

# Extended Controversial Issue Discussion Lesson Plan

## *Structured Academic Controversy*

To what extent were civil rights a priority in the Kennedy administration?



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# Extended Controversial Issue Discussion Lesson Plan

**Lesson Title:** To what extent were civil rights a priority for the Kennedy administration?

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**Appropriate for Grade Level:** 11(AP)

**US History Standard(s)/Applicable CCSS(s):**

**H3.[9-12].9** Identify and describe the major issues, events, and people of minority rights movements, i.e., Civil Rights.

**CCSS:** Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

**CCSS:** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

**CCSS:** Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

**Discussion Questions:** Students will be responding to the following question: To what extent were civil rights a priority for the Kennedy administration?

**Engagement Strategy:** *Structured Academic Controversy.*

**Student Readings:** Student Readings are located in the lesson plan.

**Total Time Needed:** 2 hours, 15 minutes

**Lesson Outline:**

Time Frame	What is the teacher doing?	What are the students doing?
Day 1: 30 min.	Pass out the primary and secondary source readings to the class. Instruct students to begin reading the documents and complete the questions for homework.	Students will begin working on reading and answering questions. They may take the primary and secondary source documents home to read and complete the questions if they do not finish during class time.
Day 2: 25 min.	Teacher will place students in groups of four and review the Structured Academic Controversy strategy. Students will be instructed to spend a few minutes reviewing the content of the sources and asking any follow up questions. Place students in teams, two on Team A and two on Team B. Team A will argue that civil rights were a priority and Team B will argue that civil rights were not a priority. Ask each team to complete the first part "Preparing My Argument" of the Structured Academic Controversy graphic organizer worksheet.	Students will review the content of the documents with their group members. Students will then complete the "Preparing My Argument" portion of the Structured Academic Controversy worksheet with their Teammate.

Day 2: 10 min.	Teacher will instruct Team A to present their claims and evidence while Team B records the argument on their Structured Academic Controversy worksheet. Then switch and have Team B present while Team A records information. Teacher will be actively observing groups while circulating around the classroom.	Team A will present while Team B records information. Then Team B will present while Team A records information.
Day 2: 10 min.	After both teams have presented, Teachers will instruct the teams to discuss what issues and points they can agree on and what things they still need clarification on.	Students will be discussing and recording what things they agree on and what things they still have questions on using their worksheet.
Day 2: 1 hour.	Teacher will instruct students to take out a blank piece of paper to write an FRQ response. Students will be timed and have only 30 minutes to respond. Teacher will use the standard AP FRQ rubric to have students self assess and peer assess their responses.	Students will have 30 minutes to write an FRQ response. They will then use the AP FRQ rubric to assess themselves and each other.

### **Description of Lesson Assessment:**

Students will be answering questions relating to each document and completing the Structured Academic Strategy Worksheet. The final assessment will be a written FRQ that students will complete individually in class. The standard AP FRQ rubric will be used to assess the student FRQ's.

### **How will students reflect on the process and their learning?:**

Students will reflect on the process after writing their FRQ. They will complete a self assessment.

### **Historical Background:**

John F. Kennedy is often remembered for the advancement of civil rights and regarded by some as a great champion of civil rights. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 is frequently cited as evidence of Kennedy's strong stance and promotion of civil rights. Yet, the validity of this perception of Kennedy has been questioned and debated. Critics argue that the issue is far more complex and that a simplistic characterization of Kennedy as a staunch advocate of civil rights is at the very least an exaggeration and an oversimplification of Kennedy's record on the issue.<sup>1</sup> They dispute this romanticized view of Kennedy, arguing that Kennedy's background, lack of political ideology, and personal political motivations motivated Kennedy's moderate and limited approach to the civil rights issue.<sup>2</sup> Proponents argue that civil rights were in fact a priority for Kennedy and the gradual approach taken by his administration was the best course of action in order to make significant progress on the issue.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Klaus Fischer, *America in White, Black, and Gray* (New York, The continuum International Publishing Group), 83.

<sup>2</sup> Nevins, *The Politics of Injustice*, (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press), 1

<sup>3</sup> James Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Kansas, University of Kansas Press), 159.

