A Symbol of Virtue Or A Strategy for Votes?
John F. Kennedy’s Telephone Call to Coretta King And Its Social And Political Consequences

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ABSTRACT

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Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
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This thesis examines the effect of a phone conversation between Kennedy and Coretta Scott King concerning Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr’s unfair imprisonment on the African-American community, and the social and political consequences that followed. By examining Kennedy’s relationship to civil rights before the call, the events surrounding the phone call itself, and the political strategy involved in getting the message of Kennedy’s call to African-Americans, this thesis will attempt to determine Kennedy’s motivations in making the call and if it had any effects. By looking at polling data and voting statistics among African-Americans, this thesis will determine to what extent they supported Kennedy in the election. A chart was developed that examined Kennedy’s motivation for making the call, ranging from instrumental to moral. The effect of the call ranges from a high effect, no effect at all, and a negative effect for Kennedy. If the call had a positive effect and Kennedy did it for political reasons, he is a calculating candidate. If the call had no effect and Kennedy made it for political reasons, he is an ineffectual candidate. If the call had a negative effect and Kennedy made it for votes, he is a
candidate who failed. Conversely, if he called out of concern and the call had a positive effect, he is a heroic candidate. If he truly cared when he called and it had no effect, he is a benign candidate. If he made the call for moral reasons and it had a negative effect, he is a foolish candidate. After looking at all the data and developing a chart examining Kennedy’s motivation and the effect the phone call had, the effect of the phone call can be quantified as high, and Kennedy’s motivations in making the call were mixed. Kennedy’s mixed motivations shed an interesting light on the campaign and his dealings with civil rights.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

“An October Surprise?:” An Introduction: 1
A Matter We Weren’t That Concerned With: Kennedy’s Orientation To Civil Rights Up To 1960: 10
“Just a minute, Mrs. King, for Senator Kennedy:” The Call And Its Consequences: 21
“‘No Comment’ Nixon versus A Candidate With a Heart:” Disseminating The Message Of The Phone Call: 38
“Everybody Got King Out Of Jail But The Lawyers”: Who Got King Out Of Jail?: 47
Kennedy’s “Suitcase Full of Votes:” Polling Data And Voter Turnout: 52
“What the hell…Get her on the phone:” A Conclusion: 66
Appendix: 75
Figures

Figure 1: Kennedy the Campaigner; His Motivation and its Effects- 9.

Figure 2: African-American Kennedy support before & after the October 26th phone call- 57.

Figure 3: The five closest states Kennedy won by a popular vote margin in 1960- 65.

Figure 1 (Revisited): Kennedy the Campaigner; His Motivation and its Effects: Results- 70.
An “October Surprise?” An Introduction

On Wednesday, October 26, 1960, Senator John F. Kennedy sat on his flight from Detroit to New York, reflecting on a choice he made that morning, one that Theodore White called “impulsive, direct, and immediate”: Kennedy telephoned Coretta Scott King, wife of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., to convey his sympathy over her husband’s recent unfair prison sentence.\(^1\) Three Southern governors had promised the Kennedy campaign that “they would throw their states to Nixon” if Kennedy supported King in any way, and Kennedy’s brother and campaign manager Bobby believed the election was now lost.\(^2\) A *New York Times* reporter asked Kennedy as he exited his plane in New York about the phone call’s validity. “She was a friend of mine and I was concerned about the situation,” Kennedy replied as he squeezed by the journalist. He asked under his breathe which traitor in his campaign staff had exposed the story.\(^3\) John F. Kennedy and Coretta Scott King had never met face-to-face.\(^4\)

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A February 18, 2011 Gallup poll asked 1015 adults who they considered to be the greatest president, and Kennedy came in 4th place behind Bill Clinton, Abraham Lincoln, and Ronald Reagan. According to a July 4, 2007 Rasmussen poll, 80% of those interviewed viewed Kennedy favorably. As the Kennedy legacy deepens, one aspect comes to mind: civil rights. Kennedy introduced and pushed for a progressive civil rights bill in 1963 that dropped his administration’s approval rating from 60 to 47 percent and, according to a Harris poll, turned 4.5 million prospective white voters against him. In honor of the late president, President Lyndon B. Johnson drove Congress to pass the historic Civil Rights Bill of 1964, which some called “the Second Emancipation Proclamation,” and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. A few months before Kennedy’s death, a Louis Harris poll found that black Americans believed the NAACP, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John F. Kennedy had done the most for African-American rights. But did Kennedy deserve this praise? Did he sympathize with the Black man’s cause? His remarks to the


journalist in New York are revealing: He called Coretta his friend without having meet her, and asked which “traitor” in his campaign had exposed this potentially devastating story.\(^9\) Was the ultimate “October Surprise,” Kennedy’s phone call to Mrs. King, compassionate, calculated, or both; and did the phone call provide the necessary votes to make Kennedy president?

Political party members employ the term “October Surprise” to describe an unexpected event surrounding a presidential candidate revealed immediately before an election that could help or hinder his chance at office.\(^10\) Some men, like Andrei Cherny, the president of Democracy: A Journal of Ideas, believe the first October Surprise occurred in 1948, when President Harry S. Truman mentioned on numerous occasions a plan to send Chief Justice Fred Vinson to negotiate ending the Cold War with Joseph Stalin.\(^11\) Though Vinson never went to the Soviet Union, Cherney argues that Truman’s insistence on sending him helped him when voters.\(^12\) Some believe the term was first used in the 1972 presidential election. On October 26, 1972, twelve years to the day Kennedy called Mrs. King, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger declared “[w]e believe peace is at hand” in Vietnam. Nixon won every state except Massachusetts twelve days later, and though he already had a significant lead over Democratic

\(^9\) Branch, Parting the Waters, 365.


\(^12\) Murse, “What is an October Surprise?”
nominee George McGovern, Kissinger’s speech could have helped his already-large support. The 1980 presidential election brought the term “October Surprise” into the national spotlight as political analysts waited to see whether President Jimmy Carter could secure the release of the hostages at the U.S. Embassy in Iran. After Iran released the hostages the day of Reagan’s election, Gary Slick, a former National Security council member under Presidents Ford and Carter, claimed the Iranian government struck a deal with Reagan’s campaign team that, once Reagan had been inaugurated, Iran would release the hostages. The surfacing of George W. Bush’s 1976 DUI just days before the 2000 election and Hurricane Sandy’s destruction along the East Coast just prior to the 2012 presidential election and the unified response of New Jersey Republican governor Chris Christie and President Barack Obama to the crisis have been viewed as October surprises. Bush won despite the embarrassing episode, and neither 2012 presidential
candidate could have foreseen Sandy. Can the term be applied to the 1960 presidential election? Was Kennedy’s call to Mrs. King a surprise, and did the two minute conversation matter in American political history?

This simple and single phone call launched, in most accounts of the period, significant social and political effects. The 1960 presidential election remains the closest popular vote margin of victory in American history, with Kennedy winning a plurality of 112,803 votes out of almost 69 million cast.\(^{18}\) Significantly, black Americans gave Kennedy 68 percent of their vote.\(^{19}\)

Historians and friends of Kennedy still debate the social and political causes and consequences of his phone call to Mrs. King.

Many authors and analysts believe the phone call provided the votes which elected Kennedy president. Hugh Davis Graham, in *Civil Rights and the Presidency*, argued that “the October phone calls to King climaxed a campaign in which the issue that held the greatest

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Based on the popular vote alone, the five closest presidential elections occurred in 1876, 1916, 1960, 1968, and 2000. In both 1876 and 2000, the candidate with more popular votes lost the election (Samual J. Tilden (D) in 1876 and Albert A. Gore (D) in 2000). Woodrow Wilson collected 591,385 more votes than Charles E. Hughes in 1916, Al Gore received 537,179 more votes than George W. Bush in 2000, Richard Nixon received 510,314 more votes than Hubert H. Humphrey in 1968, Jimmy Carter received 252,224 more votes than Gerald Ford in 1976, and John F. Kennedy received 118,574 more votes than Nixon in 1960.

\bibitem{19} W.J. Rorabaugh, *Kennedy and the Promise of the Sixties* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 17, see also Sargent Shriver, recorded interview by Anthony K. Shriver, n.d. [fall 1988], 27. Shriver says 70 percent. See also Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 930. Schlesinger says the figures were as high as 78 percent and as low as 68 percent according to Harris and Gallup polls.
\end{thebibliography}
potential for shattering Kennedy’s coalition was instead transformed into a margin of victory.”20 Ted Sorensen, a Kennedy speechwriter, noted that “JFK never forgot that a majority of whites had voted against him and that an overwhelming majority of blacks voted for him.”21 Sam Proctor, the President of North Carolina AT&T, said the Kennedy’s action “was a kind of a consuming affirmation in the hearts of black people that this family and that this presidential candidate—that both of them were on the side of black aspirations.”22

Others believed the call had little if any effect. Louis Martin, assistant to Sargent Shriver in the Civil Rights Division for Kennedy, claimed that most blacks supported Kennedy before the call, especially in the North, and that he “would have gotten the majority of the black votes without the call.” Anthony K. Shriver, Kennedy’s nephew and son of Sargent Shriver, asked Martin if it was “the icing on the cake,” and Martin replied “it was, the icing on the cake, but the cake was already made.”23

Second, what were Kennedy’s motivations? Martin Luther King, Jr., in a 1964 interview, thought Kennedy “expressed deep moral concern,” and “there was no assurance that

20 Graham, Civil Rights and the Presidency, 26.
he would pick up in the North as a result of this, so it was a risk he took.” 24 Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. wrote that “[t]he call to Mrs. King was only one of a number of personal gestures revealing the grace and force of feeling which lay beneath the supposedly cool façade.” 25 Harris Wofford, a King family friend and Kennedy Civil Rights aide, took the middle ground: “[h]e wanted to win the election and he also liked to do the right thing.” 26

Kennedy’s seemingly two-sided approach seems reminiscent of earlier presidents who needed African-American support to accomplish objectives in office. Daniel Kryder, in Divided Arsenal, describes the way President Franklin D. Roosevelt handled African-American unrest during World War II and the symbolic concession he made them so the American state would remain stable during the war. Before the 1940 presidential election, Roosevelt filled some strategic seats within the military and industrial sector with African-Americans to gain the black vote. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802 in 1941, which established the Fair Employment Practices Committee. He hoped this order would help mobilize African-Americans, in part so Europeans would not view America as weak or fractured. When votes mattered, the race issue intensified. In the 1942 midterm elections, the NAACP and FEPC confronted War Manpower Commission overseer Paul V. McNutt and demanded hearings on discrimination in the workplace. McNutt controlled the hearing schedule and promised African-Americans these hearings

24 Martin Luther King, Jr., recorded interview by Berl I. Bernhard, March 9, 1964, 12, JFKOHP. See also O’Brien, John F. Kennedy: A Biography, 487-88.


26 Harris Wofford, recorded interview by Anthony K. Shriver, n.d. [fall 1988] 85, JFKOHP.
until the election passed. After securing civil rights support, he postponed his promised hearings. In October 1944, Roosevelt endorsed a permanent FEPC in an effort to regain black voters angered after delayed hearings that would institute a permanent FEPC. Along with these concessions, officials ordered the Army to rapidly install African-American troops in combat zones, sending a message to black voters that the administration pushed for more African-American rights. African-American votes mattered to the administration so much that Philleo Nash, an Office of War Information official, called black voters the “‘Ten Percent’ that holds the balance of power.”

