

John Kennedy and Civil Rights

John F Kennedy is not automatically associated with civil rights issues as Kennedy's presidency is more famed for the Cuban Missile Crisis and issues surrounding the Cold War. Also, no obvious civil rights legislation was signed by Kennedy. However, Kennedy did have a major input into civil rights history - though posthumously.



JFK with Lyndon Johnson

John Kennedy came from a rich and privileged Irish-American family. Even so, the family had to leave Boston, the city they are most famously associated with, and moved to New York. In Boston, the family had been held at arms length by those rich families who saw their Irish background as vulgar and the family's wealth as lacking 'class'. The Kennedy's hoped that the more cosmopolitan New York would allow them to access high society. This introduction to bigotry and discrimination should have given Kennedy some kind of empathetic understanding of what life was like for African Americans. However, the opposite would appear to be true.

Kennedy put political realism before any form of beliefs when he voted against Eisenhower's 1957 Civil Rights Act. The route from bill to act nearly served to tear apart the Republicans and the Democrats were almost united to a politician in their opposition to the bill/act. Kennedy had aspirations to be the Democrats next presidential candidate in the 1960

election. If he was seen to be taking the party line and demonstrating strong leadership with regards to opposing the bill, this would do his chances no harm whatsoever. This proved to be the case and Kennedy led the Democrats to victory over Richard Nixon in 1960.

However, during the presidential campaign and after he was nominated for the Democrats, Kennedy made it clear in his speeches that he was a supporter of civil rights. Historians are divided as to why he was 'suddenly' converted. Some saw the opposition to the 1957 Act as understandable from a political point of view. Others have adopted a more cynical view which is that Kennedy recognised that he needed the 'Black Vote' if he was to beat Nixon. Hence why he said in his campaign speeches that discrimination stained America as it led the west's stance against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. He also said that a decent president could end unacceptable housing conditions by using federal power. His call of sympathy to Martin Luther King's wife, Coretta, when King was in prison was well publicised by the Democrats.

Now as president, Kennedy could either ignore discrimination or he could act. He had promised in his campaign speeches to act swiftly if elected. The 1960 report by the Civil Rights Commission made it very plain in clear statistics just how bad discrimination had affected the African American community.

57% of African American housing was judged to be unacceptable

African American life expectancy was 7 years less than whites

African American infant mortality was twice as great as whites

African Americans found it all but impossible to get mortgages from mortgage lenders.

Property values would drop a great deal if an African American family moved into a neighbourhood that was not a ghetto.

Regardless of his promises, in 1961 Kennedy did nothing to help and push forward the civil rights issue. Why?

International factors meant that the president could never focus attention on domestic issues in that year. He also knew that there was no great public support for such legislation. Opinion polls indicated that in 1960 and 1961, civil rights was at the bottom of the list when people were asked "what needs to be done in America to advance society?" Kennedy was also concentrating his domestic attention on improving health care and helping the lowest wage earners. Civil rights issues would only cloud the issue and disrupt progress in these areas. Kennedy also argued that improving health care and wages for the poor would effectively be civil rights legislation as they would benefit the most from these two.

What did Kennedy do to advance the cause of civil rights?

He put pressure on federal government organisations to employ more African Americans in America's equivalent of Britain's Civil Service. Any who were employed were usually in the lowest paid posts and in jobs that had little prospect of professional progress. The FBI only employed 48 African Americans out of a total of 13,649 and these 48 were nearly all chauffeurs. Kennedy did more than any president before him to have more African Americans appointed to federal

government posts. In total, he appointed 40 to senior federal positions including five as federal judges. Kennedy appointed his brother (Robert) as Attorney General which put him at the head of the Justice Department. Their tactic was to use the law courts as a way of enforcing already passed civil rights legislation. No southern court could really argue against laws that were already in print - though they were very good at interpreting the law in a cavalier way !! The Justice Department brought 57 law suits against local officials for obstructing African Americans who wished to register their right to vote. Local officials from Louisiana were threatened with prison for contempt when they refused to hand over money to newly desegregated schools. Such a threat prompted others in Atlanta, Memphis and New Orleans to hand over finance without too many problems - few if any were willing to experience the American penal system which had a policy of punishment then as opposed to reforming prisoners.

Kennedy was very good at what would appear to be small gestures. In American football, the Washington Redskins were the last of the big teams to refuse to sign African Americans. Their stadium was federally funded and Kennedy ordered that they were no longer allowed to use the stadium and would have to find a new one. The team very quickly signed up African American players.

Kennedy created the CEEO (Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity). Its job was to ensure that all people employed with the federal government had equal employment opportunities; it also required all those firms that had contracts with the federal government to do the same if they were to win further federal contracts. However, the CEEO was only concerned with those already employed (though it did encourage firms to employ African Americans) and it did nothing to actively get employment opportunities for African Americans. The CEEO was concerned with those in employment within the federal government.....not the unemployed.

Was Kennedy a natural supporter of civil rights?

Did Kennedy voluntarily pursue the goal of full civil rights in USA or was he 'pushed' into action ?

In many senses, Kennedy's hands were tied by both national and international events. The reaction of the KKK to the Freedom Rides of 1961 was shown on national television and clearly shocked the public. However, 63% of people polled stated that they believed that the Freedom Rides should not have taken place as they were provocative (even though federal law was on the Riders side). Kennedy himself condemned the Riders for their lack of patriotism at a time of international tension over the Berlin Wall, Cuba and the Bay of Pigs fiasco. For many Americans the world scenario was of much greater importance than specific 'home difficulties'. Involvement in the Freedom Riders affair would have been politically sensitive especially as Kennedy did not have a sizeable public mandate to initiate major change after the narrowest of victories against Nixon.

