

CHAPTER 5

Losing Control in Camelot

The shortest line between America and Addis Ababa is now a straight wire from Alabama.

AMERICAN EMBASSY, NIAMEY,

TO DEPARTMENT OF STATE, MAY 21, 1963¹

On June 26, 1961, Malick Sow of the African nation of Chad was on his way to Washington. The first ambassador to the United States from this newly independent nation, Ambassador Sow planned to present his credentials to President John F. Kennedy. The ambassador's drive from New York, the site of the United Nations, to Washington, D.C., took him along Route 40 through Maryland. Sow stopped along the highway for gas. Hoping to ease a headache, he also stopped in at a diner for a cup of coffee. What happened in the diner would not make Sow feel better but would instead create a headache for the Kennedy Administration of an entirely different sort. The ambassador was refused service. This diner did not serve blacks.²

Ambassador Sow was one of many African diplomats discriminated against on Route 40 and elsewhere in the United States. Such incidents were more than embarrassing to the diplomats and to the Kennedy administration. They threatened U.S. relations with an important new bloc of independent nations. Sow himself felt

"deeply hurt" by this incident. While he did not wish to "involve his country in any scandal," the ambassador did tell U.S. State Department representatives that "situations like this make it very difficult for African diplomats to leave New York and Washington, and that they make normal relations between the United States and African countries very strained."³

John F. Kennedy was elected president in 1960, "the Year of Africa." Between January and November of that year, seventeen African nations achieved independence. A total of twenty-five former colonies on the continent had now been liberated. Eight more would follow while Kennedy was in office.⁴ Africans were particularly attuned to U.S. racial problems. As a result, State Department officials were greatly troubled by the implications of discrimination for U.S. national security. One concern—a motivating issue since the late 1940s—was how race discrimination in the United States would affect Cold War alignments. Would race discrimination make it less likely that African and Asian nations would ally themselves with the United States and against the Soviet Union? There were practical consequences for United Nations politics as well. Would race discrimination make it more difficult for the United States to gain support for its positions in the UN from African and Asian nations? Would that affect the usefulness of the UN as a forum for the nation to further its interests in the global community?

While the impact of domestic racial issues on the nation's diplomatic interests was of concern during the Truman and Eisenhower years, the issue took on even greater importance during the Kennedy administration. "[R]acism and discrimination . . . had a major impact on my life as secretary of state," noted Dean Rusk. "Stories of racial discrimination in the United States and discriminatory treatment accorded diplomats from the many newly independent countries of the old colonial empires began to undermine our relations with these countries." The relationship between civil rights and Cold War foreign affairs was so well understood at this time that leaders sometimes felt the need to stress that civil rights reform was motivated by other objectives as well. As Democratic National Committee Deputy Chairman Louis Martin would stress, "[L]et it be clear, in our own hearts and minds, that it is not entirely because of

the Cold War, not merely because of the economic waste of discrimination, that we are committed to achieving true equality of opportunity. The basic reason is because it is right."⁵

The Year of Africa was also the year of the Greensboro, North Carolina, lunch counter sit-ins. The civil rights movement entered a new phase as activists increasingly used the tactic of nonviolent civil disobedience to challenge segregation and to direct attention to their struggle. The movement would be very effective in keeping worldwide attention focused on civil rights in the United States.⁶

Just as the movement entered a new phase, the early 1960s brought a new era in Cold War politics, both domestic and international. Overseas, the Cold War intensified in 1960 as the Soviets shot down an American U-2 plane over Soviet airspace. President Eisenhower had given his word that the United States was not sending reconnaissance flights over the Soviet Union, and he was caught in a lie. Cold War tensions increased in Kennedy's first year in office when the United States engaged in a failed attempt to overthrow Cuban leader Fidel Castro in the Bay of Pigs. During the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, American leaders and the American public worried that the world had come too close to nuclear war. Only one year later President Kennedy would shift course, edging toward détente with the Soviets and proposing a nuclear test ban treaty.⁷

At home, McCarthyism had been repudiated. Led by a progressive Supreme Court, the nation entered a period of greater tolerance of the right to dissent. Critics of the U.S. government had their passports restored. W. E. B. DuBois used his renewed freedom to travel to leave the United States and spend his last years in Ghana. Newer voices in the civil rights movement found that criticizing the United States overseas might have consequences, but losing one's passport was much less likely to be one of them.⁸