## To what extent were civil rights a priority in the Kennedy administration?

### Source 1: Robert Kennedy's conversation with Martin Luther King, Jr. regarding the Freedom Riders

One of the most important choices made by the Freedom Riders had been made in advance. Understanding that they would face arrest and prosecution for their actions, nearly all the Riders agreed that they would serve time in jail instead of paying bail. When the Riders arrived in Jackson, Mississippi, they were arrested for breach of the peace—and, as planned, they refused bail. Robert Kennedy, worried for the Freedom Riders' safety in a Mississippi jail and hoping for an end to the crisis, called King to see if he would try to convince the Freedom Riders to take a different approach. Arsenault notes that "the conversation testified to the wide ideological gap between nonviolent activists and federal officials—even those who had considerable sympathy for the cause of civil rights." In his book on the subject, Arsenault reproduces the conversation:

*King: It's a matter of conscience and morality. They must use their lives and bodies to right a wrong. Our conscience tells us that the law is wrong and we must resist, but we have a moral obligation to accept the penalty.*

*Kennedy: This is not going to have the slightest effect on what the government is going to do in this field or any other. The fact that they stay in jail is not going to have the slightest effect on me.*

*King: Perhaps it would help if students came down here by the hundreds—by the hundreds of thousands.*

*Kennedy: The country belongs to you as much as to me. You can determine what's the best just as well I can, but don't make statements that sound like a threat. That's not the way to deal with us. [a pause]*

*King: It's difficult to understand the position of oppressed people. Ours is a way out—creative, moral and nonviolent. It is not tied to black supremacy or Communism, but to the plight of the oppressed. It can save the soul of America. You must understand that we've made no gains without pressure and I hope that pressure will always be moral, legal and peaceful.*

*Kennedy: But the problem won't be settled in Jackson, but by strong federal action.*

*King: I'm deeply appreciative of what the administration is doing. I see a ray of hope, but I am different from my father. I feel the need of being free now.*

*Kennedy: Well, it all depends on what you and the people in jail decide. If they want to get out, we can get them out.*

*King: They'll stay.*

**Questions: Make a claim or assertion when you respond to each of the following sentences. Cite the specific line in the document that supports your claim.**

1. What were Robert Kennedy's reasons for calling King?
2. What different approach was Kennedy trying to convince King to take?
3. Summarize the ideological gap between nonviolent activists and federal officials that Kennedy alludes to.

## To what extent were civil rights a priority in the Kennedy administration?

### Source 2: Raymond Arsenault, Discussion of Robert Kennedy's response to the Freedom Riders

Outraged by both the violence and the violent images making headline news across the country, President Kennedy wanted the Freedom Rides to stop, or at least be delayed. The bulk of the responsibility for the Freedom Riders fell to the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy. He was charged with doing what he could to make the crisis go away. Robert Kennedy asked his longtime friend, Justice Department representative John Seigenthaler, to mediate between the Freedom Riders and southern politicians. A native of Nashville, Tennessee, Seigenthaler had local roots that Robert Kennedy hoped would help ease tensions with southern politicians.

If they couldn't stop the second round of Freedom Rides, the Kennedy administration could at least stop the violence. In an effort to enlist the help of local law enforcement, Seigenthaler and the Kennedys sought the support of Governor Patterson. Negotiations with Patterson were difficult. He blamed The Riders for the situation, not the violent mob. Furthermore, he was not willing to risk the political consequences of being seen as supporting the Riders. Without the cooperation of local law enforcement, the president's advisors suggested sending in the army or the National Guard. Hoping to avoid direct intervention, the president called Governor Patterson. Patterson refused to take the call, however, claiming to be on a fishing trip. When Seigenthaler was finally able to meet with the governor, Patterson claimed that the stand he was taking made him more popular than the president. Despite this talk, Seigenthaler left believing that Patterson would ultimately accept his responsibility and allow the Freedom Riders to leave the state safely without the need for federal intervention. He was wrong.

When the Greyhound bus carrying Freedom Riders arrived at the Montgomery station, there wasn't a single policeman to be found. The Riders entered the station cautiously, prepared to speak to the members of the press who were there to cover the event. Within minutes, a violent mob overtook the station, mercilessly beating the Riders, the press, and even John Seigenthaler, who was there to meet the Riders.

