

Persuader-in-Chief: JFK's June 11, 1963 Address on Civil Rights

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

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: English Language Arts; US History after World War II; US Government

Time Required: 1-2 class periods

Goals/Rationale

The president of the United States holds many roles in our nation, including Chief of State and Commander-in-Chief. In fulfilling these roles, a president's ability to reach out to the nation at a time of crisis is unmatched by any other governmental office. Through the years, presidents have used the "bully pulpit" (a term coined by President Theodore Roosevelt) to advocate for particular actions by the American people. In the 1950s and 1960s, the civil rights movement was gaining momentum, leading to significant turning points in our nation's history. In 1963, the Birmingham Campaign made front-page news and increased the urgency of the Kennedy administration to propose significant civil rights legislation. President Kennedy used the historic moment of the integration of the University of Alabama on June 11, 1963 to call civil rights a "moral issue" and present his civil rights agenda to the American people. In this lesson plan, students analyze the persuasiveness of this important speech.

Essential Question

Why is the president sometimes called the "Persuader-in-Chief"? What rhetorical methods enhance a persuasive speech?

Connections to Curricula (Standards)

National History Standards

US History, Era 9

Standard 3B: The student understands the "New Frontier" and the "Great Society."

Standard 4A: The student understands the "Second Reconstruction" and its advancement of civil rights.

Common Core State Standards

RH.9-10.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

RH.9-10.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

RH.9-10.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.

W.9-10.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

SL.9-10.3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.

SL.9-10.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework

USII.T4: Defending Democracy: The Cold War and civil rights at home

USII.T5: The United States and globalization

Massachusetts English Language Arts and Literacy Framework

Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

RI.4-6, 9

Objectives

Students will:

- identify rhetorical methods.
- examine the persuasive techniques of President Kennedy's June 11, 1963 *Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights*
- discuss the content of the speech.
- evaluate the effectiveness of the speech.

Materials

1. Reading: "Persuasive Power in President Kennedy's June 11, 1963 *Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights*"
2. [President Kennedy's June 11, 1963 Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights](#) (Time: 13:27)
3. "Modes of Persuasion" handout
4. "Modes of Persuasion" handout (with answers)

Historical Background and Context

Although the election of 1960 between Kennedy and Nixon was very close, across the nation, more than 70 percent of African Americans voted for Kennedy. These votes provided the winning edge in several key states. When President Kennedy took office in January 1961, African Americans had high expectations for the new administration.

But Kennedy's narrow election victory in 1960 and the power of southern segregationist Democrats in Congress left him cautious about civil rights. Instead of pushing hard for civil rights legislation, he appointed unprecedented numbers of African Americans to high-level positions and signed Executive Orders that established the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity and prohibited discrimination in federally funded housing. On February 28, 1963, Kennedy submitted a Special Message to the Congress on Civil Rights in which he asked Congress to enact legislation that included limited civil rights measures such as strengthening voting rights laws and providing assistance for schools that were voluntarily desegregating.

By the spring of 1963, Kennedy's attention became increasingly focused on civil rights. His evolution to a greater involvement in civil rights was spurred, in large measure, by the growing number and size of civil rights demonstrations, and the violent backlash from segregationists. The 1963 Birmingham Campaign in Alabama made national news with

images of children attacked by dogs and blasted with high pressure fire hoses. The Kennedy administration understood that strong civil rights legislation was necessary.

When it became clear that Governor George Wallace would stand at the doorway of the University of Alabama's registration building on June 11th to prevent the registration of two African-American college students, President Kennedy realized that, with the nation focused on civil rights, the timing was right to speak to the nation about the need for legislation.

The decision to make a speech that evening was a sudden one. Although civil rights legislation had been in the works for several weeks, it was still in process. Theodore Sorensen, President Kennedy's Special Counsel and primary speechwriter, did not start a first draft of the speech until that afternoon. An hour before the speech, President Kennedy, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall and Sorensen were assembling and rewriting parts of the speech, and President Kennedy did not have a completed version when he sat down in front of the television camera at 8:00 p.m. He extemporized the concluding paragraphs of the speech.

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 also discussed how discrimination affects education, public safety, and international relations, noting that the country could not preach freedom internationally while ignoring it domestically. 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.

In this lesson, students will consider the modes of persuasion used by President Kennedy in this historic speech and evaluate how the speech might have been strengthened.

Procedure

1. For homework, have students read "Persuasive Power in President Kennedy's June 11, 1963 *Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights*" and answer the "Question to Consider."
2. In class, go over the homework and discuss the timing of the speech and its last-minute construction.
3. If you have time, play the speech through once for students to watch, asking them to take notes on key points. If you do not have time, skip directly to Step 4.
4. Provide students the "Modes of Persuasion" handout and review the terminology of rhetorical methods.
5. Provide students with the transcript of the speech.
6. Have students read through the text of Kennedy's June 11th speech as you play the video. Ask them to mark up the transcript of the speech as they listen, noting, where they can, the methods of persuasion used.
7. After they have listened to the speech, have students fill in the handout.
8. Put students in groups to share their responses. Then, as a class, review the responses.
9. Have students write a two-page paper answering the following questions: How does

President Kennedy use Logos, Pathos, and Egos in his speech? What are the strengths of the speech? What are its weaknesses? Give specific examples.

10. Have students read through some of the responses to the speech from the public, from the ["Public Opinion" subchapter](#) of the *Address to the American People* chapter, select one letter or telegram, and write a brief essay that describes in what ways the writer was persuaded or not persuaded by President Kennedy. Which portion(s) of President Kennedy's speech most disturbs or encourages the writer? In sum, for this writer, did President Kennedy achieve his goals for the speech? Why? Why not?

Assessment

Use the 2-page paper in Step 9 and the brief essay in Step 10, noted above, as an assessment for this lesson.