The Roosevelt administration made many symbolic concessions for African-American votes, and some believe Kennedy followed the 32nd president’s example in the 1960 presidential election.

Using Kennedy’s phone call to Mrs. King as a case study, the chart below illustrates six possible interpretations of it. His motivation ranges from instrumental to moral, which identifies Kennedy’s motives in making the phone call as strictly political (calculating) to purely attempting to help the Kings (moral). The effect of the call is an independent effect, ranging from positive to neutral to negative. If the phone call had a significant impact, but Kennedy did it to gain support from the African-American community, it was a calculated action. If he called for political reasons and the call did not influence the election, it would be an ineffectual action. If

he called for political reasons and the call hurt him politically, it would be a failed action. In the other instance, if the call had a strong effect and Kennedy did it for moral reasons, it would be a heroic action. If Kennedy called purely out of sympathy and it had no effect, he would be a benign candidate. If he called for strictly moral reasons and the call negatively affected his candidacy, it would be a foolish action.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Instrumental</th>
<th>Moral</th>
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<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>Calculating</td>
<td>Heroic</td>
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<td>Negative</td>
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Figure 1: Kennedy the Campaigner; His Motivation and its Effects.
A Matter We Weren’t That Concerned With:

Kennedy’s Orientation To Civil Rights Up To 1960

Works by Doug McAdam and Hugh Davis Graham capture the political climate surrounding the 1960 presidential election. McAdam uses the political process model, “the result of a combination of expanding political opportunities and indigenous organization, as mediated through a crucial process of collective attribution,” to explain black insurgency. He concludes that black universities, black churches, and southern NAACP branches helped facilitate the civil rights movement. Graham focuses on the presidency and its affiliation with civil rights. Tracing the rise of civil rights legislation through Kennedy and Johnson to its decrease in Nixon’s presidency, Graham describes the major changes in black and women’s rights from 1960 to 1972. McAdam’s statistical analysis and Graham’s narrative provide a general background for understanding the social and political movements surrounding Kennedy’s phone call to Mrs. King.

Between 1900-1965, African-Americans overwhelmingly switched their political allegiance from the Republican to the Democratic party. From 1910-1930, Northern politicians


29 McAdam, Political Processes and the Development of Black Insurgency, 2, 87.
had persuaded many African-American migrants from the South to vote Democrat, and black voters threw their support to Roosevelt in 1936, the first time in seventeen consecutive presidential elections the majority of blacks did not vote Republican.\textsuperscript{30} Because blacks began voting Democrat in the 1930s, Republicans no longer could use them as a sign of equality to Northern voters. Southern Republicans organizations became thoroughly white during the 1940s and adopted anti-civil rights platforms.\textsuperscript{31} Born in 1917 and thrust into politics by his ambitious father in 1946, John F. Kennedy’s political career and notoriety expanded roughly along the same trajectory as the civil rights movement, and Kennedy met civil rights issues at every turn of his political rise.

Kennedy’s view of civil rights and civil rights leaders’ opinions of him provide a good background to the October phone call. In \textit{Profiles in Courage}, he sympathized with politicians when he said “in no other occupation but politics is it expected that a man will sacrifice honors, prestige, and his chosen career on a single issue.” He understood how hard it was to hold office: “Always do what is right, regardless of whether it is popular. Ignore the pressures, the temptations, the false compromises. That is an easy answer—but it is easy only for those who do not bear the responsibilities of elected office.”\textsuperscript{32} In his Harvard Senior Thesis, \textit{While England

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\textsuperscript{30} McAdam, \textit{Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency}, 82.
\textsuperscript{31} David Niven, \textit{The Politics of Injustice: The Kennedys, the Freedom Rides, and the Electoral Consequences of a Moral Compromise} (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 164.
\end{flushright}
Kennedy expressed ideas that would later drive his zeal for civil rights. In his first published work, Kennedy focused on the British people’s psychology before World War II, and how a history of overconfidence in their own strength kept them from preparing for warfare until their enemies severely threatened them. Kennedy closed his thesis with a warning for America to see the world at war and admit their own fault in not preparing for conflict. James David Barber, former political scientist at Duke University, asserts Kennedy carried this analysis into his presidency, believing “the fundamental problem of governing a democracy was psychological: how to overcome the inertia inherent in man’s nature.” Kennedy thought that, in Barber’s words, “without men to broadcast the facts and ring the alarm,” a nation would not recognize its own faults and continue in a disastrous direction.33 Kennedy would “ring the alarm” loudly on civil rights in the twilight of his presidency, but Kennedy’s road to the Oval Office did bring him into contact with many African-Americans.

The only blacks Kennedy grew up with were the servants his parents hired. He never mingled with any African-Americans at his family’s homes in Palm Beach or Hyannis Port, did not study with them at Harvard, or command any of them on his PT boat during World War II. His younger brother, Robert Kennedy, said “I don’t think it [civil rights] was...a matter that we

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were extra concerned about as were growing up.”

An avid student of history, Kennedy adopted the predominant view of Southern blacks after the Civil War in Profiles in Courage when he said “[t]he Reconstruction Period [was] a black nightmare the [white] South could never forget.”

When Jack Kennedy entered politics in 1946, he still had no close contact with black America. During his first congressional campaign, he appealed to black leaders for their support instead of going into the black community itself. Because blacks did not make up a large percentage of the Massachusetts population, Kennedy did not understand their troubles. There was “little or no contact with the Negro constituency” during his first few years of office, recalls NAACP leader Herbert Tucker. Sargent Shriver, Kennedy’s brother-in-law and Director of the Civil Rights Division for Kennedy’s presidential campaign, said, “I don’t think he was a very ardent civil rights advocate.” Harris Wofford, one of Sargent Shriver’s assistants, explained how Kennedy viewed black voters: “He had neglected the black vote until he ran for President.


37 Niven, The Politics of Injustice, 8.


He began to get interested in it in the late fifties as a vote. He didn’t have much in Massachusetts and I gather he got the black vote more or less.**40

Civil rights issues began affecting the political party makeup during the 1950s, and forced Kennedy to look at the issue that would blossom during his presidency. World War II effectively splintered the Democratic party, with Northern Democrats calling for equal rights for African-Americans, while Southern Democrats strove to keep segregation. Kennedy realized he had to somehow keep the white Southern vote while endorsing African-American incentives if he ever wanted to be president.**41

The 1960 presidential election also ushered in a new era of public relations between the president and the people. Richard E. Neustadt wrote in 1960 that the president’s “power to persuade is the power to bargain.”**42 Until the Kennedy presidency, presidents such as Eisenhower and Truman bargained for deals with members of Congress and relied on positive public sentiment behind them for leverage on Capitol Hill.**43 During the 1960 presidential

**40 Harris Wofford, recorded interview by Anthony K. Shriver, n.d. [fall 1988], 77, 81, JFKOHP.


**43 Neustadt, Presidential Power, 69-175.
television debates, Kennedy appealed to voters with his youthful complexion and composed demeanor, and he carried this format of reaching people into his presidency.44

In late January 1961, Kennedy conducted the first live presidential television press conference to an estimated sixty-five million viewers. He had a simple reason for using this format: He could talk directly to the people if the press ever stood against him. Newspaper reports hated this new format, which took away their private audience with the president and rendered their breaking news a few hours old because live television brought the news straight to the people. Kennedy enraged the press further when he started private interviews with select reporters and began engaging with the local town presses, both avenues that kept him more in touch with the American public. Kennedy’s personal and individualistic style foreshadowed what Samuel Kernell calls “individualized pluralism,” a trend developing in the 1970s and stretching to the 1994 midterm election where because of split part control, presidents had to go public with their message to gain personal prestige.45 Kennedy’s presidential campaign began the switch from a party-centered campaign to a personality-centered campaign, and his personal connection with Mrs. King helped his chances with African-American voters. His phone call gave African-American voters the idea that Kennedy cared about their individual needs and that he knew how to connect with the common man.


In early 1960, long before the October interactions between the Kings and the Kennedys, black Americans did not overwhelmingly admire Kennedy. Black reservations about Kennedy included his Catholic faith along with his mediocre civil rights congressional record.46 One episode that made Northern civil rights leaders distrust Kennedy did not stem from anything he said. The Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), a major victory for civil rights that desegregated public schools, galvanized angry Southern whites to draw up the “Southern Manifesto,” a document encouraging Southerners to resist the landmark Supreme Court decision. During the 1956 Democratic convention (an election in which neither Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower nor Democratic opponent Adlai Stevenson took a strong stance on civil rights), white Southerners endorsed Kennedy for the vice-presidential nomination over fellow Southerner Estes Kefauver of Tennessee, who supported the Supreme Court’s ruling and refused to sign the “Southern Manifesto.” Although Kefauver eventually became the vice-presidential nominee, the South’s support of Kennedy’s meager civil rights involvement made Northern civil rights activists questions his support for their cause.47

As civil rights debates increased throughout the 1950s, President Dwight D. Eisenhower asked for a civil rights act in 1957. Article III of the bill would have helped African-


Americans immensely by allowing the attorney general “to protect through injunction *all* civil rights.” Kennedy tried to keep both sides of his party happy by staying out of legislative debates over civil rights and said that federal courts should decide civil rights issues.\(^{48}\)

Two votes made civil rights leaders upset with Kennedy during the 1957 civil rights bill debate. Kennedy voted against bypassing the Senate Judiciary Committee and putting the House-approved bill on the Senate calendar for a majority vote, a decision supporters of the bill desperately endorsed because the head of the committee, Democratic Senator James Eastland of Mississippi, would certainly kill the bill. The bypass vote passed 45-39, and Kennedy backed up his vote by stating his belief in normal Senate procedures rather than invented measures to get around a certain committee. The bill did not have much life after this small victory when a 52 to 38 vote, led by Democratic Texas Senator Lyndon Johnson, struck out Title III. Kennedy voted in the minority to keep Title III, but this vote seems overshadowed by his disapproval to bypass the Senate Judiciary Committee.\(^{49}\)

Civil rights advocates still had Title IV, a proviso that could charge anyone with criminal contempt who violated a federal civil rights court order. Southern senators maneuvered around Title IV by introducing a jury-trial amendment, arguing that a private citizen charged with a crime has the Constitutional right to a trial by jury. Liberal senators such as Frank Church of Idaho and Joseph O’ Mahoney of Wyoming could not argue with the American tradition of


trial by jury even though they knew no white Southern jury would convict anyone who interfered with African-American voting rights. After seeking advice from Mark De Wolfe Howe and Paul Friend, two esteemed Harvard legal experts, Kennedy publicly endorsed the jury-trial amendment on August 1, 1957. When Eisenhower signed the first civil rights act in 82 years on September 9, 1957 into law, it had been rendered too weak to enforce any real change. Though Kennedy voted for the final bill, black leaders remained doubtful about Kennedy’s commitment to civil rights.⁵⁰

As the Kennedy brothers prepared for the 1960 presidential, they planned on campaigning on civil rights in the North while still maintaining Southern support. Nevertheless, John made sure that Bobby told the Southern politicians that he met with that Humphrey and Symington voted with northern interests in the 1957 Civil Rights debates, and that Kennedy voted with southerners like Johnson. Kennedy appointed Sargent Shriver head of the civil rights division of the campaign, and he selected as his civil rights coordinator Harris Wofford. Robert Kennedy conceded he and his brother’s ignorance on the issue: “We really don’t know much about this whole thing…I haven’t known many Negroes in my life…It’s up to you.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ O’Brien, John F. Kennedy: A Biography, 370-378. The bill did establish a six-person Committee on Civil Rights, the Department of Justice added the Civil Rights Division and did away with the Civil Rights Section, and enacted the amended Title IV.

