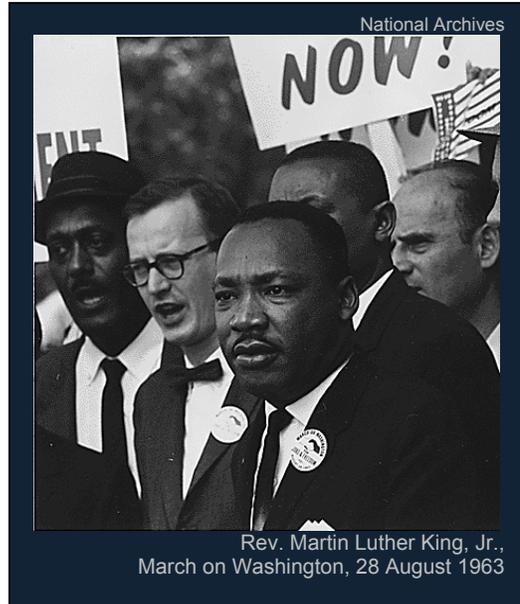




Martin Luther King, Jr. Fumbling on the New Frontier *The Nation*, 3 March 1962

In our issue of Feb. 4, 1961, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., outlined a program on civil rights which he thought the newly installed Kennedy Administration might fruitfully follow. The title was "Equality Now: The President Has the Power"; the thesis, that faster progress toward racial equality could be made by the exercise of existing Executive authority than through Congress where, in the last analysis, the Dixiecrats¹ wield decisive power.

Mr. King's original article was projected as the first of a series of annual reviews by him of the fight for racial equality. In the following article, the year 1961 comes under scrutiny. It goes without saying that the American Negro has no more knowledgeable or influential spokesman than this Southern clergyman, who rose to national prominence during the historic Montgomery bus boycott and is now President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.—EDITORS.



THE KENNEDY Administration in 1961 waged an essentially cautious and defensive struggle for civil rights against an unyielding adversary. As the year unfolded, Executive initiative became increasingly feeble, and the chilling prospect emerged of a general Administration retreat. In backing away from an Executive Order to end discrimination in housing, the President did more to undermine the confidence in his intentions than could be offset by a series of smaller accomplishments during the year. He has begun 1962 with a show of renewed aggressiveness; one can only hope that it will be sustained.

In any case, it is clear that vigorous young men of this Administration have displayed a certain *élan* in the attention they give to civil-rights issues. Undaunted by Southern backwardness and customs, they conceived and launched some imaginative and bold forays. It is also clear that this Administration has reached out more creatively than its predecessors to blaze some new trails, notably in the sensitive areas of voting and registration. Moreover, President Kennedy has appointed more Negroes to key government posts than has any previous administration. One Executive Order has been issued which, if vigorously enforced, will go a long, long way toward eliminating employment discrimination in federal agencies and in industries where government contracts are involved. So it is obvious that the Kennedy Administration has to its credit some constructive and praiseworthy achievements.

With regard to civil rights, then, it would be profoundly wrong to take an extreme position either way when viewing the Administration. While the President has not yet earned unqualified confidence and support, neither has he earned rejection and withdrawal of support. Perhaps his earnestness of attitude, fed with the vitamins of mass action, may yet grow into passionate purpose. The civil-rights movement must remain critical and flexible, watchful and active.

It is fortunate that the initiatives that President Kennedy has directed toward the reduction of international tensions present no contradictions with respect to civil rights. The Administration need have no fear that the white South will punish it for its desegregation attitudes by withholding support for a new foreign policy. While white and Negro Southerners have not yet mastered the art of living together in a relaxed society of brotherhood, they are united in the desire to remain alive. Indeed, Negroes *need* an

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¹ Dixiecrats: Southern segregationist faction of the Democratic Party, 1948-ca. 1980. [NHC note]

international *détente*, because in a period of tensions and crisis their needs are easily forgotten, and a political rigidity grips the nation that sharply inhibits social change.

