

## **Lesson Plan: Investigating Kennedy's Address on Civil Rights**

**Topic:** President Kennedy's June 11, 1963 Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights; Civil Rights, Civic Action

**Grades:** 4-8

**Time Required:** 1-2 class periods

This lesson is adapted from a longer lesson, [\*The President Takes a Stand: Kennedy's Report to the American People on Civil Rights\*](#)

### **Overview**

In this lesson, students read, listen to, and summarize an excerpt of President Kennedy's June 11th speech on civil rights. They reflect on its resonance today and create images of what racial justice could look like in the future.

### **Goals/Rationale**

Kennedy's [\*Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights\*](#) is historically significant for several reasons. It was Kennedy's strongest public statement to the country (and the rest of the world) on civil rights. Also, historians consider it a groundbreaking speech because Kennedy framed racial injustice as a moral or ethical issue. He challenged Americans to ask themselves, how do we want to be treated? What is the right way to behave towards others in a country founded on equality? The speech was a call to action; Kennedy challenged individuals to act, to treat each other with respect in their daily lives. Moreover, he formally announced his plans to introduce an omnibus civil rights bill to Congress.

The goal of the lesson is to learn about racial injustice in the past, make connections to today, and envision a better future.

### **Essential Question**

What is racial justice and how do we address it?

### **Objectives**

Students will:

- read, discuss, and listen to President Kennedy's historic speech on racial injustice and civil rights
- summarize an excerpt of the speech and determine its main ideas.
- make connections to racial injustice today.
- create an image that reflects a world that is more racially just.

### **Connections to Curricula (Standards)**

*National History Standards*

Standard 1: Historical Comprehension

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

US History Era 9

Standard 4: The struggle for racial and gender equality and for the extension of civil liberties.

*Common Core State Standards: Anchor Standards for Grades K-12*

English Language Arts, Reading Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

English Language Arts, Reading Standard 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

English Language Arts Standards, History/Social Studies, Grades 6 – 8, Standard 1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

English Language Arts Standards, History/Social Studies, Grades 6 – 8, Standard 6: Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose.

*MA Standards for History and Social Science Practice*

1. Demonstrate civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. MA Standards for History and Social Science Practice

*Massachusetts History and Social Studies Curriculum Frameworks*

5.T5.8 Research and analyze one of the people, organizations, events, or legislative acts from the 20th century that contributed to expanding civil rights of African Americans, women, and others in the United States.

Grade 8 Topic 4: The rights and responsibilities of citizens

## **Materials**

- *Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights*: Video and transcript
- *Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights* excerpt (Handout)
- Glossary for students (Handout)
- Graphic Organizer (Handout)

## **Historical Background**

After narrowly defeating Richard M. Nixon in the 1960 election, John F. Kennedy was cautious in his approach to civil rights. He was reluctant to lose southern support for legislation on many fronts by pushing too hard on civil rights legislation. By the spring of 1963, Kennedy's attention became increasingly focused on civil rights. The 1963 Birmingham Campaign in Alabama made national news with images of children attacked by dogs and blasted with high pressure fire hoses. The growing number and size of civil rights demonstrations, and the violent backlash from segregationists compelled the president to take direct action and speed up introduction of civil rights legislation.

On June 11, 1963, Kennedy took a bold stand. Earlier that day, Alabama Governor George Wallace had attempted to block two African-American students from entering the University of Alabama. The president federalized the Alabama National Guard and the governor finally

stepped aside, allowing the students to enter the University. That evening, the president delivered an historic message: segregation and other forms of racial injustice must end and he would introduce legislation to work toward that goal.

In his speech, the president responded to the threats of violence and obstruction of justice on the University of Alabama campus following desegregation attempts, explaining that the United States was founded on the principle that all men are created equal and thus, all American students are entitled to attend public educational institutions, regardless of race. He addressed discrimination in education, public accommodations, and voting rights. The president declared that “it ought to be possible, in short, for every American to enjoy the privileges of being American without regard to his race or his color.” The president made it clear that the issue of civil rights affected the country as a whole; it was not limited to one city or one region.

