

This Day in History... June 11, 1963

JFK Proposes Civil Rights Act of 1964

On June 11, 1963, President John F. Kennedy delivered a television and radio address calling for the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Early on in his career, Kennedy did not speak out frequently concerning civil rights. However, his brief term in office came at a tumultuous time in US history, when the matter of civil rights became the defining issue of a generation.

Mere months into his term, Kennedy faced his first major civil rights decision, concerning the 1961 Freedom Riders. That spring and summer hundreds of people rode Southern interstate buses to oppose the practice of segregation, which had been outlawed on public buses. Some were arrested and attacked by local mobs. The violence and imprisonments brought the civil rights issue to national attention and showed the federal government was not enforcing its own laws. In response, Kennedy sent federal marshals to guard the riders, though he stressed that his decision was a legal issue, rather than a moral one.



Stamp from the To Form a More Perfect Union Sheet

The following year, Kennedy authorized federal troops to protect James Meredith, a Black man attending the University of Mississippi. However, he insisted that it wouldn't change his legislative plans. Then in 1963, as the movement became more violent and attracted international attention, Kennedy realized that stronger legislation would take the issue "out of the streets" and into the courts – away from international spectators. That February he proposed a Civil Rights bill to Congress. He stated that it would have economical and diplomatic benefits, and argued that it should remove institutional racism because, "above all, it is wrong."



Issued for JFKs 100th birthday

Kennedy was further moved by the Birmingham campaign in May 1963, in which Black students staged nonviolent protests. Then on May 21, 1963, a federal judge ruled that the University of Alabama must allow two Black students to attend its summer courses. The governor of Alabama strongly opposed the order and insisted on making a public display. On June 11, the students attempted to enter the school's auditorium to register for classes, but the governor himself blocked the doorway. Kennedy then ordered federal troops to order him to step aside and allow the students to register.

In the wake of the nationally televised event, Kennedy decided it was time to address the nation on the civil rights issue. That night, at 8pm, Kennedy delivered his Civil Rights Address. He began by briefly talking about the events at the University of Alabama earlier in the day. Kennedy then stressed the importance that all Americans recognize civil rights as a moral cause that everyone should contribute to and that it was "as clear as the American Constitution."

Kennedy's address was well received by many people in the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King Jr. stated, "Can you believe that white man not only stepped up to the plate, he hit it over the fence!" Days later, on June 19, Kennedy sent his bill to Congress. Passage of the bill would be one of his major goals in the coming months, but he wouldn't see it happen during his life. His successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 over a year later on July 2.



From the Prominent Americans Series



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Stamp pictures Dixie Café by Jacob Lawrence.

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