

The Early 1960s: Kennedy's Response to Civil Rights

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

As he accepted his party's nomination for president at the Democratic National Convention in 1960, John F. Kennedy described the challenges of containment abroad and reform at home as a "new frontier" for the United States. Just 3 years later, on November 22, 1963, Kennedy was shot and killed in Dallas, Texas. After taking the oath of office to succeed him, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson vowed to accomplish the goals that Kennedy had set. After winning the presidency in the 1964 election, Johnson set out to realize his vision of a Great Society.

The tutorial examines the early 1960s in four parts:

1. The Rise of JFK

The son of Joseph P. Kennedy, a wealthy Boston business owner and former ambassador to Great Britain, **John F. Kennedy** (JFK) graduated from Harvard University and (beginning in 1946) represented Massachusetts in the House of Representatives. In 1952, he was elected to the Senate and, in 1960, won the Democratic nomination for president.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

John F. Kennedy

Democratic U.S. president from 1961 until his assassination in 1963, who continued America's hard-line stance against communism during the Cold War and who supported greater federal attention to African American civil rights.



DID YOU KNOW

In addition to his father's fortune, Kennedy's reputation as a war hero, having saved the crew of his patrol boat (PT boat) after the Japanese sank it, helped him win elections over more experienced candidates. For many American liberals who were concerned with civil rights and economic opportunity for all, Kennedy represented a bright future in which the United States would solve any problem that it faced. This view was partly a result of the style and attitude that Kennedy and his wife, Jacqueline, conveyed.



(a)

John F. Kennedy and First Lady Jacqueline, shown here in the White House in 1962 (a) and watching the America's Cup race that same year (b), brought youth, glamour, and optimism to Washington, DC, and the nation.



John F. Kennedy's (left) political style and optimism was on display during the first televised presidential debates in American history. Millions of viewers watched the debates between Kennedy and his Republican opponent, Vice President Richard M. Nixon (right), and millions more listened to them on the radio. Radio listeners judged Nixon the winner, while those who watched the debates on television believed that the more telegenic Kennedy was the winner.

Despite Kennedy's appeal to liberals and television viewers, the election of 1960 was very close.



DID YOU KNOW

Kennedy defeated Nixon by only 0.01% in the popular vote and won the Electoral College 303–219.

2. Descent Into Vietnam

Following his inauguration, Kennedy focused much of his attention on foreign policy. In addition to the events in Cuba that culminated in the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy had to deal with a deteriorating situation in Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam.

After declaring independence from France in 1945, the revolutionary leader **Ho Chi Minh** and a Vietnamese nationalist movement known as the Viet Minh became engaged in a long and bitter conflict with the French, who sought to maintain their imperial control of the country. The United States, beginning with President Harry Truman, supported its European ally.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Ho Chi Minh

Leader of the Vietnamese nationalist movement known as the Viet Minh, who fought against the French and later against the United States for control over Vietnam.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Although Truman and Eisenhower refused to send U.S. troops to fight with the French in Vietnam, they provided vital financial and material aid to the extent that, by 1954, the United States was paying most of the cost of France's war.

The Viet Minh defeated the French in the spring of 1954. Subsequent peace agreements divided Vietnam into northern and southern nations. National elections to select a government to reunify the country were scheduled for 1956.

Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh controlled North Vietnam. In South Vietnam, a staunchly anti-communist and French-educated prime minister, **Ngo Dinh Diem**, attempted to consolidate his control. After a fraudulent election in 1955, Diem proclaimed himself president of the Republic of Vietnam. With support from the Eisenhower administration, which believed that the Viet Minh was controlled by the Soviet Union and communist China, Diem canceled the elections to select a reunification government that were scheduled for 1956.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Ngo Dinh Diem

South Vietnamese politician and corrupt leader of South Vietnam from 1955 to 1963, who was supported by the American military and American economic aid until his assassination.

Realizing that Diem would never agree to reunifying the country under Ho Chi Minh's leadership, the North Vietnamese began to undermine his government by encouraging insurgents to attack South Vietnamese officials.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In 1960, North Vietnam created the National Liberation Front (NLF), known in the United States as the Viet Cong, to fight the Diem regime in the South.