The president asked Congress to enact legislation protecting all Americans’ voting rights, legal standing, educational opportunities, and access to public facilities, but recognized that legislation alone could not solve the country's problems concerning race relations.

He stated, “It is time to act in the Congress, in your State and local legislative body and, above all, in all of our daily lives.”

## **Procedure**

### **Part 1: The President Addresses Racial Equality and Injustice**

Note: This lesson works well as part of a unit on civil rights so that students have been introduced to the historical context of that time.

Share key points from the *Historical Background* provided in this lesson plan:

- Kennedy had been cautious about civil rights because it had been a very close election and he wanted to keep the support of as many people and legislators as possible.
- Conflict over integration and civil rights had been escalating during the spring of 1963. In May, thousands of protesters in Birmingham, Alabama marched for equal rights and faced a fierce police response. Young people were arrested and jailed, police dogs frightened and harmed demonstrators, and many protesters were injured. (For a visual image of the police response, see photographs from newspapers in the [Project C section of microsite](#) *1963: The Struggle for Equal Rights*.)
- On June 11, George Wallace, the governor of Alabama, tried to block two African American students from entering the University of Alabama. The president called in the National Guard and the governor stepped aside. The president informed the country of the event in a speech on radio and television during which he explained why it was so important for all Americans to be treated fairly and have equal rights and privileges. He announced that he would be introducing a law that would end segregation in public places, require schools to become desegregated, and protect people’s right to vote. (View a newsreel on the events of June 11, 1963 in *The Showdown* [section of](#) *The Integration of the University of Alabama*.)

- Suggestion discussion questions:
  1. Why do you think President Kennedy chose to make a speech at this moment in time?
  2. Why was it important for President Kennedy to take a stand?
  3. How could he, as president, make a difference at that time? What impact might his speech have?
  4. What arguments might he have used to convince the country that everyone should be treated equally under the law? Record students' ideas.

## **Part II: Summarizing the Speech and Identifying the Main Idea**

**Teaching note about the word “Negro” to share with students in preparation for reading the speech excerpt:** Language is important and changes over time. Until about 1967, “Negro” was one of the acceptable words used by Americans of all races to identify black or African-American people. When John F. Kennedy delivered his *Report to the American People on Civil Rights* on June 11, 1963, the word “Negro” was not thought of as a negative word by most people. However, around 1967, some black leaders and thinkers criticized the word and believed it was important for Americans of African descent to choose their own way to describe themselves. They preferred the words “black” and then “Afro-American.” Now we use “black,” “African-American,” or “a person of color” to describe Americans of African descent.

1. **Share a copy of the excerpt from Kennedy’s *Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights* with students.** Explain that they will have the opportunity to examine this historic speech, Kennedy’s strongest statement to the American people on civil rights. At the time, the American people did not all agree about segregation and other issues related to race. Many Americans wanted to keep racial segregation, and others thought President Kennedy had not taken enough action to address racial injustice. Students will summarize the excerpt and identify the main ideas of the text.
2. **Read the text to students and discuss their responses and questions.**
3. **[Play the video](#) of the highlighted excerpt (it begins at 4:00 and ends at 7:00) and discuss additional questions.**
4. **Have students work individually, in small groups, or as a whole class to complete the graphic organizer.** Guide students to consult the *Glossary* handout and dictionaries to make sure they understand the vocabulary. In addition to summarizing the text, students should identify the main ideas of the excerpt.

## **Part II: Relating the Speech to Today**

1. **Have students share their summaries and main idea.**
2. **Suggested discussion questions:**
  - What arguments does Kennedy use to convince his audience that people of all races should have equal rights?
  - How does the text relate to today? What parts still feel true? What has changed?

- What does racial justice look like? What changes do we need to make in our school, neighborhood, city or town, state, country, and world to work toward racial justice?

**Assessment:**

Have students select one of the changes (or add a new suggestion) that will help lead to racial justice, and then create an illustration with a caption.

**Extensions:**

**Sharing the story**

Compile students' illustrations and quotes into a picture book. Have them write an introduction and conclusion, providing historical information on the speech. Have them present information on the speech and perform a reading of the book to another class or at a gathering for families.