THE YEAR 1961 was characterized by inadequacy and incompleteness in the civil-rights field. It is not only that the Administration too often retreated in haste from a battlefield which it has proclaimed a field of honor, but — more significantly — its basic strategic goals have been narrowed. Its efforts have been directed toward limited accomplishments in a number of areas, affecting few individuals and altering old patterns only superficially. Changes in depth and breadth are not yet in sight, nor has there been a commitment of resources adequate to enforce extensive change. It is a melancholy fact that the Administration is aggressively driving only toward the limited goal of token integration.

It is important to understand the perspective from which this criticism develops. The paradox of laudable limited progress on the one hand, and frustrating insufficiency of progress on the other, is understandable if it is realized that the civil-rights struggle can be viewed from two quite dissimilar perspectives. Many people of good will accept the achievement of steady advances, even when fractional. They feel simple addition must eventually accumulate a totality of social gains which will answer the problem. Others, however, viewing the task from the long perspective of history, are less sanguine. They are aware that the struggle being waged is against an opposition capable of the most tenacious resistance, either actively or through inertia. Such forces are not overcome by simple pressures, but only through massive exertion. This is a law not alone of physics, but of society as well.

TO illustrate, it is not practical to integrate buses, and then over an extended period of time expect to add another gain, and then another and another. Unfortunately, resistance stiffens after each limited victory; inertia sets in, and the forward movement not only slows down, but is often reversed entirely. What is required to maintain gains is an initial sweep of positive action so far-reaching that it immobilizes and weakens the adversary, thus depriving him of his power to retaliate. Simultaneously, in order that public officials are not left free to circumvent the law by local devices, an extensive campaign to put the franchise in the hands of Negroes must be conducted. These programs, in turn, require for their success that a corps of responsible leaders be trained and developed — that ample legal defense skills and financial resources be available. In short, what is required is massive social mobilization uniting the strength of individuals, organizations, government, press and schools.

It is clear that to date no Administration has grasped the problem in this total sense and committed the varieties of weaponry required for constructive action on so broad a scale.

BEYOND this, the American Negro is impelled by psychological motives not fully understood even by his white allies. Every Negro, regardless of his educational or cultural level, carries the burden of centuries of deprivation and inferior status. The burden is with him every waking moment of his life — and often, through his dreams, dominates his sleeping moments as well. It diminished his confidence and belittles his achievements. He is tormented by the overwhelming task of catching up. This problem sharpens to a razor edge when he confronts a new struggle and is aware of the pitiful inadequacy of his resources.



When the nation feels threatened by war, a military budget of some \$50 billion is freely spent each year to achieve security. Not even \$1 billion a year is spent by government on behalf of 20,000,000 Negroes seeking to defend themselves from the persistent attack on their rights. When Negroes look from their overworked, undermanned civil-rights organizations to their government, they see in Washington only a tiny bureau, equally undermanned and overworked, hopelessly incapable of doing what is necessary. They cannot feel certain that progress is over tomorrow's horizon, or even that the government has any real understanding of the dimensions of their problems.

Their sense of inadequacy is further heightened when they look at Africa and Asia and see with envy the bursting of age-old bonds in societies still partially at a tribal level, but ablaze with modern vitality and creativity. An Alliance for Progress for South America, to cost \$20 billion, is forward-looking and necessary. An Alliance for Progress for the turbulent South is equally necessary.

From this perspective, the New Frontier is unfortunately not new enough; and the Frontier is set too close to the rear.

In the year that has just passed, certain significant developments occurred in the South that are worthy of comment. Despite tormenting handicaps, Negroes moved from sporadic, limited actions to broad-scale activities different in kind and degree from anything done in the past. City after city was swept by boycotts, sit-ins, freedom rides and registration campaigns. A new spirit was manifest in the Negro's willingness to demonstrate in the streets of communities in which, by tradition, he was supposed to step aside when a white man strode toward him.