To contain communism in Southeast Asia, the Eisenhower administration supported Diem's government with money and military advisors, even though he was an oppressive and corrupt ruler. Diem's regime was supported by wealthy, Catholic landowning families in South Vietnam, which alienated many poor farmers, students, and Buddhists.

In the aftermath of the close election, Kennedy, an ardent cold warrior, refused to allow the loss of South Vietnam to communism. He continued to supply the Diem regime with financial and military support.



DID YOU KNOW

By 1961, the United States had provided approximately \$1 billion in economic and military aid to the Diem regime.

There were 16,000 American soldiers in South Vietnam by November 1963. They trained members of South Vietnam's special forces and flew air missions that sprayed a defoliant chemical known as "Agent Orange" across the countryside to expose North Vietnamese and NLF forces and their supply routes.



By the time President Kennedy took office, the United States had sent an enormous amount of money and thousands of military advisors to South Vietnam. In the photograph above, Kennedy participates in a press conference about the growing conflict in Vietnam.

Source: Abbie Rowe.

Despite continued American support, Diem's government faltered. In October 1963, 1 month before his fateful trip to Dallas, Kennedy approved a military coup against the Diem regime. By 1964, South Vietnam appeared to be on the verge of collapse.

3. The Modern Civil Rights Movement Marches Onward

Although Kennedy wanted to focus on the Cold War, domestic developments surrounding the Civil Rights Movement, in which agitation and nonviolent protests were being met with violent resistance, required his attention. The movement was being advanced by the residents of specific communities (including students), as it had been during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. This was especially true of the **sit-in movement** that had emerged by 1960.



TERM TO KNOW

Sit-In Movement

A form of nonviolent protest utilized by civil rights activists.

On February 1, 1960, four sophomores at the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College in Greensboro—Ezell Blair Jr., Joseph McNeil, David Richmond, and Franklin McCain—entered the local Woolworth’s and sat at the lunch counter. The lunch counter was segregated, and they were refused service.



DID YOU KNOW

The four students chose Woolworth’s because it was part of a national chain and because they believed that the store’s segregation policy was vulnerable to negative publicity.



Segregated businesses, such as the Ohio business above that catered “to White trade only,” were targeted for sit-ins during the early 1960s.

Source: Library of Congress.

Over the next few days, more protesters joined the four sophomores at Woolworth’s counter. Hostile Whites responded with threats and taunted the students by pouring sugar and ketchup on their heads. Nevertheless, within 2 months, the sit-in movement had spread to 54 cities in nine states.

To coordinate student protests in Greensboro and elsewhere, **Ella Baker** and other grassroots activists organized the **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)**.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Ella Baker

African American civil rights activist who helped organize the Student Nonviolent Coordinating

Committee (SNCC).



TERM TO KNOW

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

Formed by students and activists in April 1960 to coordinate sit-ins and other demonstrations on behalf of civil rights.



Photograph of Ella Baker, one of the founders of SNCC.

In the spring of 1961, members of SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), another prominent civil rights organization, organized “**freedom rides**” to test the enforcement of a recent Supreme Court decision that prohibited segregation on interstate transportation.



TERM TO KNOW

Freedom Rides

Bus trips organized by civil rights activists to integrate racially segregated interstate buses and terminals.

Departing from Washington, DC, on May 4, Black and White “freedom riders” traveled south. By the time they reached Alabama, where they met open resistance from Southern Whites, the Kennedy administration was forced to intervene by dispatching federal marshals.



In the photograph above, “freedom riders” near Anniston, Alabama, escape from a bus after a White mob slit its tires and tossed a firebomb inside.



When the “freedom riders” reached Birmingham, Alabama, members of the Ku Klux Klan and mobs of local Whites (like those pictured above) attacked them with fists, baseball bats, pipes, and chains.

President Kennedy stated his support for civil rights during the presidential campaign, but he lacked sufficient support to advance a civil rights agenda in Congress, especially among Southern White Democrats. He feared a loss of Congressional support for his foreign policy goals if he pursued an aggressive civil rights agenda.