## **Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights**

June 11, 1963

President Kennedy: Good evening, my fellow citizens:

This afternoon, following a series of threats and defiant statements, the presence of Alabama National Guardsmen was required on the University of Alabama to carry out the final and unequivocal order of the United States District Court of the Northern District of Alabama. That order called for the admission of two clearly qualified young Alabama residents who happened to have been born Negro.

That they were admitted peacefully on the campus is due in good measure to the conduct of the students of the University of Alabama, who met their responsibilities in a constructive way.

I hope that every American, regardless of where he lives, will stop and examine his conscience about this and other related incidents. This Nation was founded by men of many nations and backgrounds. It was founded on the principle that all men are created equal, and that the rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened.

Today we are committed to a worldwide struggle to promote and protect the rights of all who wish to be free. And when Americans are sent to Viet-Nam or West Berlin, we do not ask for whites only. It ought to be possible, therefore, for American students of any color to attend any public institution they select without having to be backed up by troops.

It ought to be possible for American consumers of any color to receive equal service in places of public accommodation, such as hotels and restaurants and theaters and retail stores, without being forced to resort to demonstrations in the street, and it ought to be possible for American citizens of any color to register and to vote in a free election without interference or fear of reprisal.

It ought to be possible, in short, for every American to enjoy the privileges of being American without regard to his race or his color. In short, every American ought to have the right to be treated as he would wish to be treated, as one would wish his children to be treated. But this is not the case.

The Negro baby born in America today, regardless of the section of the Nation in which he is born, has about one-half as much chance of completing a high school as a white baby born in the same place on the same day, one-third as much chance of completing college, one-third as much chance of becoming a professional man, twice as much chance of becoming unemployed, about one-seventh as much chance of earning \$10,000 a year, a life expectancy which is 7 years shorter, and the prospects of earning only half as much.

This is not a sectional issue. Difficulties over segregation and discrimination exist in every city, in every State of the Union, producing in many cities a rising tide of discontent that threatens the public safety. Nor is this a partisan issue. In a time of domestic crisis men of good

will and generosity should be able to unite regardless of party or politics. This is not even a legal or legislative issue alone. It is better to settle these matters in the courts than on the streets, and new laws are needed at every level, but law alone cannot make men see right.

We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and is as dear as the American Constitution.

The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated. If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public school available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who represent him, if, in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place? Who among us would then be content with the counsels of patience and delay?

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.

We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it, and we cherish our freedom here at home, but are we to say to the world, and much more importantly, to each other that this is a land of the free except for the Negroes; that we have no second-class citizens except Negroes; that we have no class or cast system, no ghettos, no master race except with respect to Negroes?

Now the time has come for this Nation to fulfill its promise. The events in Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased the cries for equality that no city or State or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them.

The fires of frustration and discord are burning in every city, North and South, where legal remedies are not at hand. Re-dress is sought in the streets, in demonstrations, parades, and protests which create tensions and threaten violence and threaten lives.

We face, therefore, a moral crisis as a country and as a people. It cannot be met by repressive police action. It cannot be left to increased demonstrations in the streets. It cannot be quieted by token moves or talk. It is a time to act in the Congress, in your State and local legislative body and, above all, in all of our daily lives.

It is not enough to pin the blame on others, to say this is a problem of one section of the country or another, or deplore the fact that we face. A great change is at hand, and our task, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all.

Those who do nothing are inviting shame as well as violence. Those who act boldly are recognizing right as well as reality.

Next week I shall ask the Congress of the United States to act, to make a commitment it has not fully made in this century to the proposition that race has no place in American life or law. The Federal judiciary has upheld that proposition in a series of forthright cases. The executive branch has adopted that proposition in the conduct of its affairs, including the employment of Federal personnel, the use of Federal facilities, and the sale of federally financed housing.

But there are other necessary measures which only the Congress can provide, and they must be provided at this session. The old code of equity law under which we live commands for every wrong a remedy, but in too many communities, in too many parts of the country, wrongs are inflicted on Negro citizens and there are no remedies at law. Unless the Congress acts, their only remedy is in the street.