Heading into the 1960 Democratic primary in Los Angeles, African-Americans remained skeptical of Kennedy’s commitment to their cause. On Sunday, July 10, 2,500 civil rights proponents walked to the convention site led by Roy Wilkins and Martin Luther King, Jr. The crowd booed Kennedy as he spoke in the Shrine Auditorium that night. Kennedy did reach out to civil rights leaders as he spoke on October 11 and 12 at the National Conference on Constitutional Rights in New York. More than 400 civil rights workers from 42 states cheered Kennedy on the final day as he promised the workers he would work toward equality on federal jobs and contracts and stop housing discrimination by an executive order.

Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon (R, CA) appealed to many black voters. He endorsed the Civil Rights Act of 1957, and the California NAACP had made Nixon an honorary member in the 1940s. As Vice-President, he oversaw the president’s watchdog committee on fair employment in government contracts. Roy Williams, the NAACP’s executive director, admired Nixon’s determination to pass Senate reforms that would help minorities stop filibusters. Nixon also had the support of Martin Luther King, Sr. Like King, Sr. who had voted for Eisenhower in 1956, many black voters were Protestants, and Nixon thought they would vote...

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54 Graham, Civil Rights and the Presidency, 29-30.
for him over a Catholic candidate. In his 1962 memoir *Six Crises*, Nixon spoke of his admiration of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s non-violent protests, and even met the civil rights leader in Ghana.

“The challenging sixties demand that the President place himself in the very thick of the fight, that he care passionately about the fate of the people he leads.” With this quote inside a red and white pamphlet entitled “A time for moral leadership: Kennedy for President,” Kennedy sought black voters by pointing to his accomplishments in civil rights. The handout stated the Democratic National Convention’s prerogatives on civil rights, including stopping poll taxes and literacy tests, developing a national Fair Employment Practices Commission, stopping all federal housing discrimination, civil rights supported by the Attorney General by court action, and, by 1963, integrating all school districts. The flyer also claimed Kennedy became one of the original politicians to support sit-in demonstrations, stating that “[i]t is in the American tradition to stand up for one’s rights—even if the new way to stand up for one’s rights is to sit down.”

Coincidentally, what began as a sit-in would turn into one of the defining moments of the 1960 campaign, and of Kennedy’s relationship with civil rights.


“Just a minute, Mrs. King, for Senator Kennedy:”

The Call and its Consequences

On Wednesday evening, May 4, 1960, police pulled over Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., his wife Coretta Scott King, and white Georgia writer Lillian Smith close to Emory University as he drove her to the university’s hospital for breast cancer treatment, presumably because they saw a white woman and black man together. The borrowed car had expired license plates, and having missed the ninety-day limit for new residents of Georgia to obtain a driver’s license, King presented his Alabama license. He received a citation, and on September 23 he sat in the back of a DeKalb County courtroom as black Decatur lawyer Charles M. Clayton talked with Judge J. Oscar Mitchell of the DeKalb County Civil and Criminal Court. Mitchell ordered King to pay $25 for driving with an expired license and dismissed the expired license plates charge. King overlooked the fine print of the $25 charge: twelve months probation whereby he “shall not violate any Federal or State penal statutes or municipal ordinances.” 58

On June 24, 1960 in Atlanta, black student leaders and department store owner Richard H. Rich met over Rich’s store segregation policy. They did not persuade Rich to desegregate,

and sit-ins and picketing resumed in various Atlanta department stores once students resumed classes that fall.\textsuperscript{59}

On October 14 at Mount Moriah Baptist Church in Atlanta, Dr. King and James M. Lawson Jr. spoke at a SNCC conference. King spoke to the opening day audience on the theme “The Philosophy of Nonviolence,” a strategy he would put into action in the coming days.\textsuperscript{60} With less than a month before the 1960 presidential election, King felt pressure from three different directions. Kennedy campaign civil rights advisors Harris Wofford and Louis Martin, along with entertainer Frank Sinatra, asked him to endorse Kennedy. Atlanta black leaders, including his father, pleaded with him to endorse Nixon. Atlanta students wanted King’s reputation and participation in their upcoming protests. King did not want to participate in the upcoming sit-ins, and found a way out by scheduling a meeting in a “Deep South” city with Senator Kennedy.\textsuperscript{61}

King first met Kennedy at a New York breakfast meeting on June 23, where they had a cordial ninety-minute conversation. Skeptical of Kennedy because of his voting record in the 1957 Civil Rights Act, King learned that Kennedy agreed with him on issues such as federally

\begin{footnotes}
\item[59] Garrow, \textit{Bearing The Cross}, 141-42.
\item[61] Branch, \textit{Parting The Waters}, 345-349.
\end{footnotes}
assisted housing and voting rights for African-Americans. In a letter, King wrote positively concerning the meeting:

...I was very impressed by the forthright and honest manner in which he discussed the civil rights question. I have no doubt that he would do the right thing on this issue if he were elected President.  

King told the Kennedy campaign that if Kennedy did something truly supportive of civil rights, he would acknowledge Kennedy’s stance on civil rights. When the Kennedy campaign rejected Nashville as being “too Southern” a city to hold their meeting, King and Wofford settled on Miami. King then told Wofford that he would issue an invitation to Nixon, not thinking he would accept but just as courtesy. When Wofford told Kennedy of King’s intention, Kennedy dropped out and King cancelled the event. With King in Atlanta and Lawson’s SNCC speech concerning “jail, not bail” fresh in their minds, three student leaders, Lonnie King (no relation), Hershelle Sullivan, and Julian Bond asked King on October 18 to assist in their revitalized protest, a targeted sit-in at Rich’s Department Store. When King declined, the students reminded him of his calls of “filling the jails” and how hypocritical it would appear if King did not participate, and King finally agreed.

Coretta Scott King recalls in her memoir about the time a white passenger invited Dr. King to lunch at a restaurant in the Atlanta airport after they met on a plane. When they asked for

62 Garrow, Bearing The Cross, 139.
63 Branch, Parting The Waters, 347, 349.
64 Garrow, Bearing The Cross, 143.
a table, the waitress told Dr. King he had to sit in a different section with a curtain that divided black and white patrons. When she tried to convince him that “the food, the table and the chairs are the same,” he replied: “Oh, no. It is not the same. When you segregate me, you deprive me of fellowship with my brother here, when I want to continue to talk to him.” He then gestured to the walls and said, “When I am behind this curtain, you deprive me of the aesthetic pleasure of those paintings. It is not at all the same.”

King and the students would soon show the city of Atlanta exactly what he meant.

On Wednesday, October 19, at 11:00 a.m., 80 protestors asked for service at eight different segregated businesses in Atlanta. When police did not arrest King’s group after a snack bar in the covered bridge that connected buildings of the Rich’s complex on either side of Forsyth Street refused them service, the demonstrators took an elevator to Rich’s sixth-floor fine dining restaurant, the Magnolia Room. When Rich’s chairman of the board could not persuade them to leave, authorities arrested King and thirty-five students for breaking a new state anti-trespass law. The protestors in Rich’s were the only ones arrested: the demonstrators in the seven other stores went home free. Judge James E. Webb set bond at $500, but King and the thirty-five students refused to pay and he told the judge “I will stay in jail one year, or ten years.” King told reporters that the students insisted he take place in the protests and that he did not start them himself. Webb did not dismiss the charges, and King spent his first night ever in jail.

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65 Coretta Scott King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 189-90.
Lee of the National Council of Churches telegraphed Roy Wilkins and James Wood, SCLC public relations director, sending some of King’s remarks to the judge. On Friday, October 21, jail officials allowed King and the student leaders to hold a press conference, where King told the reporters, “I had to practice what I preached.” King wrote down a rough outline of what he said to Judge Webb in a notebook with the words “Great Issues” written on the front, possibly belonging to a student at Morris Brown College in Atlanta, where seniors took a mandatory class by the same name. Everyone involved with the case quickly learned how great an issue these arrests were.


King may have used the following draft in making his remarks to Judge Webb. The misspellings have been retained:

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Your Honor, I would simply like to say that I dont think we have done anything wrong in seeking to be served at the Magnolia Tea Room of Rich’s. We assembled quietly, peacefully and non-violently to secure seek service just as any other citizen. If we lived in a totalitarian regime or a gestapo system I could see how we might have been wrong. But one of the great glories of democracy is the right to protest for right, So we do not feel we have violated the law.

If by chance, your honor, we are guilty of violating the law please be assured that we did it to bring the whole issue of racial injustice under the scrutiny of the conscience of Atlanta. I must honestly say that we firmly believe that segregation is evil, and that our
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On Saturday, October 22, Atlanta Mayor William B. Hartsfield, a Democrat, met with sixty of Atlanta’s black leaders and reached a compromise: the city would release the protestors and drop their charges with the agreement that the students would suspend their protest for thirty days. On the same day, Harris Wofford, a civil rights advisor for the Kennedy campaign and southland will never reach its full economic, political and moral maturity until this cancerous disease is removed. We do not seek to remove this unjust system for ourselves alone but for our white brothers as well. The festering sore of segregation debilitates the white man as well as the Negro. So if our action in anyway served to bring this issue to the forefront of the conscience of the community it could it was not undertaken in vain.

We are not dangerous rabblerousers or nagging professional agitators. Our actions grow out of a deep seated concern for the moral health of our community. We have not been motivated by some foreign ideology--communistic or any other. We did it because of our love for America, our southland and our white brothers.

And sir I know you have a legal obligation facing you at this hour. This judicial obligation may cause you to bind us over to another court rather than dismiss the charge. But sir I must say that I have a moral obligation facing me at this hour. This divine imperative drive me to say that if you find it necessary to set a bond, I cannot in all good conscience have anyone go my bail. I will choose jail rather than bail, even if it takes me means remaining in jail a year or even ten years. Mayby it will this type of self suffering on the part of numerous Negroes to finally expose the moral defenses of our white brother who happen to be misguided and thereby awaken the doazing conscience of our community.