The next day, Robert Kennedy called for federal intervention. In his book *Freedom Riders*, Raymond Arsenault explains:

Robert Kennedy did not like the idea of alienating the voters of a state that had just given his brother five electoral votes, but he was running out of patience—and options. Though politically expedient, relying on state and local officials to preserve civic order was too risky. . . [President Kennedy] saw no alternative to a show of real federal force in Alabama. With the summit [with Soviet Premier Khrushchev] less than two weeks away, he simply could not allow the image and moral authority of the United States to be undercut by a mob of racist vigilantes, or, for that matter, by a band of headstrong students determined to provoke them.

As the activists' efforts progressed, Robert Kennedy became more invested in the Freedom Rides and civil rights. On May 29, 1961, the attorney general committed himself fully to the Freedom Riders' mission by directly petitioning the Interstate Commerce Commission for the enforcement of integration in interstate travel.

**Questions: Make a claim or assertion when you respond to each of the following sentences. Cite the specific line in the document that supports your claim.**

1. How did Robert Kennedy view the Freedom Riders' situation and what did he try to do about it?
2. Why did the President want to avoid direct intervention and what does that reflect about his view of the situation?
3. Why did Robert Kennedy call for federal action despite having reservations?

## To what extent were civil rights a priority in the Kennedy administration?

### Source 3: President Kennedy's Civil Rights Address, 1963

I hope that every American, regardless of where he lives, will stop and examine his conscience about this and other related incidents. This Nation was founded by men of many nations and backgrounds. It was founded on the principle that all men are created equal, and that the rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened.

Today, we are committed to a worldwide struggle to promote and protect the rights of all who wish to be free. And when Americans are sent to Vietnam or West Berlin, we do not ask for whites only. It ought to be possible, therefore, for American students of any color to attend any public institution they select without having to be backed up by troops. It ought to be possible for American consumers of any color to receive equal service in places of public accommodation, such as hotels and restaurants and theaters and retail stores, without being forced to resort to demonstrations in the street, and it ought to be possible for American citizens of any color to register and to vote in a free election without interference or fear of reprisal. It ought to be possible, in short, for every American to enjoy the privileges of being American without regard to his race or his color. In short, every American ought to have the right to be treated as he would wish to be treated, as one would wish his children to be treated. But this is not the case.

...We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it, and we cherish our freedom here at home, but are we to say to the world, and much more importantly, to each other that this is the land of the free except for the Negroes; that we have no second-class citizens except Negroes; that we have no class or caste system, no ghettos, no master race except with respect to Negroes?

Now the time has come for this Nation to fulfill its promise. The events in Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased the cries for equality that no city or State or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them. 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 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. It is not enough to pin the blame on others, to say this a problem of one section of the country or another, or deplore the facts that we face. A great change is at hand, and our task, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all. Those who do nothing are inviting shame, as well as violence. Those who act boldly are recognizing right, as well as reality.

**Questions: Make a claim or assertion when you respond to each of the following sentences. Cite the specific line in the document that supports your claim.**

1. What does JFK believe all persons should be able to do?
2. What is the contradiction that JFK refers to in lines 17-20?
3. How does JFK want to respond to the "moral crisis"?
4. What "change" is JFK referring to in line 31 and why does JFK say that the "change" is an obligation?

## To what extent were civil rights a priority in the Kennedy administration?

### Source 4: Robert Dallak, *President John f. Kennedy's Civil Rights Quandary, 2006*

In the two years after he became president, John F. Kennedy faced no more daunting domestic issue than the tension between African Americans demanding equal treatment under the Constitution and segregationists refusing to end the South's system of apartheid. While Kennedy tried to ease the problem with executive actions that expanded black voting, job opportunities and access to public housing, he consistently refused to put a major civil rights bill before Congress.

He believed that a combination of Southern Democrats and conservative Republicans would defeat any such measure and jeopardize the rest of his legislative agenda, which included a large tax cut, federal aid to elementary and secondary education, and medical insurance for the elderly. His restraint, however, did little to appease Southern legislators, who consistently helped block his other reforms.

When a civil rights crisis erupted in Birmingham, Ala., in the spring of 1963, Kennedy considered shifting ground and pressing for congressional action. In May, as black demonstrators, including many high school and some elementary school children, marched in defiance of a city ban, police and firemen attacked the marchers with police dogs that bit several demonstrators and high-pressure fire hoses that knocked marchers down and tore off their clothes. The TV images, broadcast across the country and around the world, graphically showed out-of-control racists abusing innocent young advocates of equal rights. Kennedy, looking at a picture on the front page of *The New York Times* of a dog lunging to bite a teenager on the stomach, said that the photo made him sick.