During the early 1960s, the civil rights movement no longer seemed bounded within the framework imposed during the McCarthy era. Activists still invoked the idea of American democracy in their rhetoric, and the icons of American democracy in their protest. Yet critiquing the nature of American democracy led to fewer federal consequences, at least on the surface. Red-baiting of the movement continued, but often behind the scenes. The consequences of protest

at the hands of state authorities in the South, the Klan, and the forces of massive resistance remained, of course, as brutal as ever.⁹

As the movement broadened and shifted to the left, the federal government found itself needing to listen to new voices, to harsher critics. A posture of reluctant engagement characterized President Kennedy's response to the movement during the first two years of his presidency, until in 1963, when he embraced civil rights and appeared to make that cause his own.

Although John F. Kennedy took steps to court African American voters during the 1960 campaign, civil rights reform was not a high priority for the new president as he entered office. Kennedy's own aides considered him rather uninterested in civil rights. Harris Wofford, Kennedy's advisor on civil rights during the 1960 presidential campaign, was later asked whether, at that time, he "had any feeling . . . that the President had a particular interest in the problem of civil rights or did he recognize it as a political problem?" Wofford answered, "the latter." Wofford felt that during this period "civil rights was not a high priority for Kennedy." Instead, "his chief concern then and very possibly . . . to the end of his life, was foreign policy and peace and relations with the Soviet Union." According to Wofford, such issues "always seemed to be the dominant issues for him."¹⁰

During the campaign, Kennedy realized that he had "a problem" with African American voters. Although weak on civil rights, Kennedy had made a name for himself in another area that many black voters cared about: African affairs. He had harshly criticized Eisenhower's lack of support for Algerian independence in 1957. During the campaign, Kennedy courted the black vote by drawing upon his record of support for African independence. According to Richard D. Mahoney, "[t]he strategy was to use concern for Africa as a means of wooing American blacks without alienating Southern whites." This was "a minor classic in political exploitation of foreign policy."¹¹

Harris Wofford had drafted many of Kennedy's speeches on Africa, and Kennedy turned to him to help with civil rights. Carrying out Wofford's advice, Kennedy promised to end discrimination in

federal housing programs "with the stroke of a pen," since that action could be taken by executive order. However, at the end of his first year in office, with no order in sight, civil rights activists sent thousands of pens to the White House to pressure Kennedy to fulfill his promise. The administration had a civil rights agenda, but its priorities were not always the priorities of the movement. The Justice Department decided to focus its civil rights efforts on voting rights. As Kennedy aide Arthur Schlesinger put it, voting was perceived as "the keystone in the struggle against segregation." Also, the vote "did not incite social and sexual anxieties" in the way that integration did. As a result, "[c]oncentrating on the right to vote . . . seemed the best available means of carrying the mind of the white South." Yet civil rights leaders were dissatisfied with Kennedy. According to Carl Brauer, "in his first year in office, President Kennedy had done little that regular Southern Democrats could not tolerate." Facing an election year, liberal Democratic senators urged the president to back civil rights legislation in 1962, but the president declined. The justification for his stance on civil rights in the face of increasing pressure from the civil rights movement and from some members of his own staff and party was that moving forward on civil rights legislation would jeopardize his other initiatives in Congress.¹²

Recognizing that Kennedy's priorities were elsewhere, civil rights leaders argued that civil rights reform was crucial to the president's objectives for economic growth and foreign policy. In a confidential memorandum to the president, Roy Wilkins and Arnold Aaronson of the NAACP suggested:

As the criterion by which our democratic professions are measured in many parts of globe, civil rights is and will increasingly be an important aspect of our foreign relations. And without progress on civil rights, we shall be unable to achieve the full utilization of our manpower resources so indispensable to accelerated economic growth. Action on civil rights, therefore, cannot be postponed pending the accomplishment of other foreign and domestic goals but, being inseparable from them, must proceed simultaneously with them.