William B. Hartsfield served six terms as Mayor of Atlanta (1937-1941; 1942-1961). Instrumental in establishing Atlanta’s first airport (which bears his name) and building it into one of the world’s busiest, Hartsfield cared deeply about his own image as well as the city he loved. As civil rights protests exploded across the South during the late 1950s and into the 1960s, he peacefully oversaw the integration of Atlanta’s public schools, one of many reasons the growing Southern metropolis became known as “the City Too Busy To Hate.”
King family friend, called Atlanta attorney Morris Abram, a Kennedy supporter and later president of the American Jewish Committee and the second president of Brandeis University. Wofford asked Abram “to get him (King) out and claim the credit for Senator Kennedy.” Abram told Hartsfield about his conversation with Wofford, and Hartsfield, speaking with the media and looking for a way to avoid the political consequences of releasing King, mentioned that a Kennedy supporter called to ask for King’s release. Bobby Troutman, a southern Democrat and friend of the Kennedys in charge of securing Dixiecrat votes, could not believe that Wofford tried to intervene with Mayor Hartsfield and Abram to secure King’s release, and according to Abram said, “[t]hey’ll (the southern politicians) never accept Kennedyism with Martin Luther King tied to its tail.” Abram called Wofford and told him that Troutman was trying to contact Kennedy and tell him that he should stop any efforts to help King. When Wofford realized that the campaign would be devastated if northern voters learned that Kennedy


Harris Wofford became the first white student since the early 1900s suffrage movement to enroll in Howard Law School, a decision his aristocratic southern ancestors surely would have disapproved. After receiving a second law degree from Yale Law School in June 1954, he served from 1954-1958 on the United States Commission on Civil Rights and in 1959 began teaching law at the University of Notre Dame. Wofford gave a lecture at the Hampton Institute in October 1955 concerning nonviolent protests against segregation, a practice he learned from Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Dr. King read a copy of the lecture and put Wofford’s talk into practice during the famous Montgomery Bus boycott. King and Wofford grew closer during the late 1950s, and when Wofford joined Kennedy’s campaign staff as a civil rights advisor, he tried to coordinate a meeting between King and Kennedy on civil rights.

69 Garrow, *Bearing The Cross*, 144.

stopped efforts to release King, he asked Abram to call Kennedy to prevent him from publicly refusing to assist King. Abram realized that Shriver and Wofford had acted without consulting anyone in the campaign and called a Kennedy representative in Joplin, Missouri where Kennedy was about to land. He told the man to instruct Kennedy to stay silent on the matter, which Kennedy did.\(^71\)

Abram and Hartsfield met Rich at his home Saturday night and asked him to agree to the arrangement made with the black city leaders. Once Fulton County solicitor John I. Kelley lent his support to the release, Atlanta Police Chief Herbert Jenkins released the protestors on the afternoon of Sunday, October 23. As a crowd gathered at Paschal’s, an intergrated restaurant owned by African-Americans, to welcome the protestors, they, along with Coretta, learned that authorities still had King in custody.\(^72\) Jail authorities had issued a bench warrant to keep King in jail so it could be determined whether he violated his September suspended sentence with his arrest at Rich’s.\(^73\)

Students waited outside the Fulton County jail for King’s transfer to DeKalb County on Tuesday, October 25. Authorities brought King out with arm and leg shackles in addition to his

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\(^72\) Garrow, *Bearing The Cross*, 144-45; See also Coretta Scott King, *My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 192.

\(^73\) Branch, *Parting The Waters*, 356-357.
handcuffs and placed him beside a German shepherd as they travelled to DeKalb County. At 11:00 a.m., close to 200 King supporters gathered in the DeKalb County courthouse, where a Ku Klux Klan parade had taken place a few days earlier. King’s attorney, Donald L. Hollowell, filed an appeal of King’s September license conviction, explaining how thirty days had not expired between September 23 and the day he was arrested, October 19. He argued that King could not be incarcerated until the courts upheld the one year probation conviction. Atlanta businessman John Wesley Dobbs and four African-American college presidents, Benjamin Mays of Morehouse College, Albert E. Manley of Sperman College, Frank Cunningham of Morris Brown College, and Rufus Clement of Atlanta University, all served as character witnesses for Dr. King. Judge Mitchell dismissed Hollowell’s arguments and the character witnesses, calling them irrelevant, and sentenced King to four months hard labor on a street chain gang.74

The black spectators could not believe the verdict. Police detained Southern Christian Leadership Conference Vice-President Samuel Williams for a short time when he would not comply with an officer’s command to stand back in the crowded room. Unsympathetic Peter Zack Geer, executive secretary to Georgia Governor Ernest Vandiver thought the ruling “might do him (King) good. It might make a law-abiding citizen out of him and teach him respect for the

laws of Georgia.”\textsuperscript{75} A weeping Coretta Scott King approached the holding cell where King awaited transfer, and King tried to calm her down: “Corrie, dear, you have to be strong. I’ve never seen you like this. You have to be strong for me.”\textsuperscript{76} She could not process the fact that she would have to deliver her child without him present, and the stress of him being in jail for the past six days weighed on her.\textsuperscript{77}

Coretta Scott King called Harris Wofford when she returned home that afternoon. Georgia Governor Ernest Vandiver (D-GA) had promised the Kennedy campaign that he would resolve the matter so Kennedy’s name would not be attached to King’s, so Wofford and Louis Martin did not release a statement made on behalf of Kennedy concerning Dr. King.\textsuperscript{78} Upset that


\textsuperscript{76} Branch, \textit{Parting The Waters}, 358. See also Coretta Scott King, \textit{My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.}, 193-194.

\textsuperscript{77} Coretta Scott King, \textit{My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr.}, 193.

\textsuperscript{78} Garrow, \textit{Bearing The Cross}, 146; “Proposed draft for Kennedy statement on Martin Luther King,” DNC, Records of the 1960 Campaign, Records of the Civil Rights Division (Louis Martin Files), Box 149, Press Releases, Drafts 9/1/60-10/10/60 undated. JFKL. The proposed statement, drafted on October 25, 1960, contained the following:

Good news and bad news come together. The agreement reached this weekend in Atlanta under the leadership of Mayor Hartsfield was heartening to all Americans. It was an example of the kind of local and moral leadership this problem requires—the kind of leadership which brings people to reason together in good faith and with good will—the kind of leadership which has not been given to the Republican Administration on these last years of racial crisis.

The news that Dr. Martin Luther King has been sentenced to four months of hard labor for a minor traffic violation—driving with with an out-of-state license—must shock the sense of fairness of all Americans. Mahatma Gandhi’s technique of non-violent action which Dr. King has been using in his fight against racial discrimination always involves some rise of tensions and temper. But the technique stirs consciences—and it won freedom for India. I am
they could do nothing to help the Kings, Wofford and Martin commiserated over beers in Washington that afternoon. During their discussions, they came up with the idea that someone important should call Mrs. King and encourage her.\textsuperscript{79} Wofford reached Democratic politician Chester Bowles, a King acquaintance, and he called Mrs. King Tuesday night to try to comfort her.\textsuperscript{80} Bowles had 1952 and 1956 Democratic presidential nominee Adlai Stevenson over for dinner that night, but Stevenson refused to make a call to Mrs. King either because he feared he might not be appointed Kennedy’s Secretary of State if word got out that he phoned her, or he did not care for African-Americans.\textsuperscript{81}

In the early morning on Wednesday, October 26, two white police officers transported Dr. King 230 miles away to rural Georgia State Prison near Reidsville without alerting anyone. Attorney Holloway arrived at the DeKalb County courthouse around 8 a.m., around the time authorities gave King his prison uniform, a white outfit with a black stripe down the leg. Upon arrival, Warden L. P. Balkcom made sure prison officials processed King the same way as other prisoners, undergoing an interview with the prison chaplain, fingerprints, a medical exam, assembling a file for him, and examining all his previous crimes. News spread quickly around the prison about the newest inmate at Georgia State Prison, and many black prisoners began, in

\textsuperscript{79} Branch, \textit{Parting The Waters}, 360-61.

\textsuperscript{80} Garrow, \textit{Bearing The Cross}, 146.

\textsuperscript{81} Branch, \textit{Parting The Waters}, 360.

Before penning his famous 1963 “Letter From Birmingham Jail” on pieces of newspaper, King wrote his first letter from prison to Coretta the afternoon he arrived at Reidsville. He told her that the prison allowed visitors on Sundays, and while asking her to bring many sermons and books when she visited, he tried encouraging her with the belief that every trial happens for a reason:

\begin{quote}
...I have the faith to believe that this excessive suffering that is now coming to our family will in some little way serve to make Atlanta a better city, Georgia a better state, and America a better country. Just how I do not yet know, but I have faith to believe it will. If I am correct then our suffering is not in vain.\footnote{Branch, \textit{Parting The Waters}, 363.}
\end{quote}

While he wrote this letter, Coretta remained in a state of panic, fearful for her husband’s safety in a rural Georgia prison. Highly distressed, she hastily called Wofford again, who then called Sargent Shriver in Chicago and suggested to him the idea that Kennedy should
call Mrs. King. Wofford spoke to Shriver about the impact the call would have with African-American voters:

If the Senator would only call Mrs. King and wish her well, it would reverberate all through the Negro community in the United States. All he’s got to do is say he’s thinking about her and he hopes everything will be all right. All he’s got to do is show a little heart. He can even say he doesn’t have all the facts in the case.

Shriver arrived at Kennedy’s hotel in Chicago, the O’Hare International Inn, and waited until the campaign staff left so no one could voice concern over the phone call. According to Shriver, with only he and Kennedy in the room, he proposed the call.

Negroes don’t expect everything will change tomorrow, no matter who’s elected. But they do want to know whether you care. If you telephone Mrs. King, they will know you understand and will help. You will reach their hearts and give support to a pregnant woman who is afraid her husband will be killed.

“That’s a good idea, Why not?” said Kennedy, “Do you have her number? Get her on the phone.”

The telephone rang in the King household in Atlanta as Mrs. King prepared to go meet Atlanta attorney Morris Abram and Daddy King to ask the state parole board to release King. “May I speak to Mrs. Martin Luther King, Jr.?” a voice at the other end asked. “Just a minute,

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84 Garrow, Bearing The Cross, 147.
85 Branch, Parting The Waters, 361.
86 Wofford, Of Kennedy and Kings, 18.
87 Garrow, Bearing The Cross, 147.
88 Wofford, Of Kennedy and Kings, 18-19; See also O’Brien, John F. Kennedy: A Biography, 485
Mrs. King, for Senator Kennedy.” According to Mrs. King, Kennedy greeted her with “Good morning, Mrs. King. This is Senator Kennedy.” After greeting each other, Mrs. King recalls Kennedy saying these words during their two minute conversation:

I want to express to you my concern about your husband. I know this must be very hard for you. I understand you are expecting a baby, and I just wanted you to know that I was thinking about you and Dr. King. If there is anything I can do to help, please feel free to call on me.

Mrs. King told Kennedy, “I certainly appreciate your concern. I would appreciate anything you could do to help.” She says in her memoir: “That was the gist of the famous conversation that has been said to have changed history and elected a President of the United States.” In the first official press account of the phone call, written by the New York Times journalist Kennedy rushed by, Mrs. King expressed the assurance Kennedy gave her during the call:

It certainly made me feel good that he called me personally and let me know how he felt. I had the feeling that if he was that much concerned he would do what he could that Mr. King was let out of jail.

After hanging up the phone, she told Daddy King about Kennedy’s kind words while waiting for Morris Abram. Elated, King Sr. informed Abram he would switch his vote to Kennedy because of the phone call, and Abram called Wofford to tell him the news. Robert Kennedy did not share

89 Coretta Scott King, My Life With Martin Luther King, Jr., 195-96. See also Garrow, Bearing The Cross, 147 and O’Brien, John F. Kennedy: A Biography, 485.