In 1961, the Interstate Commerce Commission ruled that transport terminals and interstate bus seating should be desegregated - as the 1948 ruling had already ordered. But if the 1948 Supreme Court decision had been flagrantly ignored over the years, why would people suddenly start obeying the Commission's ruling in 1961 especially when 63% of the people seemed to be against what the Freedom Riders were attempting to achieve ?

In terms of voter registration, Kennedy's administration did nothing in its first year in office. On the advice of his Attorney-General brother, Bobby, Kennedy claimed that it was the duty of the states to reform this area and that it was not a federal issue. Here Kennedy was no doubt attempting to win the support of those who believed that federal power was too big and trespassing in too many areas - especially the right of states to govern themselves as laid out in the Constitution.

In the violence seen at Albany in 1961, Kennedy again did nothing as he believed that the trouble had been precipitated by SNCC who were referred to as "sons of bitches" by the president.

In the 1950's little was seen of black militancy. Progress, albeit on paper, had been made under both Truman and Eisenhower. The lack of obvious improvements under the Kennedy administration saw the start of black militancy. The Nation of Islam had been in existence in the era of Eisenhower, but its real inroads into northern inner cities came in the early 1960's when little if anything from the federal government was seen to be advancing the cause of African Americans.

Kennedy only became voluntarily active when James Meredith forced his hand. In September 1962, James Meredith applied to a white-only college (the University of Mississippi) to do a doctorate. He was turned down. Here was a man who had served in the US Air Force for 10 years being rejected because of his colour. Meredith got legal aid from the NAACP and fought his case. The Supreme Court found in his favour. When he went to enrol, Bobby Kennedy sent 500 marshals to ensure that law and order was maintained. It was not. Nearly 200 of the marshals were injured and two were shot by those who were adamant that Meredith would not go to college. To maintain law and order, something the state government could not do, John Kennedy federalised the Mississippi National Guard and sent federal troops to the university. Meredith did enroll to the university.

But would Kennedy have done anything if Meredith had not taken out legal action against the university? If Meredith had simply accepted his rejection - as illegal as it was - would Kennedy have taken such drastic action ? If Meredith had not existed, would Kennedy have hunted out those educational establishments that were blatantly breaking the law ?

Kennedy was further provoked into action by the 1963 Birmingham affair. The actions ordered by Bull Connor "sickened" Kennedy. The Justice Department was ordered to Birmingham by Bobby Kennedy and improvements quickly took place. Public facilities were desegregated and employment prospects for African Americans in Birmingham did improve somewhat.

Alabama was the last state to have desegregated universities. Kennedy sent in federal troops and federalised the National Guard to enforce the law. Did the events in Birmingham convert him to the civil rights cause? Cynics comment that it may well have been a more concerted attempt by the president to target black voters for the 1964 election.

The 1963 March on Washington was initially opposed by Kennedy as he believed that any march during his presidency would indicate that the leaders of the civil rights campaign were critical of his stance on civil rights. Kennedy also felt that the march could antagonise Congress when it was in the process of discussing his civil rights bill. A march might have been viewed by Congress as external pressure being put on them. Kennedy eventually endorsed the march when it was agreed that the federal government could have an input into it. Malcolm X criticised King's decision to allow this as he believed that Kennedy was attempting to take over and orchestrate the march. Malcolm X was to nick-name the march "The Farce on Washington". Historians now view the march as a great success for both King and the federal government as it went well in all aspects - peaceful, informative, well organised etc. The rumours that federal representatives would cut off the PA system if the speeches became too rabble-raising have not been proved.

Was Kennedy a keen civil rights man? In the immediate aftermath of his death, only praise was heaped on the murdered president. To do otherwise would have been considered highly unpatriotic. However, in recent years there has been a re-evaluation of Kennedy and what he did in his presidency. For a man who claimed that poor housing could be ended with the signing of the president's name, Kennedy did nothing. His Department of Urban Affairs bill was rejected by Congress and eventually only a weak housing act was passed which applied only to future federal housing projects.

Kennedy was a politician and he was acutely aware that Democrats were less than happy with a disproportionate amount of time being spent on civil rights issues when the Cold War was in full flight with Vietnam flaring up and the world settling down after the problems poised by Cuba.

Kennedy was also aware that southern Democrats were still powerful in the party and their wishes could not be totally ignored if the party was not to be split apart - or if Kennedy was not to get the party's nomination for the 1964 election. However, there is no doubt that the violence that occurred in the South during his presidency horrified and angered him.

For all the charisma that was attached to Kennedy's name, he had a poor relationship with Congress and without their support nothing would become an act. Kennedy himself said:

"A good many programmes I care about may go down the drain as a result of this (his relationship with Congress) - we may all go down the drain."

Kennedy had to tread a very fine line in the South. His popularity by September 1963 showed that his support had dropped to 44% in the South. It had been 60% in March 1963. At this time, the South was a traditional stronghold of the

Democrats. Now in 2001, it is all but Republican to a state - and the move started in the presidency of Kennedy and grew from it almost certainly as a rejection of the stance taken by a Democrat president.

He was also losing support in the north where it was felt that the administration was too concerned with the African Americans and forgetting about the majority of the people - the whites.

In many senses Kennedy was damned if he did and damned if he did not. If he helped the African Americans in the South, he lost the support of the powerful Democrats there. If he did nothing he faced world-wide condemnation especially after the scenes vividly seen in Birmingham. Even civil rights leaders in the South criticised Kennedy for doing too little. In the north, the majority population was white. This group felt that its problems were being ignored while the problems of the African Americans were being addressed. The militant African Americans of the north as seen in the Nation of Islam condemned Kennedy simply because he epitomised white power based in Washington.