



Department of Justice

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EXCERPTS FROM REMARKS BY ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY
AT A PANEL DISCUSSION
"AFTER THE CIVIL RIGHTS BILL, WHAT?"
AMERICAN SOCIETY OF NEWSPAPER EDITORS, 1964 CONVENTION
WASHINGTON, D. C.
APRIL 16, 1964

THE HONORABLE ROBERT F. KENNEDY (Attorney General of the United States): Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen. I am very happy to have the opportunity to talk with all of you this afternoon.

No matter how one feels, as the moderator said, on the question of civil rights, it is a matter that affects all our lives. It affects our lives whether we live in Birmingham, Alabama or Boston, Massachusetts or Los Angeles, California.

There are no domestic problems that have a greater effect on all of us, whether we be white or negro, than the civil rights problems that are facing the United States at the present time.

The pending legislation will have an effect on what happens to the civil rights struggle going on in the country which will in turn have an effect on all of us who live in the communities that you represent.

I felt that if we could have a discussion of that civil rights legislation, to discuss what it contains and what it does not contain and what effect it will have on what kinds of businesses and what effect it will not have, I thought that from that we might all be better off, and in better positions to face the problems that all of us will have to face.

I speak of it as a domestic problem. I don't think that there is any question that it is the major domestic problem, and I would anticipate that it will be the major domestic problem for a number of years to come, because the mere passage of this legislation is not going to make these difficulties disappear.

But it is also an international problem. I think that we should take action in the field of civil rights. I think we should pass this legislation because it's the right thing to do, because it's the thing that needs to be done for our own community, white and negro.

I think also that we have to take into consideration the effect of this legislation on our international posture. How we treat our own people, how

we treat a minority of our own population, is going to have an effect on what people think of us abroad . . .

There are those, I think, in the past who have felt that this really hasn't been a national problem, that it has been a problem of the South and the South alone. I think that this feeling really existed until perhaps May, June or July of 1963 . . .

We are all, I think, extremely brave when we're talking about the problems that face other people in other sections of the United States. I think it is frequently the case, so far as the civil rights are concerned. But lately, the problems have come to all of us, whether we're in the newspaper field, in government or whether we're just private citizens . . .

So I think that as we face this civil rights legislation, as we consider it in its context, we have to consider it as something that deals with a nationwide problem and not just a sectional problem. . .

Undoubtedly, I am talking to a number of people who are opposed to the legislation, who feel that the passage of this legislation could cause a great hardship, that it's a violation of the constitutional rights of some of our citizens, and that the United States and our people would suffer if the legislation passed. In order to reach any kind of a conclusion on that matter, I think it is necessary to analyze the legislation to see what is in it and to see what is not in it.

I have seen a number of the ads that have appeared in many of your newspapers across the United States over the period of the last six months. These ads give a distortion of what is contained in the legislation. They assert that various kinds of businesses and aspects of society and American life will be affected by this legislation which will not in fact be affected by this legislation . . .

I think, in conclusion, that the really major problem that is going to affect all of us is what is going to happen when this legislation is passed, because it is my firm belief that the legislation will be passed . . .

What is the reaction going to be to the legislation? Are we going to comply with the bill and comply with the law of the land or are we going to oppose it? Are we going to have the same kind of problems that we had after the 1954 decision? Are we going to have the doctrine of massive resistance? Or are we going to have a doctrine of massive compliance?

Whether you oppose the legislation or favor the legislation it seems to me that, in this very difficult time now facing all of our citizens, North and South, white and Negro, that what is absolutely essential is for us to comply with the legislation.

We may fight out the question of whether the legislation should be passed. But after it's passed we should follow it and live up to it and

see that the law of the United States is obeyed. I think that's absolutely essential and that's where I think all of you have such a key role to play.

I think that if we have learned anything in the Department of Justice over the period of the last three years, it's the heartache, the misery, the pain and the suffering that comes from community leaders telling people of their communities that they don't have to obey the law, that they don't have to follow it.

When the court order came down requiring desegregation at the University of Alabama, a well-known Alabama lawyer went on television with the Governor of Alabama and told the people of that state that they should obey little and resist much.

After instructions like that are given to the people by persons who are looked up to as the leaders in the community, I don't see how then we can be surprised to find that the result is violence, disorder, or disobedience of the law.

When a governor of a state testifies before a congressional committee that if this legislation is enacted we are going to have to bring the troops back from Berlin in order to enforce it -- when such encouragement is given to those who disagree with the legislation -- I don't see how we can then be surprised when a person puts a bomb under a church or shoots at a Negro.

When we had similar troubles down at the University of Mississippi, at Oxford, Mississippi, General Howze, one of our best generals, was in charge of the troops. At one time he spoke to some of the student council leaders and said he thought it would be helpful if he had a meeting with the student leaders and discussed some of the problems and some of the procedures.

The head of the student council said, we can't do that, because if we are seen talking to you we'll be considered collaborators.