I am, therefore, asking the Congress to enact legislation giving all Americans the right to be served in facilities which are open to the public-hotels, restaurants, theaters, retail stores, and similar establishments.

This seems to me to be an elementary right. Its denial is an arbitrary indignity that no American in 1963 should have to endure, but many do.

I have recently met with scores of business leaders urging them to take voluntary action to end this discrimination and I have been encouraged by their response, and in the last 2 weeks over 75 cities have seen progress made in desegregating these kinds of facilities. But many are unwilling to act alone, and for this reason, nationwide legislation is needed if we are to move this problem from the streets to the courts.

I am also asking Congress to authorize the Federal Government to participate more fully in lawsuits designed to end segregation in public education. We have succeeded in persuading many districts to desegregate voluntarily. Dozens have admitted Negroes without violence. Today a Negro is attending a State-supported institution in every one of our 50 States, but the pace is very slow.

Too many Negro children entering segregated grade schools at the time of the Supreme Court's decision 9 years ago will enter segregated high schools this fall, having suffered a loss which can never be restored. The lack of an adequate education denies the Negro a chance to get a decent job.

The orderly implementation of the Supreme Court decision, therefore, cannot be left solely to those who may not have the economic resources to carry the legal action or who may be subject to harassment.



Other features will be also requested, including greater protection for the right to vote. But legislation, I repeat, cannot solve this problem alone. It must be solved in the homes of every American in every community across our country.

In this respect, I want to pay tribute to those citizens North and South who have been working in their communities to make life better for all. They are acting not out of a sense of legal duty but out of a sense of human decency.

Like our soldiers and sailors in all parts of the world they are meeting freedom's challenge on the firing line, and I salute them for their honor and their courage.

My fellow Americans, this is a problem which faces us all - in every city of the North as well as the South. Today there are Negroes unemployed, two or three times as many compared to whites, inadequate in education, moving into the large cities, unable to find work, young people particularly out of work without hope, denied equal rights, denied the opportunity to eat at a restaurant or lunch counter or go to a movie theater, denied the right to a decent education, denied almost today the right to attend a State university even though qualified. It seems to me that these are matters which concern us all, not merely Presidents or Congressmen or Governors, but every citizen of the United States.

This is one country. It has become one country because all of us and all the people who came here had an equal chance to develop their talents.

We cannot say to 10 percent of the population that you can't have that right; that your children can't have the chance to develop whatever talents they have; that the only way that they are going to get their rights is to go into the streets and demonstrate. I think we owe them and we owe ourselves a better country than that.

Therefore, I am asking for your help in making it easier for us to move ahead and to provide the kind of equality of treatment which we would want ourselves; to give a chance for every child to be educated to the limit of his talents.

As I have said before, not every child has an equal talent or an equal ability or an equal motivation, but they should have the equal right to develop their talent and their ability and their motivation, to make something of themselves.

We have a right to expect that the Negro community will be responsible, will uphold the law, but they have a right to expect that the law will be fair, that the Constitution will be color blind, as Justice Harlan said at the turn of the century.

This is what we are talking about and this is a matter which concerns this country and what it stands for, and in meeting it I ask the support of all our citizens.

Thank you very much.

**Excerpt from the Television and Radio Report to the American People on Civil Rights, June 11, 1963**

-----John F. Kennedy

We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and is as dear as the American Constitution.

The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated. If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public school available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who represent him, if, in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place? Who among us would then be content with the counsels of patience and delay?

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.

We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it, and we cherish our freedom here at home, but are we to say to the world, and much more importantly, to each other that this is a land of the free except for the Negroes; that we have no second-class citizens except Negroes; that we have no class or cast system, no ghettos, no master race except with respect to Negroes?

Now the time has come for this Nation to fulfill its promise. The events in Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased the cries for equality that no city or State or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them.

The fires of frustration and discord are burning in every city, North and South, where legal remedies are not at hand. Re-dress is sought in the streets, in demonstrations, parades, and protests which create tensions and threaten violence and threaten lives.