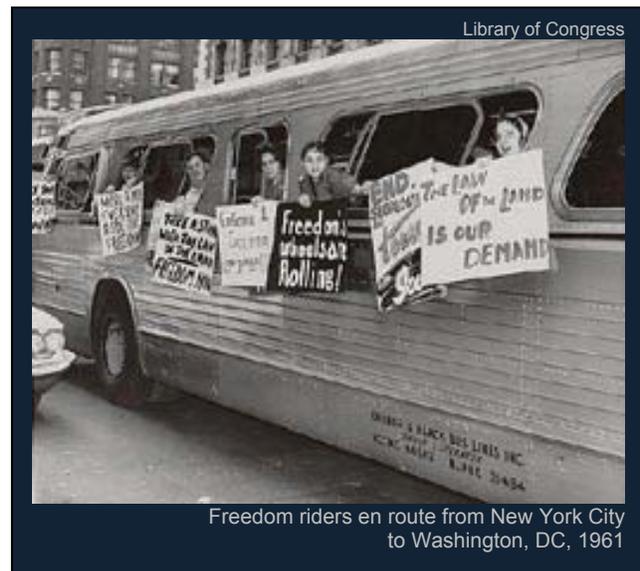
The change in spirit was even more dramatically exemplified by the Negroes' willingness, in communities such as Albany, Georgia, to endure mass jailing. Words cannot express the exultation felt by the individual as he finds himself, with hundred of his fellows, behind prison bars for a cause he knows is just. This exultation has been felt by businessmen, workers, teachers, ministers, housewives, housemaids — in ages ranging from early teens to the seventies. Significantly, these people were not gathered from across the nation; all were local residents, except for a few "outsiders" and "aliens" — including this writer, who is from far-off Atlanta, Georgia.

To the depth of these movements was added breadth when areas such as Mississippi and rural Georgia, hitherto quiescent, were churned into turbulence by registration campaigns and freedom rides.

THUS 1961 saw the Negro moving relentlessly forward against an opposition that was occasionally reasonable, but unfortunately more often vicious. It was a year of the victory of the nonviolent method: though blood flowed, not one drop was drawn by a Negro from his adversary. Yet the victories were scored by the victims, not by the violent mobs.

These highlights are cited to illustrate that Negroes, despite short-comings and a flood of unresolved problems, were spiritedly meeting their obligation to act.

It is against this backdrop that the inquiry into the experience of 1961 turns us again to the Administration and its responsibilities. At the beginning of the year, the cautious approach of the Administration turned a possible spectacular victory into a tragic defeat. A move was made in the Senate to end the two-thirds cloture rule — the legislative incinerator that burns into ashes all civil-rights bills. At the climactic moment, the Administration remained mute instead of carrying out its pledge of active leadership. Even so, the measure was defeated by a narrow 50-46 vote. No one doubts that had the Administration spoken, a historic victory would have resulted.



THE Administration then brought forth a plan to substitute Executive orders for legislative programs. The most challenging order, to end discrimination in federal housing, while no adequate substitute for the many legislative acts promised in campaign platforms and speeches, nevertheless was alluring, and pressure abated for Congressional action. The year passed and the President fumbled. By the close of the year, a new concept was adopted: the President now wished to “move ahead in a way which will maintain a consensus.” According to Washington observers, this concept derived from the President’s concern that his legislative programs in other areas, notably his trade program, might suffer at the hands of key Southern Congressmen — if he moved “too fast” on civil rights.

For years, Abraham Lincoln resisted signing the Emancipation Proclamation because he feared to alienate the slaveholders in the border states. But the imperatives of the Civil War required that slavery be ended, and he finally signed the document and won the war, preserved the nation, and gave America its greatest hour of moral glory. President Kennedy may be tormented by a similar dilemma, and may well be compelled to make an equally fateful decision — one which, if correct, could be found a century later to have made the nation greater and the man more memorable.

