

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

By John F. Kennedy, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.29.17

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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 enact landmark civil rights legislation. In his speech, JFK referred to the obstructionism and threats of violence then occurring at the University of Alabama, following desegregation attempts. 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. Martin Luther King Jr. called Kennedy's speech one of the strongest and most moving "pleas for justice and freedom of all*

*men ever made by any president." The speech was given at a time of great tension over race. Hours after JFK delivered it, famed civil rights leader Medgar Evers was gunned down by a white supremacist. Evers had worked to desegregate the University of Mississippi.*

*Here is an edited transcript of JFK's speech.*

## **"It Ought To Be Possible"**

Good evening my fellow citizens:

This afternoon, following a series of threats and defiant statements, the presence of Alabama National Guardsmen was required on the University of Alabama. The guardsmen were there to carry out the order of the United States 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 Negro.



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 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 hotels, restaurants, theaters and retail stores. And it ought to be possible for American citizens of any color to register 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 the right to expect his child to be treated like any other child — but this is not the case.

### **"This Is Not A Regional Issue"**

The Negro baby born in America today has about one-half as much chance of completing high school as a white baby born in the same place on the same day. He has one-third as much chance of completing college, and one-third as much chance of becoming a professional man. He has twice as much chance of becoming unemployed and the prospect of earning only half as much over time, and even his life expectancy is seven years shorter.

This is not a regional issue, it is not a matter of North versus South. Difficulties over segregation and discrimination exist in every city, in every state of the union, producing in many cities a rising tide of discontent that threatens the public safety. This is not even a legal or legislative issue alone. It is better to settle these matters in the courts than on the streets, and new laws are needed at every level, but law alone cannot make men see right.

We are confronted primarily with a moral issue.

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 vote for the public officials who will represent them?

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

We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it, and we cherish our freedom here at home. Yet, 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?

### **"Cannot Solve This Problem Alone"**

Now the time has come for this nation to fulfill its promise, and for it to live up to the values embedded in its Constitution. 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, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all.

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

This seems to me to be an elementary right, and its denial is an arbitrary injustice that no American in 1963 should have to endure, but many do.

I am also asking the Congress to authorize the federal government to participate more fully in lawsuits designed to end segregation in public education. We have succeeded in persuading many districts to desegregate voluntarily, and dozens have admitted Negroes without violence. Today a Negro is attending a state-supported institution in every one of our 50 states, but the pace 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 in making it easier for us to move ahead. Please help us provide the kind of equality of treatment that we would want for ourselves, and which we would want our own children to receive.

Thank you very much.