We face, therefore, a moral crisis as a country and as a people. It cannot be met by repressive police action. It cannot be left to increased demonstrations in the streets. It cannot be quieted by token moves or talk. It is a time to act in the Congress, in your State and local legislative body and, above all, in all of our daily lives.

It is not enough to pin the blame on others, to say this is a problem of one section of the country or another, or deplore the fact that we face. A great change is at hand, and our task, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all.

Those who do nothing are inviting shame as well as violence. Those who act boldly are recognizing right as well as reality.

# Glossary

**civil rights** – A right is something you are allowed to do by law. In the United States, all citizens 18 years or older have the right to vote. When we talk about civil rights we mean the things we think everyone should be able to do as a citizen: you have the right to go to school, purchase items in stores, find housing, play in parks, go to the movies. It includes voting and being treated fairly. Many different groups have struggled for civil rights throughout history: women, native people, people with disabilities, and elderly people, to name a few. When we talk about the civil rights movement that took place during the 1960s, it often means the ongoing struggle for equal rights for African-American people in the United States.

**desegregation** – Desegregation is another word for integration; it means putting people of different races together. In the 1954 lawsuit *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court ruled that “separate but equal” would not be allowed in this country. According to this court ruling, all public schools had to desegregate. The Supreme Court decided that it was unfair to have separate schools for black children and white children. It took many years for schools to make this change and open their doors to African-American students.

**demonstration** – To demonstrate (or protest) means to express your opinion as a group in a public place. When you organize a demonstration you gather a group of people to take action to try to change something you don't like or you think isn't fair. In the civil rights movement, leaders organized demonstrations so that people could march together to try to make things more fair. Demonstrators held signs with messages about changes they wanted to make happen. Demonstrations were organized to try to end segregation and racial discrimination.

**federal** – There are different levels of government in the United States. There is local government for towns and cities, a state government for each of the fifty states, and a federal government for the whole country. Federal describes the rules, offices, and services that apply to all fifty states. Federal judiciary means the court system for the whole country. Federal personnel are the people who work for the national government.

**integration** – Integration means mixing together. During the civil rights movement, people worked towards integration so that black people would have the right to go to the same places as white people. Integrating public facilities meant that black people could go to the same restaurants, movie theaters, parks, and schools as white people.

legislation – A law. Civil rights legislation is a law that says all people have equal rights. Legislative means something having to do with the law. For example, the job of the legislative branch of the government is to make and approve laws.

Negro – Until about 1967, Negro was one of the acceptable words used by Americans of all races to identify black or African-American people. When John F. Kennedy delivered his Report to the American People on Civil Rights on June 11, 1963, the word “Negro” was not thought of as a negative word by most people. However, around 1967, some black leaders and thinkers criticized the word and believed it was important for Americans of African descent to choose their own way to describe themselves. They preferred to the words “black” and then “Afro-American.” Now we use “black,” “African-American,” or “a person of color” to describe Americans of African descent.

public accommodation – An accommodation is an organization, business, or other place that serves people in some way. Restaurants, stores, movie theaters, parks, and swimming pools are all considered public accommodations because anyone might decide to enter them or use them. Many towns and cities in the South had segregated accommodations; African-American people were not welcomed or served in restaurants, hotels, stores, and theaters.

racial discrimination – To discriminate is to make a choice based on differences. Racial discrimination happens when someone is treated unfairly based on his or her skin color. In the segregated South, there was racial discrimination when black people were not allowed to go to schools, restaurants, theaters and other places that were reserved for white people only.

segregation - Segregation means separation. When President Kennedy was in office, there were some states that had laws to keep black people and white people separate. African-Americans could not use the same public water fountains and bathrooms as white Americans. Many movie theaters, restaurants, and parks were only open to white people or had separate sections for black people. The facilities for white people were usually of better quality than those set aside for African-Americans.

**Television and Radio Report to the American People on Civil Rights, June 11, 1963 --- John F. Kennedy**

Summary of Excerpt	Main Idea(s) (Identify one or more)
	1.
	2.
	3.

My vision of racial justice

---

---

---