



Department of Justice



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ADDRESS BY ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY
BEFORE THE NATIONAL NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION
MORGAN STATE COLLEGE
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I would like to talk with you tonight about the biggest domestic news story of our time.

You are deeply involved in this story. Your readers demand news about it; you are personally affected by it; and you can have a great deal to do with how it turns out.

The story broke almost a hundred years ago. Negroes were emancipated and shortly thereafter the Constitution was amended to guarantee them the full rights of citizenship.

But not since that time has so much been happening in the field of civil rights.

It is an unhappy thing that it has taken so long to implement fully the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, but this is not the time to deplore the inaction of the past. It is the time to do something about them.

And we are doing things about civil rights.

I know that some are unhappy that the story is not breaking fast enough, but things are happening; the pace is quickening.

First, we are moving to make sure that every American is free to exercise his right to register and vote.

There are now investigations and court actions going on in almost a hundred counties. There are also follow-up actions to insure that court orders are carried out and that those who come forward to assert their rights are not intimidated. Eighteen court suits have been instituted to order registrars and voting officials to allow qualified Negroes to vote.

One example of voting rights action is typical of the pattern. Macon County, Alabama is a rural county, but it is the home of famed Tuskegee Institute and thus, the home of many distinguished and well-educated Negroes.

Yet at the beginning of 1961, only a handful of Negroes were allowed to vote in Macon County. On March 17 of that year we obtained a voting rights injunction. Today there are over 2600 Negroes registered to vote in Macon County and they are voting.

This progress doesn't come about with the wave of a magic wand. It takes work. In one voting case, we had to examine in detail some 36,000 voting records, take testimony from 180 witnesses at the trial and have four lawyers devote full time for several months to prepare the case.

The ramifications of their vote are just beginning to be felt. When they are joined at the polls by Negroes over all the state, the South and the country, I think the civil rights of all our citizens will be better protected.

But we are moving ahead on other fronts as well.

Negroes are now serving in important posts in the government-- not just jobs created for them or jobs which deal with minority groups.

For the first time Negroes are serving on the United States District Court in the continental United States and the United States Attorneys in two of our largest cities are Negroes.

Progress like this requires affirmative action to overcome centuries of blind adherence to tradition and prejudice. When we came to the Department of Justice, which is responsible for enforcing the laws including those which deal with civil rights, we found that there were only ten Negroes employed as attorneys. Today there are five or six times that number.

These men were not appointed because they were Negroes. They were chosen because we need dedicated, able people in our government, and we are not foolish enough to deny ourselves the services of such people because of the color of their skin.

Private industry is also beginning to comprehend the folly of racial barriers.

President Kennedy announced this afternoon that thirty-three more companies have come forward with affirmative plans to assure equal employment opportunities in their hiring and promotion systems. In all, 85 companies with close to five million employees have such plans.

This progress has been brought about by the work of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunities under the leadership of the Vice President. They will continue to work to see that there is more.

Where voluntary action is not forthcoming from those who do business with the government, we are taking action.

In the field of education, the federal government is taking an active role assisting local officials to expedite school integration. We are not waiting until the situation gets to the point where troops are the only answer. Last year, for the first time, the school opening season passed without violence but with desegregation.

Where the government has standing to do so, we are insisting that local officials move quickly to end segregation in their schools.

Tremendous progress has been made to eliminate racial segregation in interstate transportation.

Hundreds of bus and rail terminals have been desegregated over the past year.

I can announce tonight that Fourteen of the few airports still maintaining racial segregation have abolished it voluntarily in the recent months.

Six of these are in Mississippi--Natchez, Jackson, Meridian, Tupelo, Hattiesburg, and Columbus.

Two are in Louisiana--Baton Rouge and Pineville; two in Arkansas--Fort Smith and Texarkana.

In addition, Columbus, Georgia, Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, Greenville, South Carolina and Mobile, Alabama have taken voluntary action.

This week we filed suits to enjoin two of the last holdouts from maintaining segregation and within a very short time, it will be possible to fly to any airport in the country without seeing "White" and "Colored" signs.

In all these problems--in voting, in schools, in employment, in transportation--we seek voluntary compliance. We meet with the responsible officials and try to work out the situation with them.

In many, many cases, this procedure achieved progress. Public and private officials throughout the South deserve credit for what they have done in the face of often difficult circumstances.

But I want to make it clear that when we cannot get voluntary action we will continue to go to court to enforce the laws of the United States on discrimination just as we enforce them on narcotics, gambling or anything else.

This progress does not mean that all is well. As you know, there is much more to be done.

All our schools are still not open to everyone who seeks admittance. All jobs are not awarded on merit alone. In some places the way to the ballot is still not easy for the Negro.

Even though there has been no civil rights legislation in this or the last session of the Congress, we are not wavering in our determination to press for needed legislation. We do need laws to help us, particularly in the field of voting rights where unfair literacy tests are a major barrier to voting.

You can help in this effort. The Congress as well as the Executive is responsive to your demands if you make them known effectively.

There has been far too much hypocrisy in the field of civil rights. It is easy enough to give rousing speeches or call for legislation which has no possibility of passage.

But the President is anxious to accomplish things, not merely talk about them. When he saw the Coast Guard march by in the Inaugural Parade and did not see a Negro in the group, he took action to see that this was corrected. When he reviewed an honor guard greeting a visiting African dignitary at the airport and did not see a Negro in the unit, he took action to correct this.