Wofford’s excitement. “You bomb-throwers have lost the whole campaign,” Bobby shouted over the phone at Shriver in a conversation that forever damaged their personal relationship. When Bobby summoned Wofford and Louis Martin into his office, Martin explained the injustice of the arrest and sentence: four months hard labor over a minor traffic violation. Bobby was shocked by the decision: “You can’t deny bail on a misdemeanor.” He told both men not to do anything else in the campaign, including printing pamphlets, and had John Seigenthaler, one of his aides, drive him to the airport for his flight to New York. Some accounts say that, while flying, he considered the indecency of Judge Mitchell not giving King the right to his release on bond. He called Mitchell when he landed and spoke with him on the matter. Bobby later recounted why he made the call: “I called him because it made me so damn angry to think of that bastard sentencing a citizen to four months of hard labor for a minor traffic offense.”

On Thursday morning, October 27, Hallowell once again asked Judge Marshall for King’s release on bond. Judge Marshall set the bond at $2,000, and Hallowell posted it. Wyatt Tee Walker, elated over King’s release, charted a private plane using SCLC funds and flew with Hallowell and Ralph Abernathy to Reidsville followed by lawyers and reporters in three other planes. After eight days and nights in three different prisons, King emerged from the rural

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91 Branch, Parting The Waters, 364-65; O’Brien, John F. Kennedy: A Biography, 486. See also Sargent Shriver, interview by Anthony K. Shriver, n.d. [fall 1988], 33, JFKOHP.

92 Garrow, Bearing The Cross, 147-48; Bobby’s anger outburst is also recorded in Wofford, Of Kennedy and Kings, 21, Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, 74.

93 Garrow, Bearing The Cross, 148.
maximum-security prison at 3:46 p.m. At 5:57 p.m., King landed in Atlanta. Daddy King officially endorsed Kennedy to the small crowd gathered, and Dr. King thanked Kennedy for his kind phone call

With only twelve days before the election, King did not endorse either candidate because he headed the non-partisan Southern Christian Leadership Conference, but he made clear his profound appreciation “to Senator Kennedy for the genuine concern he expressed in my arrest.” Fulton County officials stopped any efforts to convict King of wrongdoing after Rich’s

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94 Branch, Parting The Waters, 366;

95 Garrow, Bearing The Cross, 148.


I have been asked from many quarters whether it is my intention to endorse one of the presidential candidates. The organization of which I am president, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, from its inception and in its constitution has been non-partisan. Accordingly, as its titular head, I am unable to endorse a political party or its candidate. Moreover, the role that is mine in the emerging social order of the South and America demands that I remain non-partisan. This, devoid of partisan political attachments, I am free to be critical of both parties when necessary.

But for fear of being considered an ingrate, I want to make it palpably clear that I am deeply grateful to Senator Kennedy for the genuine concern he expressed in my arrest. When reactionary forces sought to crush our movement for desegregation by methods so unjust and unwise that millions were inflamed with indignation, Senator Kennedy exhibited moral courage of a high order. He voluntarily expresses his position effectively and took an active and articulate stand for a just resolution. I hope that this example of Senator Kennedy’s courage will be a lesson deeply learned and consistently applied by all as we move forward in a non violent but resolute spirit to achieve rapidly proper standards of humanity and justice in our swiftly evolving world.
Department Store decided not to press charges against the protestors. On election day, November 8, King could not vote for Kennedy. Because he had not lived in Georgia for a set amount of time, Georgia election officials would not let him vote, and he did not have enough time to pay the $1.50 poll tax to vote absentee in Montgomery, Alabama. The entire episode officially ended in March 1961, when the Georgia Court of Appeals ruled King’s September 1960 12-month probation sentence in error.

I would also like to express my appreciation to Mayor Hartsfield for his constrictive leadership throughout the whole struggle. I have always argued that the silent multitude of the South, who sincerely want fair play to be the hallmark of our society, needed support and encouragement available only from its major leadership to enable them to give open expression to their belief. I consider that Mayor Hartsfield’s action illustrated the soundness of this course. The best antidote to desegregation of conflict of opinion into maliciousness and violence is statesmanlike, firm, expressions of the moral issues giving active support to proper resolution.

This is not the time to look back, but to look forward. I am full of hope for the future because of the goodwill and concern shown by so many people in Georgia and all over the country.

Now let us use this period for genuine negotiations so that Atlanta can take a step forward toward the society of “wisdom, justice and moderation” which the Seal of the State of Georgia and the Constitution of the United States promised.


“‘No Comment’ Nixon versus A Candidate With a Heart:”

Disseminating the Message of the Phone Call

Some of Vice-President Nixon’s black support disappeared after the call. Mrs. King, in the October 27 New York Times article, briefly commented on Nixon’s actions: “He’s been very quiet.”

White House aide E. Frederic Morrow had written telegraphs to send to Mrs. King and Georgia officials, but Nixon press secretary Herb Klein thought the telegraphs would hurt Nixon, and his staff never released them.

Daddy King, speaking at the Ebenezer Baptist Church on Thursday, October 27th, famously switched his vote from Nixon to Kennedy:

I had expected to vote against Senator Kennedy because of his religion. But now he can be my President, Catholic or whatever he is. It took courage to call my daughter-in-law at a time like this. He has the moral courage to stand up for what he knows is right. I’ve got all my votes and I’ve got a suitcase and I’m going to take them up there and dump them in his lap.

The publisher of The Citizen-Call, John Patterson, said, “Mr. Nixon, in his refusal to comment or to take a stand on the civil rights issue that Rev. King’s arrest symbolized merely extends the

101 Garrow, Bearing The Cross, 146.
102 Wofford, Of Kennedy and Kings, 23.
say-nothing, do-nothing rule by golf-club philosophy of President Eisenhower regarding the moral issue.” King, speaking in 1964, told of his disappointment in Nixon: “He had been supposedly close to me, and he would call me frequently about things, getting, seeking my advice. And yet, when this moment came it was like he never heard of me, you see. So this is why I really considered him a moral coward.\textsuperscript{103}

Nixon reflected on the call in his 1962 memoir \textit{Six Crises}: “[t]his one unfortunate incident in the heat of a campaign served to dissipate much of the support I had among Negro voters because of my record.” Interestingly, Nixon mentions only Bobby Kennedy’s involvement, who he said, “realizing the tremendous political potential of King’s misfortune, wasted no time in calling the judge in the case.”\textsuperscript{104} Historian Taylor Branch contends that, though pressured by men in his campaign staff such as Attorney General Bill Rogers and E. Frederick Morrow to make a statement condemning the conviction, Nixon remained silent because he wanted to carry the South, traveling to South Carolina at the time he heard King had been taken to Reidsville.\textsuperscript{105} In his own words, Nixon deeply cared about King, but told his press secretary Herb Klein to tell reporters he had “no comment” because he thought calling the judge imprudent:


\textsuperscript{105} Branch, \textit{Parting the Waters}, 375.
I think Dr. King is getting a bum rap. But despite my strong feelings in this respect, it would be completely improper for me or any other lawyer to call the judge. And Robert Kennedy should have known better than to do so.

Nixon further consulted with Attorney General Bill Rogers about King’s dilemma, and Rogers suggested that White House Press Secretary James C. Hagerty make a statement that the Justice Department would look into the situation.\textsuperscript{106} On October 25, the day Judge Mitchell sentenced King to four months hard labor at Reidsville, the Justice Department began discussing different ideas on how to free King, including asking the Federal courts for a writ of habeas corpus or appearing before Judge Mitchell as a friend of the court on behalf of King.\textsuperscript{107} They settled on a statement to be read by President Eisenhower, but no comment ever came from the White House, and Nixon had nothing to show for his efforts to free King from prison.\textsuperscript{108} As Nixon’s vice-presidential black chauffeur John Wardlow drove him to the Capitol the Thursday afternoon after his presidential defeat, Nixon relates how Wardlow expressed his dismay about how African-Americans switched their votes:

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\textsuperscript{106} Nixon, \textit{Six Crises}, 362-63.

\textsuperscript{107} Anthony Lewis, “Protest Over Dr. King’s Arrest Was Drafted for President’s Use: Justice Department Statement, Prepared at Height of Election Campaign, Never Came to Light for Unknown Reasons,” \textit{The New York Times}, December 15, 1960, 30, PHN.

\textsuperscript{108} Nixon, \textit{Six Crises}, 363-364; Lewis. “Protest Over Dr. King’s Arrest Was Drafted for President’s Use,” \textit{The New York Times}, December 15, 1960 30, PHN http://search.proquest.com/news?accountid=9703 (accessed March 27, 2013). The statement reads: “It seems to me fundamentally unjust that a man who has peacefully attempted to establish his right to equal treatment, free from racial discrimination, should be imprisoned on an unrelated charge, in itself insignificant. Accordingly, I have asked the Attorney General to take all proper steps to join with Dr. Martin Luther King in an appropriate application for his release.”
Mr. Vice President, I can’t tell you how sick I am about the way my people voted in the election. You know I had been talking to all of my friends. They were all for you. But when Mr. Robert Kennedy called the judge to get Dr. King out of jail—well, they just all turned to him.

When Kennedy interceded on Martin Luther King, Jr.’s behalf, his campaign staff realized the importance of what Theodore White called “an episode that tangled conscience with the most delicate balancing of the Northern Negro-Southern white vote.”. The Kennedy campaign developed a strategy that proved effective and unimaginable in an information-soaked twenty-first century political sphere: keep the story out of the mainstream media, but disseminate it heavily among African-Americans. The plan worked, and Theodore White said that “in the Negro community the Kennedy intervention rang like a carillon.”

Shriver and his staff printed close to two million flyers about Kennedy’s phone call to Mrs. King shortly before the election. Shriver told Martin and Wofford to say nothing to Bobby about the pamphlets, which would come to be called the “blue bomb.” Bearing the tag line “‘No Comment’ Nixon versus a Candidate with a Heart, Senator Kennedy,” the pamphlet included statements endorsing Kennedy and denouncing Nixon by Ralph Abernathy of the SCLC, Gardner Taylor, president of the Protestant Council of New York, Daddy King, Mrs.


110 Wofford, Of Kennedy and Kings, 25. See also Sargent Shriver, recorded interview by Anthony Shriver, n.d. [fall 1988], 23 JFKOHP.

111 Branch, Parting the Waters, 368, 372.
King, and Dr. King.\textsuperscript{112}

In Washington on Saturday and Sunday, October 28 and 29, Wofford and Martin oversaw the production of the first 50,000 copies, which were sent to different areas of the country. Shriver reported on Tuesday, November 1 that the campaign would reprint 250,000 copies in Illinois for distribution on the Sunday before the election, November 6, at black churches in Chicago as well as other congregations in Illinois and Wisconsin. As demand for the “blue bomb” escalated, Shriver and his staff prepared more pamphlets for an organized Sunday distribution at black churches across the country. Greyhound buses left Washington early Sunday morning for Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina with the last batches of the “blue bomb,” which organizers carried to black churches.\textsuperscript{113} Gardner Taylor of the National Baptist Convention helped channel the pamphlet through the church organization, and he telephoned allies across the nation on how Kennedy had helped King.\textsuperscript{114} One of Doug McAdam’s three institutions for black insurgency, the church, proved to be essential in the distribution of the “blue bomb.”


\textsuperscript{113} Wofford, Of Kennedy and Kings, 24.

