

A GREAT CHANGE IS AT HAND

(A Domestic Record Defined By Civil Rights)

1961-63

By David Pitts

Note to reader: The following was originally written as an appendix for inclusion in "Jack and Lem: John F. Kennedy and Lem Billings: The Untold Story of an Extraordinary Friendship." Since it was ultimately decided not to include it in the book, it is offered here.)

"Dante once said that the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in a period of moral crisis, maintain their neutrality." (JFK, June 24, 1963)

(No one was more proud of what John F. Kennedy accomplished in the field of civil rights than his best friend, Lem Billings. Lem's great grandfather, Francis Julius LeMoyné, founded an anti-slavery society in Washington County, Pennsylvania and also ran as a vice presidential candidate on the Abolitionist platform. In addition, he also established what became LeMoyné College in Memphis, Tennessee. The college was dedicated to educating "freedmen of color. It still is a predominantly African American institution today. It joined with Owen College to become LeMoyné-Owen College in 1968. While JFK was in the White House, Lem visited Owen College and addressed the students on civil rights.)

President Kennedy's domestic agenda was ambitious. Not since the New Deal a generation earlier had a president sought to transform the country on such a grand scale. But, unlike a generation earlier, most Americans were prosperous in the early 1960s and reluctant to embrace a radical agenda that would fundamentally change the country. Despite the fact that his party suffered a loss of 22 seats in the House of Representatives in 1960 and that a conservative ideological majority dominated in Congress as a whole, Kennedy persisted.

In speech after speech, he made the case for change. Most of his initiatives -- more legislative proposals than at any time since the New Deal -- would not be passed during his short time in office. That task fell to his successor, President Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ), who was more skilled in cajoling Congress but who also benefited from the election of many more liberal Democrats in the 1964 election.

However, it was Kennedy who initiated the call for change, including the proposals for Medicare and Medicaid, a new federal war on poverty that

eventually led to the creation of Head Start and Job Corps, tax cuts to spur the economy, federal aid to education, and transportation and housing initiatives that would ultimately result in the formation of the Department of Transportation and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. But one overriding issue dominated his presidency at home -- civil rights.

On the day that John F. Kennedy became president, millions of black Americans -- Negroes they were called then -- could not vote in large sections of the South. They could not live in the neighborhood they preferred, eat in the restaurant they chose, or stay in the hotel they favored. They could not send their children to the best public school available or enroll them in the public university in the state in which they were resident.

Most African Americans living in the South, in effect, lived under a system of American apartheid. Blacks elsewhere in the country also faced widespread de facto segregation resulting in conditions that, in some areas, were even worse than in the South. Television in the early 1960s reflected the racism of the society at large. It wasn't so much black and white. It was white. The hit shows Americans watched - programs like *The Untouchables* (starring Jack's old friend, Robert Stack), *Gunsmoke*, *Perry Mason*, and *77 Sunset Strip* -- rarely, if ever, featured African Americans.

Big name black entertainers, such as Sammy Davis, Ella Fitzgerald, and Count Basie would occasionally appear on TV variety programs, such as *The Dinah Shore Show* or *The Ed Sullivan Show*, but since the *Nat King Cole Show* was prematurely canceled in 1957 because of lack of advertising support ("Madison Avenue is afraid of the dark," Cole famously remarked), no black entertainer had been given his own network television show. The few blacks who regularly appeared on television were in supportive roles playing characters who generally served whites, such as Eddie Anderson who was Rochester, Jack Benny's man-Friday, on the *Jack Benny Program*.

Network news was different, however. Although all the anchors, and most reporters, were white males, they largely held liberal-to-moderate views and were overwhelmingly supportive of the cause of African Americans. Moreover, the networks still aired serious reporting at that time -- technically inferior but, arguably, of much better quality than today. Infotainment had not yet trivialized the broadcast news media and Fox News had not yet provided a steady stream of right wing propaganda posing as news. One wonders how Fox would have covered the Civil Rights Movement had the network been on the air in the 1960s and how that would have affected coverage on the other networks. Fortunately, Fox News wasn't around. If it were, sixties television viewers probably would have heard a lot more about

states' rights and a lot less about civil rights.

The three major networks which then dominated the news -- NBC, CBS, and to a lesser extent, ABC -- devoted considerable time to civil rights issues, particularly as the movement gathered steam. They did so not only because the correspondents and editors believed in the cause of civil rights, but also because in these early days of television news the civil rights movement was a great visual story. Kennedy's stand in favor of civil rights boosted the self-confidence of network anchors and reporters. As the Sixties began, racism was becoming increasingly unfashionable among the movers and shakers at the pinnacle of power in American society. At first, it was largely symbolic. Jack and Jackie Kennedy announced that they would not attend segregated events anywhere in the country, for example. But symbolism is important especially where the presidency is concerned. Their stand sent a powerful message that segregation no longer was acceptable.

