Robert Kennedy's passing, "[...] I have a strong feeling—that there *has* to be a force in the universe working for good. Bobby Kennedy was doing a lot of good in this world for a lot of people...like my husband... and perhaps the greater good goes on after him."⁵³⁵ To this generation, Dr. Martin Luther King's words from his last public speech still apply, "We have an opportunity to make America a better nation."⁵³⁶

America must bring all into the fold and realize our equality with one another, no matter an individual's race, wealth, education, or where they live. As Robert Kennedy wrote in his 1967 book *To Seek A Newer World*, "Our answer is the world's hope."⁵³⁷ To those still suffering in America and throughout the world due to the effects of racism and slavery, domination and imperialism, and discrimination and injustice, Martin Luther King's words might be read again, "America you have strayed away. You've trampled over [...] your brethren. All men are created equal. Not some men. Not white men. All men. America, rise up and come home."⁵³⁸

⁵³⁵ Stein, p. 350

⁵³⁶ Stanford University, "I've Been to the Mountaintop."

⁵³⁷ Kennedy, *To Seek A Newer World*, p. 230.

⁵³⁸ "Men" being used here as the generic term for mankind. Schumach, Murray. "Martin Luther King Jr.: Leader of Millions in Nonviolent Drive for Racial Justice." *The New York Times*, April 5, 1968. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/118206394> (accessed March 25, 2014).

Critical Bibliographical Note

I relied on an interview with Congressman John Lewis and an interview with Senator Harris Wofford in the creation of this thesis. Both men were closely connected to the story I told, but I utilized their words primarily for perspective and then to corroborate and enliven the existing written record.

The archival material from the JFK Library enabled me to gain direct access to Kennedy's words and speeches. This enabled me to examine what was left out of the secondary literature and helped me formulate my own views on the topic. The oral histories I examined from the library were composed soon after events took place, increasing their reliability. In many cases, these sources were often close to the Kennedy family, increasing their potential biases.

I relied also on newspaper articles written from the time period. While each newspaper is certain to have its own perspective, I used both mainstream newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and the black press such as *The Chicago Defender* and *The New York Amsterdam News*. I mainly selected quotes from the articles to show the speaker's perspective, not the author. Several websites were also used to compile this work. While this is not necessarily best historical practice, the websites were used in order to quickly access the written word, in either corroboration or expansion upon the secondary literature I reviewed.

The secondary literature on the Civil Rights Movement and on Robert Kennedy is vast. I tried to choose sources that would give me a good cross section of both the man and the movement. I relied heavily on Arthur Schlesinger's work *Robert Kennedy and His Times* in part because he is the only historian to have complete or near complete access to all of Robert Kennedy's papers. I also relied heavily on Taylor Branch's seminal series *America in the King Years*, Branch's work pervades the field of Civil Rights history. Branch's latest compilation, *The King Years*, condenses the history of the Civil Rights Movement into a more manageable format.

Finally, the memoirs of John Lewis, Harris Wofford, and Jack Newfield all have their partialities because all three men knew and worked with Robert Kennedy. Admittedly, I lean on these sources heavily, but all three offer unique perspectives because of their interrelation between Kennedy and the movement. Realizing the individual's perspective at a particular time and seeing how their views of Robert Kennedy changed over time was crucial in helping to formulate my thesis.

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