\textsuperscript{114} Branch, Parting The Waters, 372.
Northern newspapers and magazines also carried the story. On November 5, 1960, The Pittsburgh Courier ran as their front page headline “King Interviewed by Courier: Says Prisoners Wanted to Strike.” The paper contained the story of King’s time in jail and his gratitude for Kennedy’s intervention. In both papers King declined endorsing either candidate because of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s non-partisan position, though his comments about Kennedy clearly indicated which candidate he preferred. On election day, Tuesday, November 8, the black newspaper Chicago Defender, in an article titled “King Lauds Jack On Race Issue,” quoted King in a radio address in which he predicted Kennedy would use the office of the president to help African-Americans:

I don’t know how much Senator Kennedy would do about segregation, but I am sure that he would take a forthright position. Kennedy has made it very clear in the campaign that there is a great deal that the President can do, and he intends to use the weight of his office to get behind the struggle for civil rights, and to mobilize forces in the nation for implementation of the Supreme Court’s decision for desegregation.

Not everyone responded positively to the phone call or Kennedy. A November 7 Los Angeles Times article about an Associated Press election poll spoke about Kennedy’s phone call to Mrs. King and the white anger in Georgia it sparked, but still predicted Kennedy would win

115 The Pittsburgh Courier, November 5, 1960, DNC, Records of the Civil Rights Campaign, Records of the Civil Rights Division (Louis Martin), Box 147, Newspaper Clippings 11/5/60 undated, JFKL.

the state with 60% of the vote.\textsuperscript{117} Eighteen black leaders affiliated with Independents, Republicans, and Democrats for Nixon said King could have gotten out of prison without Kennedy’s help and spoke of “a clear-cut unholy, diabolic conspiracy” between King and the Democratic party to get Kennedy elected.\textsuperscript{118} An October 30 \textit{Atlanta Daily World} Letter to the Editor addressed to Mayor Hartsfield predicted incorrectly that the Democrats would lose the presidential election because a Georgia Democratic state official had put King in prison and blacks would not support the party for this action.\textsuperscript{119} Despite the phone call, the \textit{Atlanta Daily World} still endorsed Nixon on Election Day, particularly because no black citizen could become a Democrat in Georgia.\textsuperscript{120}

The “blue bomb” and newspapers served as crucial mediums in getting the message to black voters that Kennedy called Mrs. King and helped secure Martin Luther King, Jr.’s release from prison. But which documents had the greatest effect? While researching newspaper databases and the Kennedy Library, I consulted thirteen newspapers and examined how these

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\textsuperscript{120} Branch, \textit{Parting The Waters}, 373-74.
\end{flushleft}
articles covered the affair. By using key words such as “John F. Kennedy,” “Phone Call,” “Coretta Scott King, “Dr. Martin Luther King,” and “1960 presidential election, I used Proquest Newspaper Database to uncover how many articles dealt with the topic. After narrowing the search from late October 1960 to early 1961, I found nine newspapers that dealt with the Kennedy’s involvement in the King episode. Twenty-four articles in those newspapers mention the Kennedy’s involvement in the period before the election. After viewing these documents, from newspapers in the Northeast, Midwest, California, and even Israel, the message of both Kennedy phone calls reached many people, particularly urban African-Americans. Two million “blue bombs” were printed and handed out, but newspapers reached more areas than the “blue bomb” was distributed. Both were effective, but the newspapers had a farther reach than the “blue bomb.”

121 The following newspapers contained stories about the episode:


“Everybody Got King Out Of Jail But The Lawyers”:

Who Was Responsible For King’s Release?

Since the famous phone call, many individuals have claimed to play a major role in the events that led Kennedy to call Mrs. King as well as the process that secured King’s release from prison. The oral history accounts of Kennedy’s call to Mrs. King and Dr. King’s subsequent release contain contrasting data and self-serving historical revision, so much so that the first African-American Supreme Court Associate Justice, Thurgood Marshall, remarked to King’s attorney Donald Hollowell, “Say, Hollowell, they tell me that everybody got King out of jail but the lawyers.”

In their own words, many men claimed to have a significant role in Kennedy’s election. Lonnie King, one of the Atlanta student protestor leaders that asked King to join the October coordinated sit-ins, said the student leaders came up with the idea in the summer of 1960 so that Dr. King’s October arrest would have an influence on the election. Because King did not realize he was on probation after his September 23 hearing and other student leaders do not back up the story, Lonnie King’s self-serving claim does not hold up. Dr. Martin Luther King, Sr. claimed

that he turned the election to Kennedy with his “suitcase full of votes” speech.\textsuperscript{123}

Mayor Hartsfield told former Atlanta Constitution editor Eugene Patterson numerous times that “I’m the guy who got Kennedy elected president.” In December 1960, Hartsfield told the press that his insistence that the Kennedy campaign do something for Dr. King set the wheels in motion that attracted black votes and ultimately gave Kennedy the presidency. Hartsfield’s self-serving narrative does not correlate with the facts. The force behind King’s release from jail that seems to have enhanced Kennedy’s prestige among black voters came from an unlikely source: Democratic Georgia Governor S. Ernest Vandiver. Though not as radical as other Georgia Democratic politicians, Vandiver condemned King on his return to Atlanta in 1960 and also ran in 1958 for governor on the platform of keeping schools segregated. While supporting segregation, he allowed attorney Griffin Bell, his chief of staff, to start committees that looked into desegregating schools, keeping the governor’s name out of these negotiations. Only when Kennedy privately promised Vandiver that, if elected, he would not send the National Guard into Georgia like Eisenhower had done in Little Rock to enforce integration did Vandiver publicly endorse Kennedy.\textsuperscript{124}

\textsuperscript{123} Kuhn, “There’s a Footnote to History,” 587.

\textsuperscript{124} Kuhn, “There’s a Footnote to History!” 585-86; 591. William B. Hartsfield interview by Charles T. Morrissey, January 6, 1966, JFKOHP.
Most accounts take at face value the claim that Bobby Kennedy’s enraged call to Judge Mitchell persuaded the judge to release King from jail. Besides crediting Bobby Kennedy with a superhuman gift of persuasion, this interpretation makes Judge Mitchell out to be extremely malleable to other’s opinions, which does not correlate with his views on civil rights. Bobby’s harsh tone alone could not have changed the mind of a man who privately and publicly stressed that he wanted King kept behind bars and ordered him to the Georgia State prison in the dead of night.125

The man that links the Kennedy brothers with the governor and judge did not receive any official historical mention in the case until 1993: George D. Stewart. Secretary of the Georgia Democratic party and the former roommate of Georgia politician Herman Talmadge at the University of Georgia, Stewart got Mitchell a court appointment while Talmadge served as governor in 1950. Senator Kennedy called Governor Vandiver at 6:30 a.m. one morning and asked him to help secure King’s release. Both men realized how negatively many viewed the Southern Democratic party because of King’s unfair sentence, but Vandiver could not risk his political career over releasing King because of his views on segregation. Bob Russell, the governor’s political advisor and brother-in-law, knew exactly what to do.126

125 Kuhn, “There’s a Footnote to History!” 588-89.
Taking into account that Senator Kennedy asked the governor to consult Bobby, as well as Mitchell and Stewart’s friendship (along with Mitchell receiving his job thanks to Stewart), Russell convinced Stewart to talk to Mitchell about the matter. Mitchell wanted confirmation that Senator Kennedy and Governor Vandiver had talked about the situation, but he did promise King’s release. Bobby called Mitchell after Vandiver told Bobby to call the judge.\(^{127}\)

Vandiver reported in a January 1994 interview that Judge Mitchell had already determined, if Bobby called, to release King. Vandiver believed that Mitchell had been promised a federal appointment by Stewart, and both men later met Bobby Kennedy in Washington.\(^{128}\) Bobby Kennedy’s one-call miracle never happened; it took political maneuvering in both the Kennedy camp and the governor’s office to release King. The importance of men like S. Ernest Vandiver and George D. Stewart demonstrate the intricacies beneath the repeated historical narrative that tell a complete and truthful story.

Although many southern politicians tried rewriting their history later in life when their anti-civil rights views became politically incorrect, Governor Vandiver’s story holds up for many reasons. Ironically, because he feared for his office if word got out that he intervened on King’s

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\(^{127}\) Kuhn, “There’s a Footnote to History!” 589, 591; Ernest Vandiver, interview with John F. Stewart, May 22, 1967, 89, JFKOHP. See also O’Brien, John F. Kennedy: A Biography, 476 and Evan Thomas, Robert Kennedy, 102

\(^{128}\) Kuhn, “There’s a Footnote to History!” 593.
behalf, he asked that his Kennedy Library 1967 oral interview be placed on a different tape and retained copyright of the interview.\footnote{Kuhn, “There’s a Footnote to History!” 591.} Vandiver’s story seems valid because he discussed the potentially devastating story during the civil rights movement and asked that the tape containing this information be separated from the rest of the interview in order to not upset white Georgia voter
Kennedy’s “Suitcase Full Of Votes:”

The Polling Data and Actual Vote Count

In the post-election analysis, one fact stands out: African-Americans overwhelmingly voted for Kennedy. Believing around November 10 that Nixon only gained 10 or 12 percent of black votes, Republican Party National Chairman Thruston B. Morton said Nixon lost the election primarily because he failed to capture the black vote as Eisenhower had in 1956. He also lamented that the Nixon campaign had not spent nearly as much money as the Kennedy campaign had on targeting black voters.\(^{130}\) Doug McAdam put it this way: “for the third time since 1936, the votes of black Americans were widely credited with deciding the contest.”\(^{131}\) Before looking at African-American’s support for Kennedy, an examination of party identification gives a good introduction to African-Americans’ 1960 political preferences.

According to a 1960 National Election Studies poll, African-Americans aligned more closely with the Democratic Party than with the Republican party.\(^{132}\) According to those surveyed in the poll, 50\% of African-Americans always voted Democrat as opposed to 8\% who


\(^{132}\) Niven, *The Politics of Injustice*, 165.
always voted Republican. Compared to 30.6% of whites who always voted Democrat to 24.3 percent who always voted Republican, apparently overall, African-Americans supported Democrats. Furthermore, African-Americans had 3.4 affirming remarks concerning the Democratic party for every 1.8 good remark made about the Republican party, a racial gap of 4.1 good remarks about Republicans for every 4.0 affirming remarks about Democrats made by whites.\textsuperscript{133}

As the King situation heated up and the election approached, Nixon saw some of his Southern poll numbers fall.\textsuperscript{134} Because of Kennedy’s definite advantage in the Northeast, Nixon needed border and Southern states. An Associated Press poll stated that a number of states had either switched to Kennedy or were now “doubtful.” Texas, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, and North Carolina were classified as doubtful, while Louisiana had moved from doubtful to supporting Kennedy. Henry Cabot Lodge’s recent announcement that Nixon would appoint an African-American to his cabinet hurt his popularity among Southern white voters. With Kennedy’s dramatic call to Mrs. King encouraging black voters and Southern whites disgruntled with Nixon, these poll numbers suggested a more favorable outcome for Kennedy in

\textsuperscript{133} Niven, \textit{The Politics of Injustice}, 244.