As the 1960s progressed, Network news coverage became increasingly sympathetic to the plight of African Americans. The importance of this cannot be overestimated. The overwhelming majority of homes had at least one television set as the decade began. Americans watched the Civil Rights Movement in their living rooms, the first great movement for social change in this country that was televised. There was no MTV or 24-hour movie channels to distract audiences. Most Americans saw the ugly images of bigotry that were shown night after night. Television news became indispensable in building the consensus for change that Kennedy needed to act. Still, a 1963 Newsweek poll found that 74 percent of whites thought that racial integration was "moving too fast," a viewpoint that seems shocking today but which was a political reality with which Kennedy had to live.

The modern civil rights movement was ignited on December 1, 1955 by a seemingly small event -- the refusal of a woman to sit at the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, as required then by state law. But Rosa Parks' act of defiance might have been in vain had not a Baptist minister by the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. seized the moment to lead a 382-day struggle to integrate the city's transportation system. "It is one of the splendid ironies of our day that Montgomery, the cradle of the Confederacy, is being transformed into Montgomery, the cradle of freedom and justice," King remarked.

It was the debut of the young civil rights warrior on the national stage. His speaking and organizational skills inspired blacks across the entire

city and beyond. The boycott was successful and a year later the Supreme Court ruled that segregated buses were unconstitutional. But the leaders of the emerging Civil Rights Movement knew that court rulings, even Supreme Court rulings, would not alone ensure the end of segregation. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously that separate but equal education was inherently unequal, but segregated schools remained a fact of life throughout the South, as many jurisdictions in the region mounted a campaign of massive resistance.

In addition to legal action, King believed that a national nonviolent movement was necessary to break the back of segregation patterned on tactics developed by Mahatma Gandhi who successfully forced the British out of India. Other African American leaders championed even more aggressive tactics. The movement continued to build throughout the rest of the decade.

When Kennedy was elected, expectations among African Americans were high, particularly since most blacks who could vote at the time had given their support to the Kennedy/Johnson ticket. Kennedy personally knew few blacks. All his friends were white most of whom, like him, had grown up in a privileged environment. There were no blacks sitting in the classrooms at Choate and few attending Princeton or Harvard while JFK was there. As an Irish-American and a Catholic, however, whose family had experienced prejudice, Kennedy felt that discrimination was wrong and he said so repeatedly during his campaign for president. He frequently quoted a set of statistics, including in the much-watched television debates with Richard Nixon. "If a Negro baby is born... he has about one-half as much chance to get through high school as a white baby. He has about one-half as much chance to get through college as a white student. He has about a third as much chance to be a professional man, and about half as much chance that he'll own his own house. He has about four times as much chance that he'll be out of work in his life as the white baby. I think we can do better. I don't want the talents of any American to go to waste."

The words were great. But as president, Kennedy was not eager for a battle over civil rights, particularly since he won the presidency by such a narrow margin and faced a Congress dominated by segregationist Southern Democrats with whom he would have to work to get his other programs passed. However, Kennedy did not have the luxury of waiting. Civil rights, as King said, was "an idea whose time has come." On the day of Kennedy's Inaugural Address, James Meredith, a black American, was watching the proceedings on television at his home in Jackson, Mississippi. He decided to put Kennedy's idealism and liberalism to the test. The next day, the young 29-year old USAF veteran wrote to the admissions office at the University of Mississippi for an application. In the 113-year proud history of "Ole Miss," the state

university, which was supported by taxes levied on every Mississippian, had never accepted a black applicant. It was intent on continuing the tradition.

It took almost two years, but finally a federal court ruled that Ole Miss must enroll James Meredith. In the fall of 1962, Meredith was scheduled to attend. What would the Kennedy administration do in the face of overwhelming white resistance on the campus at Oxford, in the state generally and in the wider South? Many white southerners were descending on Oxford to prevent his admission. The prospect of massive violence was real. Some even feared the outbreak of a second Civil War. Kennedy hesitated at first. He was a man who was bold in principle but cautious in action, as chief aide Theodore Sorensen once said. There was no doubt in Kennedy's mind, however, that Meredith should be enrolled in the university. But he wanted to do it in a way that would deter violence. So he tried persuasion, at least initially.