Civil rights was therefore not a distraction from the president's other objectives. Instead, it was "the third leg of the stool."¹³

Wilkins and Aaronson argued that more would be required of Kennedy than his predecessors. "The world-wide movement of colored people for emancipation and self-determination has given a momentum to the civil rights cause in our own country—a momentum that will accelerate rapidly in the months and years ahead." Because of that, "[t]he pace of our government's civil rights effort must be accelerated," not only because it was just, but also "to avoid increased frustration, bitterness, tension and strife." The nation needed a civil rights "breakthrough."¹⁴

A Kennedy administration "breakthrough" on civil rights would be some time in coming. In the meantime, one way to improve the nation's standing overseas was to send Peace Corps volunteers to Africa and other parts of the world. As Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman has suggested, "At the top of the Peace Corps' list of implicit goals was to show skeptical observers from the new nations that Americans were not monsters." The nation's bad press on civil rights could be ameliorated through one-on-one contact with American volunteers.¹⁵

The year before Kennedy took office, the civil rights movement took an important turn. On February 1, 1960, four African American college students held a sit-in at the segregated lunch counter at Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina. The North Carolina protest inspired others, and by August 1961 more than seventy thousand people had participated in sit-ins and more than three thousand had been arrested. Student involvement in the sit-ins and other movement activity was a catalyst behind the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in April 1960. Encouraged by Ella Baker of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), students created their own organization, which would be a major force in the civil rights movement. The civil rights movement was developing a broader base and was increasingly turning to the tactic of nonviolent civil disobedience.¹⁶

In May 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) planned to use direct action to challenge segregation in interstate bus travel. The Supreme Court had ruled that segregation was unlawful in interstate transit, and in 1960 that ruling was extended to interstate busses and terminals. In spite of federal law, however, interstate bus travelers were still segregated in southern states. CORE planned to have an

interracial group ride together on a nonsegregated basis to test compliance with the Court's rulings. It was called the Freedom Ride.¹⁷

Thirteen Freedom Riders departed from Washington, D.C. on May 4 on two Trailways busses. Their destination was New Orleans. The Freedom Ride encountered resistance along the way. Tensions heightened when the riders arrived in Alabama. Outside Anniston, one bus was firebombed. In Anniston and Birmingham, riders were brutally attacked by mobs. Rider Walter Bergman suffered permanent brain damage, and many others required medical care for beating injuries and smoke inhalation. The riders were committed to continuing their journey, but no bus drivers would take them. With Justice Department help, the Freedom Riders instead flew to New Orleans.¹⁸

Hoping to prove to the world that violence would not stymie civil rights protest, SNCC sent in reinforcements. On May 20, SNCC members continued the Freedom Ride from Birmingham to Montgomery. President Kennedy thought he had assurance from Alabama Governor John Patterson that the riders would be protected, but a mob of a thousand met the riders and savagely beat them. Justice Department aide John Siegenthaler was attacked and knocked unconscious in the melee. Martin Luther King Jr. then came to the city, addressing a mass meeting that itself became the target of violence. President Kennedy was forced to act, and sent six hundred federal marshals to the scene.¹⁹

A weak and battered James Zwerg, interviewed from his hospital bed, told a nationwide television audience that the ride would go on. "We will continue the Freedom Ride, . . . no matter what happens. We'll take hitting, we'll take beating. We're willing to accept death." The riders would keep coming until they could ride free of segregation, "just as American citizens."²⁰

President Kennedy was angered by the Freedom Riders' persistence. As biographer Richard Reeves put it, the president was upset in part because the violence against the riders was "exactly the kind of thing the Communists used to make the United States look bad around the world." He told civil rights advisor Harris Wofford, "Stop them! Get your friends off those buses!" Kennedy felt that the movement was "embarrassing him and the country on the eve of

the meeting in Vienna with Khrushchev." He was preparing for his first presidential trip overseas, and he hoped to draw the world's attention away from the disaster at the Bay of Pigs and establish himself as a confident and accomplished world leader. The Freedom Riders interfered with these objectives. According to Wofford, Kennedy "supported every American's right to stand up or sit down for his rights—but not to ride for them in the spring of 1961."²¹

Kennedy had reason to be concerned with the overseas impact of the violence against the Freedom Riders, for the international reaction to these events was harsh. The USIA later reported that "[a]ssessed in terms of its impact on the American image abroad, the Alabama racial incident was highly detrimental." Worldwide news accounts "presented a stark picture of developments in Alabama even though conscious distortion in free world reporting was limited and efforts to present some balance or at least exercise some restraint were common in most areas of the world." Some regions of the world—Western Europe, India and parts of Southeast Asia—applauded Kennedy's action and discussed American racial progress, but still the USIA reported that editorial comment suggested that the incident "had dealt a severe blow to U.S. prestige which might adversely effect its position of leadership in the free world as well as weaken the overall effectiveness of the Western alliance."²²