The violence that occurred during the “freedom rides” and the continued agitation of civil rights activists ultimately forced Kennedy to take action. On certain occasions, he was required to use the authority of the executive branch to protect African Americans.



In the photograph above (from the Library of Congress), James Meredith (center) attempts to enroll at the segregated University of Mississippi in 1962. When riots broke out on campus, President Kennedy sent the Army to restore order. U.S. Marshals ensured that Meredith was able to attend classes.

In the summer of 1963, Kennedy responded to civil rights activists, indicating that his administration supported a civil rights bill that would increase the federal government's power to enforce school desegregation, prohibit segregation in public accommodations, and outlaw employment discrimination. In a national broadcast in June, Kennedy appealed to the conscience of the nation when announcing his intentions:

President John F. Kennedy, Summer 1963

“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. 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.”



(a)



(b)

Perhaps the most famous of the civil rights-era demonstrations was the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, held in August 1963, to build support for the civil rights bill, then making its way through Congress. As the crowd gathered outside the Lincoln Memorial and across the National Mall, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, in which he called for an end to racial injustice in the United States and envisioned a harmonious, integrated society.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Martin Luther King Jr.

Baptist preacher, activist, and leader of the Civil Rights Movement, whose advocacy of nonviolent protest and civil disobedience characterized the movement for much of the 1950s and early 1960s.

4. The Beginnings of the Great Society

Unfortunately, President Kennedy did not live to see the civil rights bill enacted or to decide how the United States would deal with instability in Southeast Asia. On November 22, 1963, he was shot and killed by Lee Harvey Oswald while riding in a motorcade through Dallas.



Lee Harvey Oswald (center) was arrested at the Texas Theatre in Dallas a few hours after shooting President Kennedy. No credible evidence has proven that someone other than Oswald murdered Kennedy or that Oswald acted with coconspirators.

It fell to Kennedy's vice president, **Lyndon B. Johnson**, to secure the passage of the civil rights bill.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Lyndon B. Johnson

Democratic U.S. president from 1963 to 1969, whose grandiose domestic agenda for civil rights and economic equality, known as the Great Society, ran up against a growing conflict in Vietnam and an unraveling of the liberal New Deal coalition that supported the Democratic Party.



Lyndon B. Johnson (center) takes the oath of office on Air Force One, just hours after President Kennedy's assassination. Jacqueline Kennedy (right) looks on.

By the time of Kennedy's assassination, the civil rights bill had been passed in the House of Representatives, but it was stalled in the Senate. Johnson, who was the Senate majority leader before becoming vice president, used his political influence and the memories of his fallen predecessor to end a filibuster that had been launched by 18 Southern Democratic Senators and one Republican to prevent its passage. On July 2, 1964, Johnson signed the **Civil Rights Act of 1964** into law.



TERM TO KNOW

Civil Rights Act of 1964

Civil rights law that bans discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. The act contained strong provisions that accomplished the following:

- Banned discrimination in public accommodations, including restaurants and theaters
- Prohibited federal funding for schools and other institutions that practiced racial segregation
- Established an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to investigate cases of employment discrimination.

The Civil Rights Act became a key component of Lyndon Johnson's plan for a **Great Society**.