In a series of extraordinary phone calls to Ross Barnett, the segregationist governor of Mississippi, Kennedy alternately pleaded with, and cajoled, Barnett to do the right thing. "Well, now, here's my problem governor. I didn't put him in the university, but on the other hand, under the Constitution, I have to carry out that order. Now I'd like to get your help in doing that." But Barnett argued he would be betraying his oath under the Mississippi Constitution if he obeyed Kennedy's wishes. And back and forth it went. Meredith was eventually admitted, but not without the violence Kennedy feared and not without sending thousands of U.S. army and National Guard troops to the campus. Two people were killed. Scores were injured. But the battle was won. Kennedy had upheld the principle that blacks are entitled to equal protection under the law, as least as far as admission to a state university is concerned.

Meredith needed extended protection on the campus, but he prevailed and graduated from Ole Miss in 1963. The political price for Kennedy's stand, however, was high. Millions of white southerners were furious about what they regarded as interference in state affairs by the federal government, an anger that would linger for years and provide a political opening for the Republican Party in the South. During his early years in office, Kennedy also moved to get more blacks hired in the Federal government, a politically more feasible task since he had control of the executive branch. He asked Robert Kennedy why there were no black lawyers in the Justice Department and inquired of Treasury Secretary Douglas Dillon why there were no blacks in the Coast Guard.

In May of 1961, Kennedy's hand was forced again, as it had been earlier by

James Meredith, when the Freedom Rides began to call attention to segregation in public transportation. Groups of blacks and whites embarked on bus rides through the South, sitting next to each other in defiance of law and custom. Kennedy felt that this would only inflame whites in the South, and it did. But that is what the freedom riders wanted to do. Television cameras from the network news divisions followed the freedom riders every step of the way showing their viewers just how deeply racial prejudice was entrenched. Outside Anniston, Alabama, a bus carrying freedom riders was ambushed and firebombed. The riders barely escaped with their lives. When the Anniston episode occurred, Kennedy was about to leave for Vienna to meet Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and the last thing he needed was embarrassing scenes on television sets all over the world showing how badly blacks were treated in America. He exploded at one aide saying, "Get your friends off those buses."

There was no doubt where Kennedy's sympathies lay, but he felt that the situation at home would undermine him abroad. He was right of course. It did, but the people to blame were not the freedom riders but those white Americans who were betraying the promise of their own Constitution. Later on, when he cooled down, he realized that if America were to stand for liberty and freedom around the world, it must get its own house in order at home -- a point he would repeatedly make to domestic audiences when building the case for civil rights.

During the first two years of his presidency, the demonstrations and protests for more drastic action on civil rights only grew, despite Kennedy's support for getting Meredith into the University of Mississippi and despite the other modest actions he took to move forward on the issue. There was a general feeling among civil rights leaders that Kennedy could have done more, even by executive order, especially since blacks had given him overwhelming support. It all came to a head in the spring and summer of 1963 and on one day in particular, June 11. Before the day was over, Kennedy announced he would send to Congress a civil rights bill that, when passed eight months after his death, transformed American racial landscape.

As the morning began, the attention of the nation was focused on the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. George Wallace, the state's segregationist governor, pledged that he would stand in front of the schoolhouse door to prevent the admission of African American students. In the hours before two, qualified black students were escorted to campus, Wallace made clear he intended to keep his promise. In a dramatic confrontation televised around the world, Wallace stood eyeball to eyeball with Nick Katzenbach, an aide to Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who was sent to Tuscaloosa to enforce the federal court order requiring the

admission of the two students.

When Katzenbach asked Wallace for "an unequivocal assurance that you will not bar entry to these students -- to Vivian Malone and to James Hood -- and that you will step aside and do your constitutional duty," Wallace responded by reading a proclamation. "I stand here today, as governor of this sovereign state," he declared, "and refuse to willingly submit to illegal usurpation of power by the central government." What many people did not know at the time was that Wallace let it be known in Washington that he did not want a confrontation with federal authorities or a repeat of the violence at Ole Miss. But he did want Alabama voters to see him blocking the schoolhouse door.

So Robert Kennedy let Wallace grandstand before the cameras knowing that the television pictures of his doing so would damn him in the eyes of most of his fellow countrymen and the world. Bobby hoped that Wallace -- after making his point -- would step aside, which in fact he did later that day. The crisis ended peacefully with Malone and Hood safely registered by late afternoon. Once again, the Kennedy administration had prevailed. This time, it was the University of Alabama that was integrated. In Washington, Robert Kennedy breathed a sigh of relief, lit a cigar, and called his brother to give him the good news.

