

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

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

Word Count **794**

Level **830L**



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: President John F. Kennedy (JFK) gave a speech to the nation on June 11, 1963. In it, he announced that he would be asking Congress to pass major new civil rights laws. In his speech, JFK spoke about events at the University of Alabama. Earlier that day, JFK had sent National Guard troops to the university after two black students were denied admission simply because of their color. Below is an edited version of JFK's speech.*

## "Think Deeply About This"

Good evening my fellow citizens:

This afternoon National Guardsmen were sent to the University of Alabama. They were there 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 young Alabamans who happened to have been born black. It is not right that anyone should try to stop them from attending the school of their choice.



I hope every American will think deeply about this and other related incidents. This nation was founded on the principle that all men are created equal.

When we send our young men off to war, we do not ask for whites only. Today, many black Americans serve in all branches of our military. Therefore, it ought to be possible for black students to attend whatever school they select. They should not have to be backed up by troops simply to get inside a college or high school classroom.

### **"The Right To Be Treated Equally"**

Justice is about more than just schools. Americans of any color should be able to receive equal service in hotels, restaurants, theaters and stores. They should be able to vote in a free and open election without any interference.

Every American ought to have the right to be treated equally. Their chances should be the same as everyone else's. But this is not the case.

A black baby born in America today does not have the same chances as a white baby. He has about one-half as much chance of completing high school. 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 money.

This is true all across this country. Discrimination exists in every city, in every state.

New laws are needed at every level, but law alone cannot make men see right.

The real question is whether all Americans are to be given equal rights and equal opportunities. Is it fair that many black Americans cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public? Is it right that they cannot send their children to a good public school? Or freely vote for the public officials who will represent them?

### **"Black Americans Are Still Not Fully Free:"**

It has been 100 years since President Lincoln freed the slaves. Yet, today black Americans are still not fully free. They are still burdened by injustice and inequality.

We seek to spread freedom around the world, and value our freedom at home. Yet, for the black American, this is not yet the land of the free.

The time has come for this nation to live up to its promise. It is time to act in the Congress and in state government. Above all, it is time for each of us to act in 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. It is time for a great change across our land.

### **"To End Segregation In Public Education"**

I am therefore asking Congress to pass certain major new laws. These laws will give all Americans the right to be served in hotels, restaurants, theaters, stores and other public places. No American in 1963 should lack this right, yet many do.

I am also asking Congress to give government more power to end segregation in public education. Blacks and whites should no longer be educated separately. Blacks must not be kept from attending any school simply because they are black.

I will ask for other changes as well, including greater protection for the right to vote. But new laws 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 this country a better place. Please help us provide all Americans the kind of equal treatment we would want for ourselves.

Thank you very much.