But Kennedy's response was more than visceral. He saw an end to racial strife in the South as essential to America's international standing in its competition with Moscow for influence in Third World countries. Moreover, Kennedy feared that as many as 30 Southern cities might explode in violence during the summer. The prospect of race wars across the South convinced him that he had to take bolder action. Burke Marshall, the assistant attorney general for the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, recalled that the president now saw Birmingham as representative of a pattern that 'would recur in many other places.' JFK, Marshall said, 'wanted to know what he should do—not to deal with Birmingham, but to deal with what was clearly an explosion in the racial problem that could not, would not, go away, that he had not only to face up to himself, but somehow to bring the country to face up to and resolve.'

**Questions: Make a claim or assertion when you respond to each of the following sentences. Cite the specific line in the document that supports your claim.**

1. According to Dallak, why did JFK consistently refuse to put a major civil rights bill before congress?
2. What primary concerns caused JFK to shift his opinion and press for congressional action?

## To what extent were civil rights a priority in the Kennedy administration?

### Source 5: Interview by John Stewart regarding the 1960 presidential campaign, Simeon Booker, Journalist 1967

BOOKER: Well, I think the Kennedys had doped out the Negro position thusly, as one of the Kennedys told me later: "A man has first got to become president before he can help Negroes, and Negroes can't help a man become president, unless it is voting for him at an election." And so their whole strategy was geared to keeping a certain image among the Negro, making statements here and there, but realizing the Negro wasn't part of the technical machinery of the primary, the Convention— but a few Negro delegates in the long run. And by taking too strong a view early, they could lose the entire South, the Midwest, the far West. I think intentionally he just stayed away from making any overall approach toward Negroes. His strategy was to just keep in with Negroes he considered powerful or who could help him. ...

He had no close relationship with any Negro so-called civil rights leaders. That was one area he just had no contact with.

..... In other words, they were using that same stereotypical appeal, taking Negro athletes or stage people, to try to appeal to Negroes. There wasn't any emphasis on civil rights, but just the same, you know, he would at least speak to, talk to Negroes.

.... I think early 1960 it was just his attitude and the fact that he wasn't conversant in civil rights, in all of the sectional sides of it. He wasn't familiar. He had to be briefed constantly. And that's what Negroes judge in a candidate—how articulate he is, how many of the dimensional factors he can bring up. Kennedy wasn't in that. He was more of a guy who would come in with a set speech, give it, and the questions were always sort of vague, open ended, sort of. He never got into any discussions of things specific.

...  
STEWART: Moving on then to the Kennedy Administration. You discuss in your book the attempts that, presumably, or at least you implied, that the Administration made to recruit many Negro leaders to, again presumably, break the back of the civil rights movement by taking so many people out of these organizations. Could you discuss some of the reasoning for this conclusion if that was a conclusion, of yours?

BOOKER: Well, I think Kennedy shifted. On the day before Inauguration Day I got a call that I had been named one of the eight to come over to Kennedy's house in the morning and to go all the way through it. To me, as being a Negro, when I first came here, I couldn't even get a White House press pass. I had just been denied everything because.... I saw great changes come over Kennedy in trying to do something. He had been committed to a certain point. The old prevailing way to deal with it would be to name one or two Negroes to key spots. Then you figure out what kind of program you can do to end, to get publicity on ending discrimination, and to develop into some kind of programs that would be useful. And the only people trained would be the people with a civil rights background. So once the word got out around the country that he was interested in this and that and the other, people were interested in coming to Washington. And he brought in a lot of people. Because he was beginning to see a collapse of the civil rights movement, he then figured, well, you can take leadership and you can jockey and you can work around them because he'd seen, I think he very wisely had seen, that the civil rights leader had a limited ability to reach the Negro down here in the metropolitan areas. He went around them to keep that image with the little Negro. He didn't give them the same respect that you see when Lyndon became President. He invited each one to the White House and he worked through them to get. Kennedy went around them, you see.

**Questions: Make a claim or assertion when you respond to each of the following sentences. Cite the specific line in the document that supports your claim.**

1. According to Booker, what was JFK's initial view on civil rights at the beginning of the campaign?
2. Why does Booker say JFK hired African American civil rights leaders?