With a symbolic victory now in his pocket against the most infamous of the die-hard segregationist governors, Kennedy seized the moment to address the nation on civil rights. He asked the networks to delay regular programming beginning at 8 p.m. Eastern Time that evening. His aide, Theodore Sorensen, quickly worked up a draft of a speech. But when Kennedy went before the television cameras, the speech was incomplete. He improvised on live television. Nevertheless, it became one of the most memorable speeches given by a U.S. president and the most forceful ever on civil rights. Martin Luther King called it "a hallmark in the annals of American history," Kennedy's, "masterpiece." For the first time in the history of the country, Kennedy defined civil rights as a moral issue. "It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution. The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated. If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public schools available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who represent him, if, in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life that all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place."

Then Kennedy announced that he would send a comprehensive civil rights bill to the legislature affirming that, "race has no place in American life or law." The bill was delivered to Congress the following week. After hesitating and wavering earlier in his presidency, Kennedy now put the full weight of his administration behind the cause of equality for African Americans. As the sun set over the nation's capital at the close of a momentous day, there was no longer any doubt about the course on which he had set the nation. It was clear the tide had turned, that a great change was at hand, and that the country had embarked on an irreversible journey toward the infinitely more tolerant country America is today.

Kennedy has been attacked recently in a book by a British author for moving too slowly and haltingly on civil rights. It is a criticism often made by Europeans who tend to underestimate the power of checks and balances in the U.S. political framework. Under Britain's parliamentary system - which Lord Hailsham, once called "an elected dictatorship" -- a government with a parliamentary majority virtually is assured of passing its major legislation. That is not the case in the U.S. system even if the president's party controls both houses of Congress. It is certainly true that Kennedy could have made his speech to the nation on civil rights in January 1961 and sent the civil rights bill to Congress in that month rather than more than two years later. But it would have been a pointless exercise. The bill almost surely would have gone down to defeat. Even after it was sent to Congress under much more favorable circumstances in June 1963, it was by no means clear that the bill would pass. But it is no doubt true that Kennedy could have done more through executive action in the earlier part of his presidency than he did.

Just a few hours after Kennedy finished his speech on that June night, Medgar Evers, a prominent civil rights leader in Mississippi, who had watched the president's speech on television at his NAACP office, was gunned down in the driveway of his Jackson home. The murder dramatically underscored the urgency of the task, giving added momentum to the civil rights bill that Kennedy sent to Congress. Sadly, Evers would not be the last to die in that season of hate for a cause that could no longer be delayed. During that crucial year of 1963 -- Kennedy's last as president -- black children in Birmingham, Alabama were pummeled with jets of water and set upon by police dogs as they mounted their children's crusade for equal rights. Once again, the television images were shown across the nation and disseminated around the world. In September, four African American children were blown to pieces in a church bombing in Birmingham. The brutality of the attack -- against four little girls -- stunned the country.

But there also was a triumphant event that summer as well, the great March

on Washington that took place on August 28, 1963. An estimated quarter of a million people marched to the Lincoln Memorial where they heard Martin Luther King, Jr. give his timeless "I Have A Dream," speech. It seemed that the Civil Rights Movement was now unstoppable, and indeed it was. Kennedy had been against the idea of a march at first, fearing that it would spark violence and also jeopardize his civil rights bill. But once it was over, he invited Dr. King and the other civil rights leaders to the White House. The president took hold of the Baptist minister's hand, congratulated him, and said, "I have a dream."

The consequences of Kennedy's stand on civil rights, and that of Lyndon Johnson who worked to secure the civil rights bill's passage on July 2, 1964, were profound. Together with the Voting Rights Act passed in 1965, it was arguably the most important legislation of the twentieth century. It transformed America, eradicating Jim Crow laws across the South and providing new tools for African Americans to fight discrimination in the North. The fact that race relations are so different today than they were in the early 1960s is due in no small measure to the civil rights warriors who waged the struggle on the streets and in the courts, and to the two presidents -- Kennedy and Johnson -- who sympathized with their cause and ultimately embraced it.

Unfortunately, there was a negative consequence as well, at least for the Democratic Party. Lyndon Johnson famously remarked after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that the Democratic Party would now lose the South in presidential elections, a prediction that largely has come true. In 1964, Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater campaigned on a platform that included opposition to the Civil Rights law on the grounds that it violated states' rights. In 1968, Richard Nixon campaigned for the presidency with a "southern strategy," appealing to white voters there who resented the stand of the Democratic Party on race and other issues. Most southern whites have voted for the Republicans ever since.

But the foes of civil rights could not change the country's embrace of a fairer and more just society. Before John F. Kennedy, the white Anglo-Saxon male was king in the United States. After him, everything changed first for African Americans and then later for women and gays. Kennedy ultimately took a stand when it was most difficult to do so and when it mattered. Civil rights is the heart of his legacy.