The *Pakistani Observer* suggested that "[t]he race riots in Alabama seem to out-Little Rocked [sic] Little Rock." The Moroccan *Al Fair* thought that these incidents were "compromising the U.S. position of world leadership," yet believed that Kennedy administration action would address this problem. The *Ghanaian Times* suggested that "[s]urely the Negro problem on the earth as well as the plight of oppressed peoples in Africa and elsewhere demand much more serious attention and consideration than the sending of a man to the moon." Reports from Moscow first characterized the events as indicative of the American "way of life" and later emphasized their impact on U.S. standing around the world. Meanwhile, the USIA reported that "Chinese Communist wireless files to all parts of the world reflect a business-like effort on the part of Peking propagandists to sharpen the tools of their craft in a blunt exploitation of racial tensions in the United States." Peking accounts "bore down



President John F. Kennedy and Nigerian Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa at the White House following talks between the two leaders, July 27, 1961. When African leaders traveling in the United States encountered race discrimination, it led to embarrassing diplomatic problems for the Kennedy administration. (UPI/CORBIS-BETTMANN)

hard on the theme that rampant racism has 'exposed' the savage nature of American freedom and democracy."²³

According to the USIA, of even more concern than the media reports were "the largely unvoiced private views of the masses of 'colored' peoples throughout the world who are known to be hypersensitive on the question of racial discrimination." The agency felt



Freedom Rider James Zwerg, recovering in a Montgomery, Alabama, hospital bed, caresses a newspaper with front-page coverage of his brutal beating, May 20, 1961. The civil rights movement made effective use of the media, broadening national and international support for civil rights reform. (UPI/CORBIS-BETTMANN)

that "[r]eliable reports . . . suggest that racial incidents in the U.S. frequently are seen as a general reflection of what they believe to be the superior or, at best, condescending attitude which the 'whites' have toward the 'non-whites.'" Resentment about racism "feeds upon U.S. racial incidents and may well be a much stronger force in shaping their response to the West over the long-haul."²⁴

The president's concerns about the impact of these incidents on the Vienna talks were echoed in the London *Daily Telegraph*: "It is a pity that the Russians and Chinese in their endless efforts to foster hatred of America, who have made great play with the disturbances at Little Rock, should have another opportunity on the eve of the President's meeting with Khrushchev." Other papers thought that Kennedy had displayed courage in intervening in Alabama, and in the words of the London *Daily Express*, had "proven to an anxious world that the Kennedy brothers are as ready to defend the ideals of individual liberty within the borders of the United States as they are to act outside. . . . On the eve of perhaps the most vital personal confrontation in post-war history . . . between President Kennedy and Mr. Khrushchev, that is an incalculable contribution not only to American prestige but to Western unity."²⁵

Ultimately, the Kennedy administration handled the crisis in a manner that helped minimize mob violence and negative headlines, but without protecting federal rights. Following negotiations between the administration and Mississippi's governor, when the Freedom Ride arrived in Jackson, Mississippi, on May 24, police officers were on hand and kept the peace. The officers directed the riders from the bus, through the waiting rooms, and into paddy wagons. The riders were arrested, convicted of breach of the peace, and sentenced to sixty-seven-day jail terms. The federal government did not intervene.²⁶

The Freedom Rides provided an early and dramatic example for the Kennedy administration of the way that civil rights movement activities, coupled with violent southern white reaction, created civil rights crises that demanded federal government attention. President Kennedy could not fully define the place of civil rights in his administration's overall agenda. He could not control the nature and timing of the issues. Civil rights crises would periodically demand the president's attention and concern. Because federal rights were at stake, because law and order demanded it, because it had an impact on his image as a national leader, because it harmed U.S. prestige abroad, Kennedy would find himself increasingly involved in civil rights.

As Kennedy's first year in office drew to a close, the administration took stock of its accomplishments. Achievements on the civil rights front were included on a draft list of "Major Foreign Policy Measures Taken by the Kennedy Administration." The administration's foreign policy activity including encouraging "the orderly evolution of desegregation in the United States. This has had a favorable effect overseas. Progress in the fields of civil rights and education have been noteworthy."²⁷ It was clear that the Kennedy administration's foreign affairs objectives would be enhanced by civil rights reform.