Extension

Have students read the [memo to Associate Press Secretary Andrew Hatcher](#) which provides a pro/con count of incoming mail about the speech. Then have them review all the [letters written in response to the June 11th speech](#) in this section of the site to determine if they detect any repetition in themes or patterns. Does the letter they selected (in Step 10) fit into any pattern? If so, how?

Persuasive Power in President Kennedy's June 11, 1963 *Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights*

The president of the United States holds many roles in our nation, including Chief of State, a symbolic leader of our country, and Commander-in-Chief, leader of our armed forces. In fulfilling these roles, a president's ability to reach out to the nation at a time of crisis is unmatched by any other governmental office. Through the years, presidents have used the "bully pulpit" (a term coined by President Theodore Roosevelt—"bully" meaning excellent) to advocate for particular actions by the American people. John F. Kennedy confronted several crises during his presidency, both at home and abroad. He was fortunate to have the aid of his Special Counsel and lead speechwriter, Theodore Sorensen, to help him craft his persuasive messages to the American people.

On the international front, President Kennedy's foreign engagements were directly tied to the Cold War, a conflict with the Soviet Union in which both nations sought control over Europe and influence over new emerging nations in Asia and Africa. Concerns over Vietnam, Berlin and Cuba loomed large.

At home, following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision requiring the desegregation of public schools, the civil rights movement was gaining momentum.

Kennedy's narrow election victory in 1960 and the power of southern segregationist Democrats in Congress left him cautious about civil rights. He was reluctant to lose southern support for legislation on many fronts by pushing too hard on civil rights legislation. Instead, he appointed unprecedented numbers of African Americans to high-level positions and signed Executive Orders that established the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity and prohibited discrimination in federally funded housing. On February 28, 1963, Kennedy submitted a Special Message to the Congress on Civil Rights in which he asked Congress to enact legislation that included limited civil rights measures such as strengthening voting rights laws and providing assistance for schools that were voluntarily desegregating.

By the spring of 1963 Kennedy's attention became increasingly focused on civil rights. Kennedy's evolution to a greater involvement in civil rights was spurred, in large measure, by the growing number and size of civil rights demonstrations, and the violent backlash from segregationists. The 1963 Birmingham Campaign in Alabama made national news with images of children attacked by dogs and blasted with high pressure fire hoses. The Kennedy administration was compelled to take action and to speed up the drafting of civil rights legislation.

When it became clear that Alabama's Governor George Wallace would stand at the doorway of the University of Alabama's registration building on June 11th to prevent the registration of two African-American college students, President Kennedy realized that, with the nation focused on civil rights, the time was right to speak to the nation about the need for legislation.

The decision to make a speech that evening was a sudden one. Although civil rights legislation had been in the works for several weeks, it was still in process. Sorensen did not begin a first draft of the speech until that afternoon. An hour before the speech, President Kennedy, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall and Sorensen were assembling and rewriting parts of the speech, and President Kennedy did not have a completed version when he sat down in front of the television cameras at 8:00 p.m. He spoke without a script in the concluding paragraphs of his speech.

President Kennedy was speaking to a nation divided on how to tackle the unequal treatment of African Americans. The division was reflected in the Senate and House of Representatives, with many legislative leaders unwilling or afraid to legislate what they considered a social issue, entrenched in the way of life of their white constituents. In order to pass this legislation, President Kennedy would need to convince white Americans, who mostly lived in segregated communities, that the unequal treatment of African Americans was inherently wrong and that change would only be possible if local communities were open to reform. He would need to show Southerners that this was not a North versus South issue--that the federal government was not targeting them. Most of all, he would need to convince his audience that the time was ripe for civil rights legislation.

President Kennedy appealed to the American people using techniques the Greek philosopher Aristotle identified centuries ago-- Logos (appeal to logic), Pathos (appeal to emotion), and Ethos (appeal due to the speaker's trustworthiness, credibility or authority). After his speech, he received high praise from civil rights leaders and numerous telegrams and letters from Americans throughout the country both expressing approval and berating him.

Question to Consider:

If you were President Kennedy, what would be your main arguments to convince white Americans in 1963 that civil rights legislation was necessary? Outline five points you might make to the American people.

6. Appealing to his audience's pride

7. Appealing to his audience's fears

Egos: Appeal due to the source's trustworthiness, credibility or authority

8. Demonstrating his understanding of his audience.

Modes of Persuasion Handout (with answers) Kennedy's June 11, 1963 Civil Rights Speech

Logos: Appeal to logic

Find two examples of the following items:

1. Referring to historical events

13th Amendment – *“One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free.”*

Brown v. Board of Education – *“Too many Negro children entering segregated grade schools at the time of the Supreme Court's decision nine years ago will enter segregated high schools this fall, having suffered a loss which can never be restored.”*

2. Referring to the Cold War (references to foreign affairs)

“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.”

“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...”

3. Referring to significant documents or texts

Declaration of Independence - *“This Nation was founded by men of many nations and backgrounds. It was founded on the principle that all men are created equal...”*

Bible and Constitution – *“We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution.”*

4. Referring to statistics

“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 seven years shorter, and the prospects of earning only half as much.”

“Today there are Negroes unemployed, two or three times as many compared to whites...”

Pathos: Appeal to Emotions

5. Appealing to his audience's conscience

“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?”

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

“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.”

6. Appealing to his audience's pride

“And this Nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free.”

“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.”

“...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.”

7. Appealing to his audience's fears

“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.”

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

“Those who do nothing are inviting shame as well as violence...”

Egos: Appeal due to the source's trustworthiness, credibility or authority

8. Demonstrating his understanding of his audience.

“My fellow Americans, this is a problem which faces us all-in every city of the North as well as the South.”

“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.”

“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.”