Though one can respect the urgency of trade legislation to facilitate competition with the European Common Market, the 20 million Americans who have waited 300 years to be able to compete as human beings in the market place at home have the right to question whether, this year, trade agreements are more important than their long-postponed freedom. Should Americans favor the winning of the welfare and trade programs in Congress at the cost of the Negro citizen’s elementary rights?

Are we seeking our national purpose in the spirit of Thomas Jefferson, who said: “All men are created equal . . . endowed with certain inalienable rights. . . . Among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”? Or are we pursuing the national purpose proclaimed by Calvin Coolidge, who said: “The business of America is business”?

It may be an electrifying act to shelve trade bills for human-rights legislation because it has never been done before. Perhaps that alone is reason enough to do it.



EVEN apart from morality, practical considerations require a different course. The defensive posture of the President against adversaries seasoned in the art of combat, and older than the nation itself, will increase his impotence, not release his strength. They have already paralyzed his Executive power by holding hostage his legislative program. If he cannot break out of this prison, he will be unable to either to influence legislation or use his Executive powers, and in this confinement he may become a tragically helpless figure.

Impotence at a moment of kaleidoscopic world change is even worse than error. The President is seeking compromises acceptable to his jailers, but they would rather paralyze him than accept compromises. It is deeply significant that the activities of the ultra-right-wing organizations are aimed principally at the President, and that the one issue uniting all the disparate rightist groups is their virulent opposition to civil rights. He has already challenged them, boldly, but holding to the offensive on civil rights is part of the challenge.

The President and the Administration are impressively popular. The President will have to take his fight to the people, who trust him. He must now trust *them*. He can be confident that correct policy, sound issues and an aroused

Danny Lyon & Library of Congress



Drinking fountains labelled "Colored" and "White," county courthouse, Albany, Georgia, ca. 1963, photograph by Danny Lyon, staff photographer with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

people are a fortress mightier than a hundred reactionary committee chairmen. An illustrious predecessor, Franklin Roosevelt, relied more on the weight of the people than on maneuvering in Congressional cloakrooms.

IF THE President acts, his leadership will communicate strength to waiting millions. Firm, decisive direction from him will galvanize the forces that can turn a program into an actuality. "Nothing in the world is stronger," Victor Hugo said, "than an idea whose time has come." The nation is ready and eager for bold leadership in civil rights. This is evident in the scope and quality of the actions that were conducted last year even in the absence of sustained, strong, national leadership.

The opportunity is not yet lost, nor has the sincerity of the Administration been irrevocably discredited. But the clock of history is nearing the midnight hour and an upsurge in governmental activity is an inescapable necessity. The Negro in 1962 — almost one hundred years after slavery's demise — justifiably looks to government for comprehensive, vital programs which will change the totality of his life.

Civil rights will continue for many decades to remain a political football unless the national government abandons the traditional piecemeal approach and constructs a long-term plan. India and other underdeveloped nations, confronting the monumental challenge to liquidate centuries

of backwardness, have relied upon detailed plans of two years, four years, six years. The plans define the specific steps to be taken by stages which will lift the nation into a new era. We are not strangers to such conceptions. The President has proposed a ten-year plan to put a man on the moon. We do not yet have a plan to put a Negro in the State Legislature in Alabama.

The development of a plan for the nation-wide and complete realization of civil rights would accomplish several purposes. It would affirm that the nation is committed to solve the problem within a stated period of time; it would establish that the full resources of government would be available to that end, whatever the cost. (In this connection, it is well to remember that our country built its foundations on a cotton economy based on two centuries of virtually unpaid labor by millions of Negroes.) Finally, a plan would enable the nation to assess progress from time to time, and would declare to those who dream that segregation and discrimination can still be preserved that they must begin to live with the realities of the twentieth century.