## To what extent were civil rights a priority in the Kennedy administration?

### Source 6: Interview, James Farmer, Founder of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), 1967

STEWART: Mr. Farmer, why don't we begin by my asking you if you recall your earliest impressions of John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

FARMER: Yes. I suppose you mean impressions during the campaign or...

STEWART: Before.

FARMER: Before the campaign. Yes. I had not met the President until after the campaign, as a matter of fact, after he became President. My impressions of him before and during the campaign were that he was a man of goodwill and good intentions, but frankly I did not feel that he was extremely knowledgeable in the civil rights field or that he had a feeling for it. I would not say that now. He had a feeling for it. I would not say that now. He had a feeling for but not enough knowledge or acquaintance with civil rights. I felt that he did not know much about Negroes or their struggle because his life had been pretty much isolated from it up until that point. But he had the capacity to learn and to grow. That was my impression of him.

STEWART: Do you recall what your immediate reaction was to the news, in probably December or January of 1961, that the Administration wasn't going to push for legislation in the 1961 session?

FARMER: It was disappointment. Our reaction was one of great disappointment. And as a matter of fact, the attitude of the Administration up until the Birmingham demonstrations was opposition to civil rights legislation. It was their feeling, which they had expressed to civil rights organizations leaders, that new civil rights legislation was neither needed at the present time nor feasible, that there were enough laws on the books, and what was needed was an enforcement of those laws. The Administration's point of view changed at the time of Birmingham and subsequent demonstrations throughout the country. It was generally our feeling that we had to keep up the pressure. And we saw ourselves as being in the role of being in front of the President on civil rights issues, trying to pull the Administration forward, recognizing that there would be many who would be in back of the Administration trying to slow them down or pull them backward.

STEWART: Did you feel that the image of the Kennedys—and of course by 1962 people in the South were referring to them as “the Kennedys” rather than the President and the Attorney General.

FARMER: Yes, yes.

STEWART: Do you feel that this image had any significant impact on the success of the civil rights movement in the South?

FARMER: You mean the image in which Negroes held him or the whites?

STEWART: No, the image of white people, the fact that so many white people could throw all of their antagonisms onto the Kennedys.

FARMER: Well, yes, I think it did. By 1963 the Kennedys were thoroughly identified with the movement and with our thrust forward. Now, our position had been that this was the result of our having kept up the pressure and that the pressure had become intolerable, so they had to respond. So, that may be right or may be wrong, or partially right and partially wrong. Who knows? Who is able to say? But they were identified with the movement by the South and, to a great extent, then, by the movement itself. We considered that they had come a long way, the Administration had come a long way, in understanding what was taking place. Now, I personally regret that I did not get to know the Kennedys better during that period on a personal level because I think there was mutual misunderstanding at that point.

**Questions: Make a claim or assertion when you respond to each of the following sentences. Cite the specific line in the document that supports your claim.**

1. What was Farmer's view of JFK early in his administration?
2. According to Farmer, what was the administration's position on civil rights in 1961 and what caused it to shift?
3. By 1963, how did civil rights leaders view the Kennedy administrations view on civil rights?

## To what extent were civil rights a priority in the Kennedy administration?

### Source 7: Presidential Debates 1960, JFK's opening statement

SENATOR KENNEDY: Mr. Smith, Mr. Nixon. In the election of 1860, Abraham Lincoln said the question was whether this nation could exist half-slave or half-free. In the election of 1960, and with the world around us, the question is whether the world will exist half-slave or half-free, whether it will move in the direction of freedom, in the direction of the road that we are taking, or whether it will move in the direction of slavery. I think it will depend in great measure upon what we do here in the United States, on the kind of society that we build, on the kind of strength that we maintain. We discuss tonight domestic issues, but I would not want that to be any implication to be given that this does not involve directly our struggle with Mr. Khrushchev for survival. Mr. Khrushchev is in New York, and he maintains the Communist offensive throughout the world because of the productive power of the Soviet Union itself. The Chinese Communists have always had a large population. But they are important and dangerous now because they are mounting a major effort within their own country. The kind of country we have here, the kind of society we have, the kind of strength we build in the United States will be the defense of freedom. If we do well here, if we meet our obligations, if we're moving ahead, then I think freedom will be secure around the world. If we fail, then freedom fails. Therefore, I think the question before the American people is: Are we doing as much as we can do? Are we as strong as we should be? Are we as strong as we must be if we're going to maintain our independence, and if we're going to maintain and hold out the hand of friendship to those who look to us for assistance, to those who look to us for survival?