These are but examples of many of the things that can be done with existing laws, and they are being done. In my opinion, the vast majority of the people of this country--north, east, south and west, want to move ahead in civil rights, and this government is responsive to the wishes of the people.

Newspapers can generate action in this country. They not only record current history, they help to determine what course it will take.

This is particularly true at the community level. Where there is an aggressive, vigilant, honest newspaper there is likely to be a progressive, clean community. Where the newspapers are fat and lazy, the community is in danger of becoming a backwater festering corruption, vice and indifference.

You who serve the Negro communities have a particularly heavy responsibility.

Timothy Thomas Fortune, was a distinguished newspaperman of the 19th Century who served as editor of the New York Age and as a member of the editorial staff of the New York Evening Sun.

He summed up the role of the Negro newspaper this way:

"Some declare that colored newspapers are a nuisance; and so they are, in a measure, just as the colored people are a nuisance, in so far as they have a grievance which they persistently obtrude upon the notice of others, who either have no such grievances themselves, or do not wish to be reminded of the fact that they have one. As long, however, as men are struck, they will cry out in protest or indignation until the wrongs are avenged."

You must continue to perform this function of crying out in protest of indignation, but you have an added responsibility as well.

Your coverage of this big story of our time, the civil rights story, will determine, in large measure, the attitude of the Negro community.

If your stories are sensation-seeking, slanted or vindictive, the Negro community will mirror this attitude. If you dwell upon the remaining flaws and do not report the progress as well, disillusionment will follow.

I do not suggest that you be soft on prejudice and discrimination. You have a duty to bring these facts to light wherever they appear, and attack them vigilantly.

But I do suggest that you also have a duty to report in full the progress that is being made and the work that is going on. It is easy enough to crusade against wrongdoing; it is sometimes difficult to give credit when credit is due.

For instance, when officials in the South enforce segregation, when they make arrests in racial cases or when there is police brutality, it is reported in depth and it should be.

But by the same rule, when officials in the South bring about desegregation, and often they do this in the face of strong local opposition, they should be given credit.

One of the most exciting developments in the civil rights story has been the work of citizens committees in Atlanta, Dallas, Memphis, and other cities. These bi-racial committees have brought integration to their schools in a peaceful, orderly manner.

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Solid, plugging committee work may not have the headline appeal of an incident of violence, but it is far more important. This kind of news should be reported as well as the violence if the story is to be in proper perspective.

And as newspapermen, you have a responsibility to give your readers the full story.

Responsibility is the key word. We in this country are proud of our free and open society. It is one of the safeguards of our freedom.

If there is a racial incident in any corner of the United States, within hours it is flashed around the world. The Communists seize upon it for their propaganda mill.

We don't hear of the East Europeans who are daily whisked away to jails for seeking only a fraction of the freedom we enjoy.

But we would not have it any other way. Our newspapers must be free to report every facet of American life for this is not only a freedom guaranteed to them but a guarantee of freedom for all Americans.

With liberty for the press, as with all liberties, comes responsibility. Newspapers occupy a position of trust to the public to report to them all the news--not just that which they wish to read or that which an editor thinks they should read.

Your trust with the Negro community is an important part of race relations in the United States today. This is a time of great excitement.

Long delayed gains are being won. The process has accelerated to a point where ferment is inevitable. This ferment is bound to cause emotional upheavals and some bitterness--from those who think the process is too fast and those who think it is too slow.

The exertion of leadership and the exercise of responsibility always bring some scorn from radical elements in our society. But the transition we are making must be made within the patterns of law which are set by our Constitution and within the framework of our federal system. So the responsibility for exerting leadership is not something that can be avoided, but something that must be faced.

Radical charges, impossible demands and unwarranted accusations will not help. They will hinder the efforts of those who are trying to make real progress.

Sensationalism will add acrimony to controversy but it will not help settle problems. There are enough color problems without adding that of "yellow journalism". Full knowledge of the facts presented fairly and objectively will help by bringing about understanding.

So I urge you to continue to banner across your front pages any discrimination in schools, voting, or employment.

But I also urge you to banner across the same pages the news that the "For White Only" signs are coming down; that Negroes are registering and voting as never before; and that new employment opportunities are opening up every day.

Your responsible reporting will do your readers a great service and it will do the nation a great service. If the story is told fully and well, understanding and cooperation will be much easier, and we need understanding and cooperation to make progress. You are in a position to help provide it.

Newspapermen and those of us who are charged with enforcing the law are, in a sense, in the same business. We gather facts. We seek the truth. I hope we can work together more closely on the story in which we are both interested.

I hope that you as the leaders of the Negro newspaper world will consider yourself as an unofficial advisory committee to the Department of Justice in the enforcement of civil rights.

We are available 24 hours a day to hear anything of importance you have to report to us. We are also available to give you the information you need to do your job.

You are a group of newspapermen to whom a great opportunity has been given. You are on top of one of the biggest news stories of our time.

The story will go on for some years to come. There may be some setbacks and some difficult turns. I cannot predict all the developments. But I can tell you how it will end.

No American will be denied his human rights or his Constitutional rights because of his race, creed, religion.

And when the final line of this story is filed, I hope that Negro Journalists will be able to say with pride that they helped solve our major domestic problems by meeting their responsibilities as newspapermen.