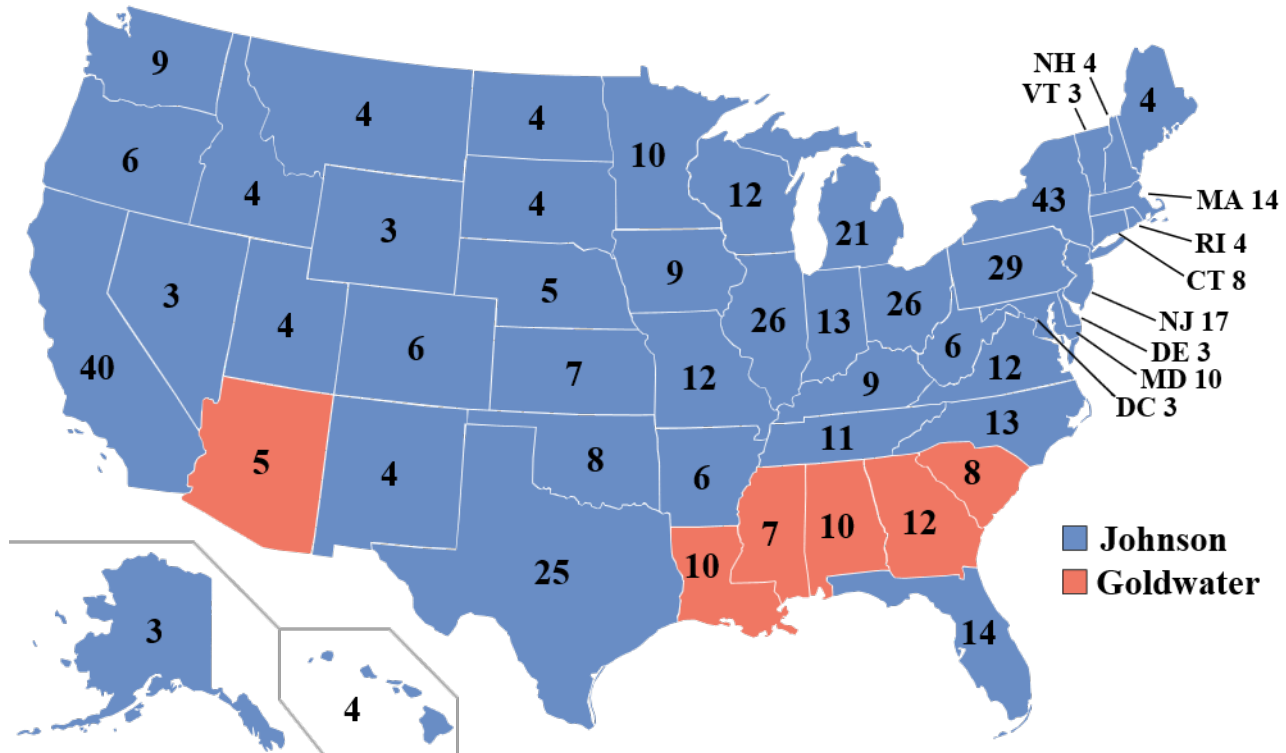


TERM TO KNOW

Great Society

Lyndon Johnson's plan to eliminate poverty and racial injustice in the United States and to improve the lives of all Americans.

In November 1964, Johnson was elected president in his own right in an overwhelming victory over Republican Senator Barry Goldwater.



During the election of 1964, Johnson received over 43 million popular votes, compared to 27 million for Goldwater, and won the Electoral College 486–52. However, this map also illustrates an important political shift, as several Southern states (that were once Democratic strongholds) voted Republican to express their opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

In January 1965, with commanding Democratic majorities in the House of Representatives and the Senate, Johnson began implementing his vision for the Great Society. In the course of combating racial discrimination and attempting to eliminate poverty, Johnson expanded the power of the federal government and redefined American liberalism.



SUMMARY

The early 1960s were marked by optimism and frustration. The rise of John F. Kennedy and his “new frontier” reinforced the belief that the United States could solve any problem it faced. However, American involvement in Vietnam failed to stabilize Southeast Asia, and South Vietnam was on the brink of collapse by the time of Kennedy’s assassination. The efforts of civil rights activists at the grassroots level eventually convinced the Kennedy administration to support a civil rights bill. Whether Kennedy would have scaled back American involvement in Vietnam and increased his commitment to civil rights are two of the biggest “what-ifs” in U.S. history. The enactment of the Civil Rights Act and

Lyndon Johnson's subsequent victory in the 1964 presidential election made it seem as if American liberalism was more popular than it had been since the New Deal.

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REFERENCES

Kennedy's civil rights announcement- June 1963- John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. Television Network Columbia Broadcasting System Collection. Retrieved 5/1/17 from: bit.ly/2fAh9zi



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