.....These are all the things, I think, in this country that can make our society strong, or can mean that it stands still. I'm not satisfied until every American enjoys his full constitutional rights. If a Negro baby is born—and this is true also of Puerto Ricans and Mexicans in some of our cities—he has about one-half as much chance to get through high school as a white baby. He has one-third as much chance to get through college as a white student. He has about a third as much chance to be a professional man, about half as much chance to own a house. He has about uh—four times as much chance that he'll be out of work in his life as the white baby. I think we can do better. I don't want the talents of any American to go to waste.

...

**Questions: Make a claim or assertion when you respond to each of the following sentences. Cite the specific line in the document that supports your claim**

1. What does Kennedy claim is the most important question at the time?
2. How does Kennedy propose to deal with that question?
3. Why do you think Kennedy is concerned with the constitutional rights of all Americans?



# Structured Academic Controversy

To What extent were civil rights a priority in the Kennedy administration?

- ✓ You will be placed in groups of 4.
- ✓ 2 of you will be on Team A and will discuss and provide evidence to support the opinion that civil rights were a priority in the Kennedy administration.
- ✓ 2 of you will be on Team B and will discuss and provide evidence to support the opinion that civil rights were not a significant priority for the Kennedy administration.
- ✓ In your group, you will first review the documents that you read and answered questions for at home and then prepare your argument with your partner.
- ✓ Your teacher will then guide you through the discussion. Team A will present their claims, reasons, and evidence first. Team B can ask any questions for clarification. Team B will then present their claims, reasons, and evidence. Team A can ask any questions for clarification. During the discussion you will both present your opinions **and** write down the opinions and evidence from the opposing side.
- ✓ After both teams have presented their side of the issue you will discuss together as a whole group what you can agree on what you still need clarification on or to debate further.

## Preparing My Argument

My Claims and Reasons

My Evidence & Examples

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# Structured Academic Controversy

To What extent were civil rights a priority in the Kennedy administration?

## The Other Side of the Issue

Opposing Claims & Reasons

Opposing Evidence & Examples

## Common Ground & Further Questions

We can agree that ...

We need further clarification on ...

Homework Assignment: Your task now is to write a standard FRQ response to the question. Be sure to include your claim (thesis) and supporting evidence.

Sarah Brown  
VHT  
May 17, 2012

Controversial Issue: To what extent were civil rights a priority in the Kennedy administration?

John F. Kennedy is often remembered for the advancement of civil rights and regarded by some as a great champion of civil rights. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 is frequently cited as evidence of Kennedy's strong stance and promotion of civil rights. Yet, the validity of this perception of Kennedy has been questioned and debated. Critics argue that the issue is far more complex and that a simplistic characterization of Kennedy as a staunch advocate of civil rights is at the very least an exaggeration and an oversimplification of Kennedy's record on the issue.<sup>4</sup> They dispute this romanticized view of Kennedy, arguing that Kennedy's background, lack of political ideology, and personal political motivations motivated Kennedy's moderate and limited approach to the civil rights issue.<sup>5</sup> Proponents argue that civil rights were in fact a priority for Kennedy and the gradual approach taken by his administration was the best course of action in order to make significant progress on the issue.<sup>6</sup>

Opponents of the view that civil rights were a priority in the Kennedy administration argue that Kennedy did not intend to put civil rights at the forefront of his domestic agenda, but rather was forced to increasingly consider and act on the issue.<sup>7</sup> Arguably, foreign policy was of far greater concern for Kennedy. This coupled with his limited background and knowledge of civil rights issues and his own political motivations are what made Kennedy reluctant to take

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<sup>4</sup> Klaus Fischer, *America in White, Black, and Gray* (New York, The continuum International Publishing Group), 83.

<sup>5</sup> Nevins, *The Politics of Injustice*, (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press), 1

<sup>6</sup> James Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Kansas, University of Kansas Press), 159.

