

# Famous Speeches: President Kennedy's 1963 Speech on Race

By John F. Kennedy, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.30.17

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President John F. Kennedy as he made a nationwide televised broadcast on civil rights in the White House, June 11, 1963. His talk climaxed a day during which Alabama Governor George Wallace defied a federal court order to admit two black students to the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa. Wallace withdrew after the National Guard was federalized and placed on duty on the university campus. The president asked the American people for help in ending racial discrimination and termed the fulfillment of African American rights a moral issue. Kennedy spoke from his office. AP Photo/Charles Gorry

*Editor's Note: In his address of June 11, 1963, delivered to the nation over radio and television, President John F. Kennedy (1917–1963) announced that he soon would ask Congress to pass major civil rights legislation. In his speech, JFK referred to events at the University of Alabama. Earlier that day, JFK had sent the Alabama National Guard to the university after Alabama Gov. George Wallace had refused to allow two black students to enroll there. The speech was given at a time of great tension over race. Hours after JFK delivered it, civil rights leader Medgar Evers was murdered by a white supremacist. Evers had worked to desegregate the University of Mississippi. Here is an edited transcript of JFK's speech.*

## "American Students Of Any Color"

Good evening my fellow citizens:

This afternoon, following a series of threats and defiant statements, National Guardsmen were sent to the University of Alabama. Their presence was required to carry out the order of the U.S. District Court of the Northern District of Alabama. That order called for the admission of two clearly qualified young Alabama residents who happened to have been born black.



I hope that every American will stop and examine his conscience about this and other related incidents. This nation was founded on the principle that all men are created equal, and that the rights of every man are reduced when the rights of one man are threatened.

Today, when we send our young men off to war, 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.

## **"To Enjoy The Privileges Of Being American"**

It ought to be possible for Americans of any color to receive equal service in hotels, restaurants, theaters and stores. And it ought to be possible for American citizens of any color to vote in a free election without interference.

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. Every American ought to have the right to be treated as we all would wish to be treated, and to expect his child to be treated like any other child. But this is not the case.

A black baby born in America today has about one-half as much chance of completing high school as a white baby born on the same day. He has one-third as much chance of completing college and of landing a good job. He is likely to earn only half as much, and has twice as much chance of becoming unemployed. Even his life expectancy is seven years shorter.

This is not a regional issue. Discrimination exists in every city, in every state, and in many cities it is producing a rising tide of anger that threatens the public safety. This is not even a legal or legislative issue alone. New laws are needed at every level, but law alone cannot make men see right.

We are confronted primarily with a moral issue.

## **"Equal Rights And Equal Opportunities"**

The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be given equal rights and equal opportunities. Is it fair and just that some Americans, only because their skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public? Is it right that they cannot send their children to the best public school available? Or freely vote for the public officials who will represent them?

It has been 100 years since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their grandsons and granddaughters are not fully free. They are not yet freed from the bonds of injustice. They are not yet freed from the burdens of social and economic inequality. And this nation, for all its hopes, will not be fully free until all its citizens are free.

We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it. Yet, for black Americans, this is not yet the land of the free.

Now the time has come for this nation to fulfill its promise. It is 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 is a problem of one section of the country or another. A great change is at hand, and our task is to make that change peaceful and constructive for all.

### **"I Am Asking For Your Help"**

I am, therefore, asking the Congress to pass legislation giving all Americans the right to be served in public facilities: hotels, restaurants, theaters, stores and similar establishments.

This seems to me to be an elementary right. No American in 1963 should lack this right, yet many do.

I am also asking the Congress to give the federal government more power to end segregation in public education. We have succeeded in persuading many districts to desegregate voluntarily. Today a black person is attending a state-supported institution in every one of our 50 states, but the pace of change is very slow.

Other changes will also be requested, including greater protection for the right to vote. But legislation, I repeat, cannot solve this problem alone. It must be solved in the homes of every American in every community across our country.

Therefore, I am asking for your help as we try to move our country forward. Please help us provide the kind of equal treatment we would want for ourselves, and for our own children.

Thank you very much.