In September 1962, the University of Mississippi in Oxford handed the Kennedy administration a civil rights crisis that would resonate even more forcefully overseas than the Freedom Rides had done. James Meredith, a resident of Mississippi, applied to the university and was rejected solely because he was African American. Meredith sued the university, and in June 1962 the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that Meredith's exclusion was unconstitutional. After the U.S. Supreme Court declined to review the case, Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett responded that the state would "not surrender to the evil and illegal forces of tyranny." Ultimately, with Barnett recalcitrant and mobs on campus protesting Meredith, Kennedy sent in federal marshals. Through the night of September 30, a battle raged between troops and demonstrators. Two people were killed, including a French reporter, and hundreds were wounded. The next morning, with troops in control of the campus, Meredith was registered.²⁸

The violence in Oxford and the federal role in managing the crisis were widely followed overseas. Although dramatic racial conflict harmed the nation's image abroad, the Meredith incident, like Little Rock before it, also provided an opportunity for demonstrating the federal government's resolve. In England, the Manchester *Guardian* noted that "[i]n the world outside Mississippi's long night has already done serious damage to America's name." Yet along with many international commentators, the *Guardian* believed that the federal government's role was "proof that the killers and rioters are not a

portent but a remnant." In Sweden, the *Stockhoms-Tidningen* thought that "[t]here is hardly to be found a corresponding example in the world of a Government so powerfully protecting the rights of a minority. In the midst of tragedy, this is a victory for American democracy and for the ideas upon which it rests." In contrast, however, a survey of university students in Bogotá reported that the crisis damaged U.S. prestige abroad and undermined the president's standing.²⁹

Even in Africa, many critics of the United States found reasons to praise Kennedy's actions. The USIA reported the "[n]oteworthy . . . fact that some African sources exemplified by Sudan, Ghana, and Libya, often critical of the United States in the past and particularly so when racial incidents occur, have not in this case launched attacks on America but have instead praised the federal action." In Nigeria, Kenya, and Ethiopia, newspapers had "displayed considerable understanding of the difficulties faced by the American government with this problem." In Kenya, the *Daily Nation* thought that "the words 'Little Rock' and 'Oxford, Mississippi' should be considered . . . as a vindication of American democracy." According to the paper, "In each case we have seen the federal authorities, working through the channel of the decisions of the Supreme Court, pursuing honestly and fearlessly a policy aimed at eradicating the taint of racialism from American life." The coverage in some African newspapers, however, was searing. The Moroccan *La Nation* saw Meredith as "a symbol as he enters the university between a double hedge of armed soldiers. Let us wish that his name remains that of the last American to be wounded in heart and flesh because he is a Negro." The local press in Katanga argued that "[t]he United States is incapable of establishing a multiracial society in their own country" and suggested that it was time to consider sending a United Nations delegation "to the United States to protect the rights of black American citizens."³⁰

The former governor general of India was impressed by President Kennedy's handling of the Mississippi crisis. He told U.S. Ambassador Chester Bowles that "as far as he knows this is the first time in the history of the world that any nation has ever demonstrated so

dramatically its respect for law. Where else, he asked, could we expect to see a government throw thousands of men and huge resources behind the application of a single individual to enter a university because the law said he had a right to be there." Such reactions convinced Bowles that the United States had now dramatized that racial discrimination was illegal and that the federal government was committed to opposing it. Bowles believed that the Meredith situation could be "a turning point not only in our struggle against segregation in this country, but in our efforts to make the people of Asia, Africa and Latin America understand what we are trying to do."³¹

The international impact was not lost on members of the administration. As Arthur Schlesinger put it,

President Kennedy's action had a profound effect around the world, most of all in Africa. As the delegate from Upper Volta put it in the UN General Assembly, segregation unquestionably existed in the United States, but what is important is that the Government of the United States did not make an institution of this. It does not praise the policy. On the contrary, it energetically fights it. For one small Negro to go to school, it threatens governors and judges with prison . . . it sends troops to occupy the University of Mississippi.