<sup>7</sup> James Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Kansas, University of Kansas Press), 173-181.

significant action regarding civil rights until he had to.<sup>8</sup> Kennedy came from a wealthy, white, northern family and knew few blacks personally. Massachusetts did not have a large black population and he rarely encountered circumstances in which to witness issues of civil rights first hand.<sup>9</sup> Yet, he was a politician who understood the importance of winning the black vote and by the end of the 1950's Kennedy had begun to try to appeal to black southern voters in preparation for the 1960 presidential campaign. Arguably, these early efforts to acknowledge the civil rights issue were done out of political necessity to court the black voters of the south.<sup>10</sup> Kennedy tried to neutralize the issue in order to win over the Democratic South while not alienating the black southern vote at the same time.

Above all Kennedy was a nationalist who put the, "value of the country above the values of the country."<sup>11</sup> While Kennedy may have been moved to some degree by morality, he was far more concerned with the perception of the nation and the impact that segregation and racism was having both on the perception of America internationally and the divisiveness of the issue domestically. Kennedy's actions on civil rights were largely the result of his concerns regarding the Cold War crisis as evidenced in his responses during the televised presidential debates of 1960 and even his 1963 Civil Rights Address.<sup>12</sup> The Kennedy administration was concerned that the existence of virulent racism and segregation in America would undermine the nation's image and negatively impact Cold War efforts.

As a result of Kennedy's political motivations and foreign policy priorities, Kennedy emphasized moderation and a gradual approach to dealing with civil rights issues. Those who

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<sup>8</sup> James Giglio and Stephen Rabe, *Debating the Kennedy Presidency* (Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers), 11.

<sup>9</sup> James Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Kansas, University of Kansas Press), 160.

<sup>10</sup> David Nevin, *The Politics of Injustice* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press), 161-162.

<sup>11</sup> David Nevin, *The Politics of Injustice* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press), 161-162.

<sup>12</sup> Klaus Fischer, *America in White, Black, and Gray* (New York, The continuum International Publishing Group), 103.

argue that civil rights were not a priority for the administration claim that Kennedy moved exceedingly slow on the issue, refusing to take any immediate action. This hands-off approach is apparent in Kennedy's refusal to offer a civil rights bill in 1961, a lack of any sweeping executive order as black civil rights activists had hoped for and the diverting of the issue to the Department of Justice.<sup>13</sup> While Kennedy did appoint moderate black civil rights leaders to positions within his administration, critics contest that these were symbolic gestures aimed at creating a façade and a buffer between Kennedy and more radical civil rights leaders.<sup>14</sup> Civil rights, according to critics, did not become a priority for Kennedy until he was forced to make it a priority following the widely publicized accounts of violence that accompanied the Freedom Rides and other integration efforts. It was as a result of these events that Kennedy had to take a more hard line approach and a moral stance on the issue.

Proponents of the view of Kennedy as a champion of civil rights argue that despite his limited knowledge and interactions with blacks and his own personal political motivations, that Kennedy was indeed moved to do what was morally right. They acknowledge that Kennedy emphasized moderation and a gradual approach to dealing with the issue, but they argue that Kennedy knew this was the only effective means by which to make significant progress.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, what appears as reluctance and a lack of the desire to take strong, decisive action was actually a calculated decision by an administration who knew that there was no other way to make any headway on the issue. Public opinion regarding civil rights legislation, particularly in the south, was extremely low and Kennedy faced a strong conservative coalition in Congress. Both of these factors would have made it virtually impossible for Kennedy to have pushed a strong civil rights agenda immediately upon coming to office. Rather, Kennedy worked slowly

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<sup>13</sup> Klaus Fischer, *America in White, Black, and Gray* (New York, The continuum International Publishing Group), 83.

<sup>14</sup> James Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Kansas, University of Kansas Press), 160.

<sup>15</sup> James Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Kansas, University of Kansas Press), 161.



to build momentum through personal efforts to denounce segregation and requiring the Department of Justice to target voting rights violations.<sup>16</sup> According to this theory, civil rights were a priority in the administration from the beginning and dramatic events such as the Freedom Rides allowed the administration to act more forcefully and concretely on the issue.

The degree to which civil rights were a priority in the Kennedy administration is still debated today. Undoubtedly, the administration took what appears to be a gradual approach to dealing with civil rights. However, the motivations behind that gradual approach are still contested. While civil rights were a dominating domestic concern at the time, it is difficult to assess whether or not it was a priority for Kennedy or whether other domestic issues and foreign policy concerns took precedent.

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<sup>16</sup> James Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Kansas, University of Kansas Press), 164.

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