\textsuperscript{134} During the 1968 campaign, Nixon employed what Kevin Phillips would popularize as “The Southern Strategy, where Republicans appealed to white Southern voters at the expense of African-Americans, alienating them from the Republican party. The strategy created a strong Republican coalition in the South. A possible reason for this shift in Nixon’s strategy could be because he did not take a strong stand on the King issue in 1960. By siding with white Southerners in the 1968 election, he helped strengthened the Republican stronghold that still exists in the South. He learned his lesson in 1960 after trying to ride the fence. “The Southern Strategy,” Wikipedia
During the campaign, Louis Harris and Associates conducted polls in 28 states concerning, among other things, African-American support for Kennedy and Nixon. Six states (Illinois, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Texas) had polls performed before and after Kennedy’s phone call to Mrs. King, and one (Connecticut) after the call (See Figure 2). Of these states all but North Carolina had Kennedy far ahead of Nixon with African-American support before Kennedy called Mrs. King. The Illinois October 21 poll concluded that 76% of blacks favored Kennedy to Nixon’s 24%, Maryland’s 23 September poll had Kennedy ahead 64% to 34% in black support, New York’s 25 October poll had Kennedy ahead 66% to 34%, Pennsylvania’s October 12 poll showed Kennedy with a 66% to 34% advantage, and


137 A Survey of the Presidential Election in Illinois, II, #809, 6, October 21, 1960, RFKPAPF, 1960C/T, GSF59/60, Box 43, JFKL.

138 A Survey of the Presidential Election in Maryland, I, #863, 21, September 23, 1960, RFKPAPF, 1960C/T, GSF59/60, Box 44, JFKL.

139 A Survey of the Presidential Election in New York, II, #849, 4, October 25, 1960, RFKPAPF, 1960C/T, GSF59/60, Box 44, JFKL.
the October 17 Texas poll had Kennedy ahead 83% to 17%.\textsuperscript{141} In only Texas and New York did his numbers drop after the call, in New York 66 to 63% and in Texas from 83 support to 71%.\textsuperscript{142} Illinois black support grew in the November 2 poll to 82% from 76%,\textsuperscript{143} Maryland support in the October 31 poll to 66% from 64%,\textsuperscript{144} and Pennsylvania black support from 66% to 74%.\textsuperscript{145} North Carolina illustrates the most radical change. A September 26 poll had Nixon ahead 53% to 47% in black support,\textsuperscript{146} and the October 31 poll showed Kennedy ahead 88% to 12%, an impressive turnaround.\textsuperscript{147} Connecticut's November 4 poll had Kennedy ahead 68% to 32%.\textsuperscript{148} These polls did not concern the phone call, but do show the overall support Kennedy enjoyed

\textsuperscript{140} A Survey of the Presidential Election in Pennsylvania, II, #807, 3, October 12, 1960, RFKPAPF, 1960C/T, GSF59/60, Box 45, JFKL.

\textsuperscript{141} A Survey of the Presidential Election in Texas, II, October 17, 1960, #829, 8, RFKPAPF, 1960C/T, GSF59/60 Box 45, JFKL.

\textsuperscript{142} A Survey of the Presidential Election in New York, III, November 4, 1960, #810, 2, RFKPAPF, 1960C/T, GSF59/60Box 44, JFKL; A Survey of the Presidential Election in Texas, III, November 3, 1960, #830, 3, RFKPAPF, 1960C/T, GSF59/60Box 45, JFKL.

\textsuperscript{143} A Survey of the Presidential Election in Illinois, III, November 2, 1960, #814, 4, RFKPAPF, 1960C/T, GSF59/60Box 43, JFKL.

\textsuperscript{144} A Survey of the Presidential Election in Maryland, II, October 31, 1960, #864, 2, RFKPAPF, 1960C/T, GSF59/60Box 44, JFKL.

\textsuperscript{145} A Survey of the Presidential Election in Pennsylvania, III, November 3, 1960, #812, 4, RFKPAPF, 1960C/T, GSF59/60Box 45, JFKL.

\textsuperscript{146} A Survey of the Presidential Election in North Carolina, I, September 26, 1960, #849, 7, RFKPAPF, 1960C/T, GSF59/60, Box 44, JFKL; See also Niven, \textit{The Politics of Injustice}, 19.

\textsuperscript{147} A Survey of the Presidential Election in North Carolina, II, October 31, 1960, #850, 2, RFKPAPF, 1960C/T, GSF59/60 Box 44, JFKL.

\textsuperscript{148} A Survey of the Presidential Election in Connecticut, November 4, 1960, #912, 2, RFKPAPF, 1960C/T, GSF59/60Box 45, JFKL.
from black Americans. The dates used are not the dates the polling took place: Illinois’ polling took place between October 19 and 27, New York’s between October 24 and November 1, Pennsylvania’s polling was completed before October 27, Texas’ between October 24 and 29, and Maryland and North Carolina have no date for when polling occurred.\textsuperscript{149}

Figure 2: African-American Kennedy support before & after the October 26th phone call.

Gallup polls helped measure interest in the election and how African-Americans voted. Between September 28 and October 2, Gallup conducted a poll asking how much interest certain groups had in the election. Released on October 23, 58% of non-white participants in the poll said they were absolutely certain they would vote in the upcoming election.\(^{150}\) A December 9

Gallup Post-Election analysis poll shows the advantage Kennedy had with black voters. Of those interviewed, Southern blacks gave Kennedy 67% of their vote, and those in other areas of the country gave him 68%. Blacks over 50 interviewed gave him 63% of their vote, and those under 50 gave him 71%. Of those interviewed in an area with less than 500,000 people, blacks gave Kennedy 60% of their vote, and in an area with more than 500,000 people he got 74% of the black vote. Black women interviewed voted 70% for Kennedy, and black men voted 66%.¹⁵¹

A March 1962 article by Florida State Professor Russel Middleton examined the support Kennedy received from African-Americans. Right before the 1960 presidential election (Middleton does not give a specific date), Middleton asked 130 African-Americans in a Deep South town of 50,000 to participate in a survey in which he asked them, “If the election were being held today, would you vote for Nixon or Kennedy?” When he proposed the same question after the election, he found that all the undecided voters ended up voting for Kennedy, no one switched their vote to Nixon after confirming they preferred Kennedy, and 16% voted for Kennedy after initially supporting Nixon. Although Middleton calls the shift of support from Nixon to Kennedy “relatively slight,” he thinks that Martin Luther King, Jr’s favorable words about Kennedy possibly helped bring about the shift in votes.¹⁵²


In *The Politics of Injustice*, David Niven calculated the states Kennedy would have lost without African American votes, and his alternative conclusion would have given Nixon a landslide electoral victory. Kennedy barely defeated Nixon in the popular vote, winning a total of 34,220,984 votes to Nixon’s 34,108,157, or 49.7% of the vote to Nixon’s 49.6%. In the Electoral College, Kennedy secured 303 electoral votes to Nixon’s 219. Despite Bobby Kennedy’s early apprehension over the phone call, Kennedy and Johnson won significant victories in the Deep South, carrying Georgia (12), Louisiana (10), South Carolina (8), and five electoral votes from Alabama. Niven used National Election Studies, Gallup exit poll reports on African Americans, and the likelihood African-Americans would vote for Kennedy. When compiled, he measured those who voted for Nixon, Kennedy, or not at all. He multiplied these estimates by the African Americans in each state, and then subtracted the approximated voters for Nixon from the approximated voters for Kennedy. If the results produced more black voters than actually voted for Kennedy, he would have lost the state. Nine states fell into this category: Texas (24), Nevada (3), Illinois (27), Hawaii (3), Missouri (13), Michigan (20), New Jersey (16), New Mexico (4), and Pennsylvania (32). Nixon would have received an additional 142 electoral votes.

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votes if blacks had not voted, and this would have given him a 361-161 victory in the Electoral College.¹⁵⁵

The black vote in Texas, North Carolina, and South Carolina all helped Kennedy secure these states. Approximately 100,000 blacks voted in Texas, where Kennedy won by 45,000 votes. Approximately 70,000 blacks voted Kennedy in North Carolina, more than the 58,000 votes that separated him and Nixon in the state. More than 40,000 blacks voted for Kennedy in South Carolina, and he won the state by a narrow 10,000 votes.¹⁵⁶

Richard M. Scammon, director of elections research at the Governmental Affairs Institute in 1960, wrote an article entitled “How the Negroes Voted” for a booklet entitled The New Republic: The Meaning of Moving Forward-I. The article showed the tremendous affect black voters had on the election. Around 125,000 blacks voted in New Jersey, where Kennedy won by only 30,000 votes. He mentions Michigan, where a minimum of 225,000 black votes ensured Kennedy’s 65,000 vote margin. More than 350,000 black voters helped Kennedy win Illinois by 10,000 votes, and at least 100,000 black votes guaranteed his 35,000 vote advantage

¹⁵⁵ Niven, The Politics of Injustice, 167-68.


Around the country, African-Americans showed their support for Kennedy. The 120 black precincts of Los Angeles voted 19,307 to 5,423 in favor of Kennedy. In a post-election examination of the 2nd to 14th assembly districts in Harlem, Kennedy received 76,782 votes to Nixon’s 18,218. Pittsburgh’s ward 5’s Democratic support rose from 67.7% in 1956 to 78.4% in 1960. Ward 47 in Philadelphia increased its Democratic support from 74.3% in 1956 to 84.3% in 1960. Four predominantly black wards in Buffalo, New York voted for Eisenhower 14,850 to 12,119, but in 1960 the four wards voted for Kennedy 21,712 to 7,329. Memphis’ 48 wards gave Kennedy a 27,321 to 12,701 victory over Nixon, an area Eisenhower defeated Democratic challenger Adele Stevenson 16,270 to 10,730 in 1956. Ward 35 in Memphis voted 67.7% for Kennedy in 1960 as opposed to 36.2% for Stevenson in 1956. Kennedy won Chicago’s all


159 Scammon, “How the Negroes Voted,” 9


162 Scammon, “How the Negroes Voted,” 9, DNC, Box 149, JFKL.
black wards 136,935 to 33,906, an increase over Stevenson’s 112,206 to 58,895 total in 1956.\textsuperscript{163}Five black wards in Chicago’s South Side gave Kennedy 78.1% of their vote, an increase from the 62.5% they gave Stevenson in 1956.\textsuperscript{164}

A November 27 \textit{New York Times} article analyzed the black vote and found a distinct shift from the Republican to the Democratic party, with more pronounced participation in the South. In twenty-three Houston districts with a majority of blacks, Kennedy beat Nixon 22,156 to 3,393, a significant increase from Adlei Stevenson 11,592 to 6,006 win in 1956. Kennedy soundly defeated Nixon in three Tampa, Florida black districts 1,980 to 558, an area Stevenson barely won 1,011 to 995 in 1956. Five Louisville black wards voted Eisenhower in 1956 by a margin of 26,183 to 23,067, but Kennedy won the area 28,613 to 23,405 in 1960. Three Nashville black wards voted 5,710 to 2,529 for Kennedy, a marked difference from their 3,258 to 2861 Eisenhower support.\textsuperscript{165}

Although Democratic support remained small in eight black Atlanta precincts, Kennedy gained 41.9% of the vote in 1960, a definite improvement over Stevenson’s 14.8 percent. 2 predominately black Baltimore wards gave Kennedy 74.4% of their vote, an increase over the

\textsuperscript{163} “Voting Records, undated,” November 10, 1960, DNC, Box 150, Records of the 1960 Campaign, JFKL.

\textsuperscript{164} Scammon, “How the Negroes Voted,” 9, DNC, Box 149, JFKL.

