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The Turning Point for a Reluctant White House

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When many people think about the March on Washington 40 years ago this week, and the civil rights movement in general, the images that remain strongest are of Martin Luther King Jr. and thousands of grass-roots activists who took to the streets, organized protests and fought county by county in the South to force change. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, which he delivered on Aug. 28, 1963, has been enshrined as one of the great moments in American history, and the march galvanized millions of Americans to demand change. But just as vital to the movement, the march helped push a hesitant President John F. Kennedy to embrace the cause of civil rights reform, which led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a crucial step toward abolishing legalized racial discrimination.

Until very recently, it was easy to overlook how important Kennedy was to civil rights reform and how the change in his position in the last few months before his death set the stage for Lyndon Johnson's championship of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. For most of the past 40 years, the story of the civil rights movement has usually treated official Washington as at best a bystander and at worst an antagonistic obstacle to the cause. But in the past several years, both the Kennedy Library and the Johnson Library have released tapes made by the presidents while they were in the White House, and as the two of us listened to those tapes, we realized that the story of the civil rights movement has been missing a key chapter. Without question, the White House and Congress would never have embraced meaningful civil rights reform if African Americans in large numbers hadn't devoted their lives to the cause. But the tapes demonstrate that real change happened when it did because Kennedy and then Johnson made civil rights reform a personal crusade.

That matters to the history of the civil rights movement, but it also tells us something about leadership today. In an era when we think of politics as all calculation, what Kennedy and Johnson did on civil rights is a reminder that every now and then, politicians sacrifice what is expedient for what is right. And every now and then, they get rewarded for it at the polls.

When Kennedy first learned of plans for the march, he opposed it. As comments he made to King and others in June 1963 make clear, Kennedy was concerned that the march would fan the flames of opposition to civil rights and that it could easily turn violent.

It did neither. And Kennedy's subsequent actions suggest that he was strongly affected by the march. Immediately after it, the president met with civil rights leaders who thanked him for his commitment to the cause. A. Philip Randolph, head of the railway porters' union and a leader of the movement, told Kennedy, "Mr. President, it's obvious that it's going to take nothing less than a crusade to win approval for these civil rights measures. . . . And if it is going to be a crusade, I think nobody can lead this crusade but you."

After the march, Kennedy began to do just that. Earlier in the year, he had introduced civil rights legislation, but he'd been ambivalent about how far it should go. He knew that much of the South was bitterly opposed to desegregation and that prudence dictated a bill that would be rhetorically bold but would leave the status quo largely untouched. Tapes of meetings made in the spring of that year show a cautious Kennedy trying to craft a bill that could make it through the gantlet of a Senate filled with powerful Southerners. Tapes made in the fall -- after the march -- show a determined advocate of civil rights reform who aggressively pushed congressional leaders to go further, to give the federal government

the power to enforce desegregation in the South, especially by allowing for cases to be brought before a three-judge panel rather than a jury. It was extraordinarily rare for juries in the South to rule in favor of African Americans, and unless the complaints of the Justice Department could be decided by judges, ending segregation would be impossible.

Less than three months after the march, Kennedy was assassinated. We'll never know for sure what Kennedy would have done about civil rights had he lived, no more than we'll know how he would have handled Vietnam, but having listened to the tapes, we think we can say this about his stance on civil rights in the final months of his life: He was committed to ending generations of legal discrimination, and he was willing to stake both his reputation and the fate of the Democratic Party on it. "This fight is going to go on. . . . We're going to have another bill," he told one adviser in a tape-recorded meeting that fall. He would bend a bit to accommodate congressional moderates, but not at the expense of meaningful legislation. That determination then allowed Johnson to decide -- literally within hours of Kennedy's death -- to make civil rights the centerpiece of his administration. As Johnson told civil rights leader Whitney M. Young Jr. on Nov. 24, 1963, "I got to get this funeral behind me. . . . I'm going to a joint session [of Congress] and I think I'll just tell them we're carrying on and ask for the passage of his civil rights bill." He then called King, and told him that on civil rights, "we just won't give up an inch." And he didn't.

Kennedy was no slouch when it came to politics, but Johnson was the master. He knew how much the Southerners of the Democratic Party hated civil rights reform. He was friends with most of them, including Sens. Robert Byrd of West Virginia and Richard Russell of Georgia. Johnson knew that they would denounce the bill, fight it and filibuster it. More troubling, he knew from his own advisers that his standing in the polls would go down, way down, in the South if the bill was passed. Yet he went ahead anyway. He staked his personal prestige and the political capital of his new administration on passing the civil rights bill, and he did so knowing that public opinion in the South was firmly opposed.

But instead of losing support, Johnson was overwhelmingly elected, and while the South did begin to shift to the Republicans after 1968, other factors hurt the Democrats, not the least of which was the social chaos caused by the Vietnam War. In 1964, having risked political and electoral defeat, Johnson achieved political and electoral success.

That should be a lesson to today's politicians and consultants who think that polls are sacrosanct. Doing what is right is hard when that looks like political suicide, but voters have every right to expect that of politicians. Unless we have leaders who care more about the common good than their own political fortunes, we are usually left with the status quo, even when that status quo means perpetuating a stark injustice such as segregation. In Kennedy and Johnson, we have examples of two leaders who were, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, willing to listen to "the better angels of their nature" because they recognized that a country founded on exceptional ideals will prosper only if those ideals are honored.

Zachary Karabell and Jonathan Rosenberg are the authors of "Kennedy, Johnson, and the Quest for Justice: The Civil Rights Tapes," to be published next month by Norton.

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