The General said, I went through Germany and that's a dirty word to me.

But here are students at one of our universities who say they cannot talk to a General of the United States Army, and other students cannot be seen talking to a General of the United States Army because they will be considered collaborators. They didn't just pick this up out of the air. They learned it from some place, and that's what is so distressing.

It seems to me that all of us have a responsibility, and no group has a greater responsibility, I assure all of you, than newspaper people. We can see, dealing with some of these problems across the United States, what effect a newspaper has in a particular community. If it gives some leadership, if it makes an effort, then the whole atmosphere in the community changes. If it makes no effort, if it preaches dissension, if it preaches opposition, then you have nothing but trouble and you have violence.

I think that if we can have cooperation again when the legislation is passed, whether it be legislation supported or opposed by you. If we just

have support for the fact that the law should be upheld and that we should live up to the law, then I think great progress can be made. I think that the American people now want to make progress.

Obviously, there is opposition in the North as well as the South.

Starting in May of 1963 when President Kennedy met during the spring and ~~the summer~~ and the fall with then Vice President Johnson with a number of community leaders from across the United States, but particularly business leaders from some 560 southern communities of over 10,000 population.

The President and Vice President Johnson said to them that what we needed was voluntary compliance, that an effort should be made in the local communities. Since those meetings in May 1963 about 70 percent of those communities have desegregated at least some of their public accommodations.

I think that if there is encouragement from newspapers, from political leaders, from leading citizens in the community to comply with the law once it is the law of the land, I think that the country will benefit, the community will benefit, the state will benefit, and that all of us as American citizens will benefit.

EXCERPT FROM THE QUESTION PERIOD:

MR. SYLVAN MEYER: Sylvan Meyer from the Daily from the Gainesville Times, Gainesville, Georgia.

Sir, I speak of no hostility to the bill and although I proudly claim the title of Southerner, our paper is not in opposition to the Civil Rights Bill.

I would like to ask, however, what plans you have after the passage of this bill, which, I agree with you, is a foregone conclusion.

Are more stringent amendments in later sessions of Congress planned? Do you plan legislation perhaps to deal with such things as de facto segregation in schools and this sort of thing? In other words, the question is what next?

MR. KENNEDY: First, let me just say that your paper, Mr. Meyer, has made a major difference in the efforts to try to understand what has been going on, and a major difference, in my judgment, in your community, and has had an effect on all of us who are working on this problem.

It seems to me the passage of the legislation is not going to make the problem disappear. I don't think anyone involved in the civil rights struggle says that if you pass this law then the difficulties are going to disappear, because they are just not. We are going to have problems in this field for a long period of time. We are going to pay for what has gone on in the past.

I think basically it is a question of education. I think that is the first step. I think the poverty legislation that has been offered, the tax

reform bill and the tax legislation that was passed in the last month will have an effect, because they will make more jobs available.

Much of the fundamental problem stems from the fact that it is true for many Negroes your parents couldn't get a job, you can't get a job and there is no future. A young person growing up in some of our major metropolitan areas looks at his parents and looks at the neighborhood in which he has been brought up and he says, what is my future -- I don't have any future under this system. Where can I turn?

I think that the passage of legislation is essential. It is essential to right grievances that now exist. Even more important, the passage of legislation will re-establish confidence that Negro people and white people together can work to solve our problems.

If the legislation is not passed, I think that Negroes in many areas of the United States, particularly our younger Negro population who are getting more educated and more dissatisfied, are going to say there is no future in this system.

We can talk about it. We can make a Fourth of July speech. We can make a speech on George Washington's birthday, we can make all the patriotic speeches we want to that we all have to be loyal, but all these speeches are being made by white people.

The Negro asks: What is our future? What do you hold out to us? There is a future for the white person, but what is the future for the Negro?

I think that is the major question.

If the legislation is passed, I think, Mr. Meyer, we are going to have some time to try to take the other steps that are going to be necessary to deal with some of these problems in the Northern community.

But action by the Federal Government alone is not going to resolve it. It is going to have to be action by the local citizens; it is going to have to be action by the newspaper; it is going to have to be action by the local political leaders making an effort in their local community to try to do something about the schools, for example.

The Federal Government cannot do it by going into these major metropolitan areas and tell them what needs to be done with their schools. It has to be people in the local community who face up to it themselves.

I think the legislation is essential, but I think there has to be something more than that.

Looking at the casualty list from Viet Nam and some of the Negroes that have been killed in Viet Nam, a number of them from Southern States.

The widow of one of them lives in Alabama. I was just thinking that if she brought her husband's body back and it was buried in Arlington across the River, and then she had to go back to Alabama, she wouldn't know what hotel she could stop at, she wouldn't know where she could stop at a restaurant, she wouldn't know where she could stop for a restroom. When she gets back to her local community, she can't bring her children to a theatre.

And yet her husband has just been killed in Viet Nam on behalf of all of us.

It just doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense to us and it certainly is not going to make any sense to a Negro brought up under that system.