48.1% they gave Stevenson in 1956. In Richmond, Virginia, Kennedy won three black districts 1,286 to 762, reversing Eisenhower's 1,287 to 588 1956 victory. With black registered voters a majority in Charles City County, Virginia, 64.9% voted for Kennedy as opposed to 19.0% for Stevenson in 1956.166

In some Northern cities, Kennedy gained more black votes than Stevenson in 1956. Stevenson’s 1,231 to 993 win in eight black Cleveland districts rose to 1,992 to 506 for Kennedy in 1960. Four black East St. Louis, Illinois voted 2,734 to 534 in Kennedy’s favor, an increase from Stevenson’s 2,342 to 761 margin. Two black Pittsburgh wards increased their support for the Democratic nominee from 13,940 to 8,922 in 1956 to 14,892 to 5,272 in 1960.167

Manhattan’s Eleventh, Twelfth, and Fourteenth Districts increased their Democratic vote totals from 66,527 to 32,356 in 1956 to 71,445 to 20,367 in 1960. Brooklyn’s predominately black Sixth Assembly District also expanded their Democratic support from 13,754 to 8,973 in 1956 to 22,777 to 5,808 in 1960.168 Three black assembly districts in Manhattan and Brooklyn voted 64.2% Democrat in 1956 and 75.2% in 1960.169

Most of these figures show a dramatic shift in support from the Republican to Democratic party among African-American voters in the 1960 presidential election. Illinois

166 Scammon, “How the Negroes Voted,” 9, DNC, Box 149, JFKL.


169 Scammon, “How the Negroes Voted,” 9, DNC, Box 149, JFKL.
proved pivotal to the Kennedy campaign because of its twenty-seven electoral votes and the distribution of 250,000 blue bombs in the state and in Wisconsin. Despite claims of election fraud and mob intervention in Kennedy’s Illinois victory, 136,935 voters in Chicago’s black wards gave their vote to Kennedy, and over 350,000 Illinois blacks voted for him. With less than 20,000 popular votes separating Kennedy and Nixon in the popular vote and a margin of only 8,858 votes out of 4,657,000 Illinois votes separating him and Nixon, black voters in Illinois gave more than enough popular support to ensure Kennedy’s victory, and the “blue bomb” may have helped convince these African-Americans voters that Kennedy was the man for the Sixties. When that Morris Brown college senior wrote “Great Issues” on the front of his notebook, he did not foresee how a May traffic ticket and an October phone would become great issues in the 1960 presidential election and the civil rights movement.170

To illustrate how important Illinois was in the 1960 presidential election, the chart on the next page displays the five states Kennedy won with the smallest margin of popular votes. Notice the small amount of electoral votes compared to Illinois’ twenty-seven. 171


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Margin of Victory in Popular Vote</th>
<th>Electoral Votes</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>2,294</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>2,294</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>3,217</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>8,858</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3:** The five closest states Kennedy won by a popular vote margin in 1960

“What the hell…Get her on the phone:”
A Conclusion

Kennedy made only one reference to his civil rights aide Harris Wofford about the
King episode. Campaign staffers printed the “blue bomb” on Sunday, October 30 as Kennedy
and Wofford walked on the runway of Washington National Airport to Kennedy’s plane the
Caroline, named for his three-year old daughter he carried on his back. Kennedy asked Wofford
whether he should sign and release a report on the Conference of Constitutional Rights he
oversaw in mid-October. Kennedy, reading the specific issues concerning civil rights in the
document, asked Wofford if releasing the document would help him get elected in nine days.
Wofford said it probably wouldn’t shift voter’s opinions because it concerned presidential
initiatives, and said in his own words, “By now he had hit his bolt for civil rights in the campaign
and done it well.” Kennedy agreed to wait until he got in office to sign the document and then
spoke about the phone call:

Did you see what Martin’s father said? He was going to vote against me
because I was a Catholic, but since I called his daughter-in-law, he will vote
for me. That was a hell of a bigoted statement, wasn’t it? Imagine Martin
Luther King having a bigot for a father!

When Wofford turned to leave, Kennedy flashed his famous grin and said, “Well, we all have
fathers, don’t we?”

Harris Wofford best explained this crucial episode of the 1960 presidential election: “If King had remained in jail, the Senator’s call to Mrs. King might have been a symbol without substance--the worst fate for any symbolic act.” If the behind-the-scenes legwork had failed, Nixon may well have won the presidency. Looking back at Figure 1, the events surrounding Kennedy’s call to Mrs. King help explain Kennedy as a campaigner. Unfortunately, Kennedy never discussed the matter in depth before his murder in 1963. He briefly referenced the episode with Harris Wofford before boarding his plane, with the New York Times reporter he quickly rushed by, and with John Kenneth Galbraith, when Kennedy explained to him that “the best strategies are always accidental.” Niven believes that “this accident produced overwhelming support from African Americans and made liberals much more enthusiastic for Kennedy.” In the same interview, Kennedy told Galbraith he did not know about Bobby’s subsequent call, a claim that does not correlate with the coordinated telephone conversations Kennedy proposed to Governor Vandiver. Despite Kennedy’s kind words to Mrs. King, the strategy involved with releasing King and distributing the message to select groups hints at Kennedy’s complex desire


173 Wofford, Of Kennedy and Kings, 22. See also Kuhn, “There’s a Footnote to History,” 588.


175 Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, 74; Kuhn, “There’s a Footnote To History,” 588-593.
of doing the right thing while still gaining white Southern support. In addition, if the strategy backfired, Bobby remained in good position to take the fall.\textsuperscript{176}

According to historian Taylor Branch’s account of a 1983 Sargent Shriver interview, Kennedy’s responded to Shriver’s suggestion to make the phone call with these words: “‘What the hell? That’s a decent thing to do. Why not? Get her on the phone.’” Branch also says that Kennedy felt ill when he made the call, so he possibly could have made the decision without thinking through the ramifications.\textsuperscript{177} We do not know Kennedy’s mind, but the steps he took afterward show the calculating politician at work.

The entire episode in late October can be divided into three events: the call itself, King’s release from prison, and the distribution of the blue bomb. Each event had an independent effect. The phone call influenced some voters, as they perceived that Kennedy cared enough to check on Mrs. King. Bartender Jack Boyd of Harlem, on the night of the election, told Les Matthews of \textit{New York Amsterdam News} that “Kennedy went to the aid of Rev. Martin Luther King. It was only vocal but it showed where his heart was. He is my choice.” As Matthews walked through Harlem on November 8, he ran into Louis Bates, who said “Kennedy is the best man. Look at the record and judge the men by their performance. Who was the first to go to the

\textsuperscript{176} Kuhn, “There’s a Footnote to History!” 593.

\textsuperscript{177} Branch, \textit{Parting the Waters}, 362. Interview with Sargent Shriver, November 30, 1983.
defense of Rev. Martin Luther King?" Though more than a week after King’s release, these men emphasized the moral support of Kennedy, and they appreciated his vocal support for King.178 King’s release from prison really ignited support for Kennedy: black voters understood that the Kennedys had interceded on behalf of Dr. King, and the reproduction of both the story and Nixon’s inaction in black newspapers helped enhance Kennedy’s image in the African-American community. The “blue bomb” retold both Kennedy’s call and King’s release from prison, and African-Americans’ strong turnout for Kennedy could be contributed to these flyers.179

The way Kennedy’s phone call to Mrs. King affected black voters and the election remain undisputed: despite other factors that helped Kennedy win the presidency, blacks overwhelmingly voted for him, which made the effect of the phone call high. The call did not negatively affect Kennedy: though some white agitation existed, most major newspapers and news agencies minimally covered the story.180 Kennedy’s motivation remains much harder to solve. Thomas C. Reeves concluded in A Question Of Character that “[i]t now seems reasonably clear that the motivation for Bobby’s call was, as in Jack’s case, both humanitarian and political.”181 Because of the unseen political moves made to release King and Kennedy’s


180 Branch, Parting The Waters, 365-66.

reluctance to discuss the issue, the call appears more instrumental than moral. However, at the time of the call, Kennedy seems sympathetic and caring. Factoring in whatever was ailing him at the time, he could have made a quick decision and not realized the consequences until later. After studying Kennedy’s approach to civil rights before the phone call, one sees how Kennedy would cater to both black and white voters for support. With this conclusion, Kennedy seems to have had mixed motivations. The possibility exists that he had purely calculating or purely moral concern when he called, but no concrete evidence exists to prove this.

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Failed</td>
<td>Complex and Unfortunate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1: Kennedy the Campaigner; His Motivation and its Effects: The Results**

Despite Kennedy’s pragmatic approach to the King episode, other episodes during and immediately following the campaign show some type of commitment toward civil rights.
Gretchen Rubin draws attention to a few instances. After a Kentucky hotel refused service to a black reporter during the campaign, Kennedy moved all those with him out of the hotel in protest of the man’s treatment.\textsuperscript{182} Kennedy demanded the Coast Guard be integrated and asked for targeted recruitment of blacks after unhappily watching an all-white unit march during his inauguration. She also mentions that these both acted as symbolic gestures, just as when Kennedy called Mrs. King. These symbolic overtures to black Americans seems to add credence to the theories of men like Theodore Sorensen and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. who believe Kennedy waited until the Spring of 1963 to initiate civil rights reform because he understood the time was not quite right to attack segregation.\textsuperscript{183} Another understanding of Kennedy’s approach to civil rights (and, in effect, the King episode) is found in Garry Wills’ less flattering view on Kennedy: “[Kennedy’s] encouragement of the civil rights issue was largely inadvertent, when it was not the result of good public relations work by people like [Harris] Wofford.”\textsuperscript{184} Kennedy would devote much energy during the final months of his presidency toward civil rights, but, in October 1960, Wofford’s words ring true: “[H]e wanted to win the election and he also liked to do the right thing.”\textsuperscript{185} As the “blue bomb” proclaimed, Kennedy was indeed “A Candidate With

\textsuperscript{182} Gretchen Rubin, \textit{Forty Ways To Look At JFK} (New York: Bellantine Books, 2007), 175.
\textsuperscript{183} Stern, “John F. Kennedy and Civil Rights,” 797.
\textsuperscript{185} Harris Wofford, recorded interview by Anthony K. Shriver, n.d. [fall 1988] 85, JFKOHP.
a Heart,” but his strategically-timed comment on the King episode and his previous relationship with African-Americans proves he did not act on strictly moral conviction.  

Though Kennedy had mixed motivations when he called Mrs. King, this should not overshadow the steps he took toward making African-Americans equal citizens of the United States. His call to Mrs. King helped him win the presidency, which then enabled him to enact legislation which would bestow upon African-Americans another “new birth of freedom.” In a May 23, 1961 interview, Attorney General Robert Kennedy stated that in the “near and foreseeable future,” an African-American could become president. Less than three months later, the man who would fulfill that prediction would be born into a nation ripe with race divisions and prejudice. On October 6, 1965, two days after Barack Hussein Obama turned four, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 went into effect, delivering equal voting rights for African-Americans and fulfilling Kennedy’s final months of work. Fifty years after his death, John F. Kennedy remains a symbol for civil rights, just as his phone conversation to Mrs. King remains a symbol of compassion on the long road to American equality. Because of men like Kennedy and

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King, minorities need not channel their voice solely through newspapers and churches, or secretly over a telephone, but can openly voice their call for all Americans to create a more perfect Union.
Appendix