In Schlesinger's view, the administration's actions in Mississippi had concrete foreign relations benefits. "Three weeks after Oxford, Sékou Touré and Ben Bella were prepared to deny refueling facilities to Soviet planes bound for Cuba during the missile crisis." The lesson was clear. The nation's world leadership and security were enhanced by efforts to secure civil rights at home.³²

Although federal action at the University of Mississippi was widely praised, the overall impact of this crisis remained troubling. Assessing worldwide press coverage, the USIA noted that the restrained editorial comment was "overshadowed by the massive news reporting on the incident. Despite the factual nature of news coverage based primarily on Western wire services, the vivid portrayal in news reports and wire photos of the more sensational aspects of the

incident—such as rioting and bloodshed—may well have left a more lasting impression of the less palatable aspects of the racial situation in the U.S.” Moderate editorial comment could not overcome visceral news reporting on the actual events. The USIA’s concerns bore themselves out in a subsequent 1962 report, which found that “[r]acial prejudice is the chief blemish on the image of the American people abroad, even among the majority of citizens of non-Communist nations who hold the United States in high esteem.”³³

USIA reports detailing the widespread international media coverage of the Mississippi crisis crossed the president’s desk, and he was concerned about Mississippi’s impact on the U.S. image abroad. Kennedy had been critical of Eisenhower’s handling of the Little Rock crisis. As Richard Reeves put it, he had hoped “there would be no photo opportunities on his watch that would embarrass the United States all over the world.” In the aftermath of the Mississippi crisis, Kennedy wondered how Mississippi compared with Little Rock. How did the world react to his administration’s handling of the crisis, compared to the reaction to Eisenhower’s action in Little Rock? The USIA responded with a detailed report on the international reaction to the crisis at Ole Miss. The lessons to be drawn from it were clear. Definitive federal action in civil rights crises would have a positive effect on the nation’s image abroad. A more passive civil rights stance might serve the president’s interest in not alienating the South before the 1964 election and in keeping his other legislative priorities from getting sidetracked by a congressional battle over civil rights. An active posture, however, would better serve U.S. foreign affairs.³⁴

If things remained quiet, this trade-off could be avoided, at least for a time. With the Mississippi crisis over, the Kennedy administration might have hoped for a breathing spell. Yet as long as discrimination and disenfranchisement plagued the nation, the image of democracy would be at risk. And the rank and file of the civil rights movement did not shy away from protest actions out of fear of harming the nation’s image abroad. Instead, the movement questioned the truth of American rhetoric. As protest actions met with violent resistance, the movement kept the gaze of the international media focused on race in America.

* * *

A particularly awkward and persistent problem for the administration was discrimination against black foreign diplomats. Troubling incidents occurred with increasing frequency as UN delegates from newly independent nations came to the United States. Dean Rusk recalled one incident:

Early in the Kennedy years a black delegate to the United Nations landed in Miami on his way to New York. When the passengers disembarked for lunch, the white passengers were taken to the airport restaurant; the black delegate received a folding canvas stool in a corner of the hangar and a sandwich wrapped with waxed paper. He then flew on to New York, where our delegation asked for his vote on human rights issues.³⁵

Rusk believed that incidents like this were “a severe barrier to cordial relations with many foreign states.” The State Department Protocol Office tried to handle difficulties faced by foreign diplomats, but Rusk quickly discovered that the problems were deep-seated and “depended on racial progress throughout Washington and indeed the entire country. We could not expect an African diplomat to gain privileges and services denied black Americans. Nor could we expect him to display his diplomatic passport every time he wanted to eat or get a haircut.” For these reasons, as well as, Rusk said, “the simple rightness of the cause,” the State Department worked on antisegregation efforts, throwing “its full weight behind the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, and especially legislation dealing with public accommodations.”³⁶

A source of particular concern was Maryland’s Highway 40, the route taken by many diplomats on the drive from the United Nations in New York City to the nation’s capital. Time after time, when African diplomats stopped for a bite to eat, they were refused service at Maryland restaurants. Such incidents upset the diplomats and often generated a hostile press reaction in their home country. The implications of discrimination for U.S. relations with these countries concerned Kennedy administration staffers. As Chester Bowles remarked,

Now you have some 20 new nations in Africa. You have, of course, all the new nations of Asia. The UN has grown from 50 nations in the last few years to a hundred. They are all coming to the United States because the UN is here and because they look on this as a country of great promise. . . . And they come here and, of course, some of them get into all kinds of difficulties with some of our own ways of doing things. And they go home, a lot of them, pretty upset individuals.³⁷

Upon hearing of these incidents, President Kennedy's initial reaction was that African ambassadors shouldn't be driving on Highway 40. They should fly. "It's a hell of a road," he said. "I used to drive it years ago, but why would anybody want to drive it today when you can fly? Tell these ambassadors I wouldn't think of driving from New York to Washington. Tell them to fly!" According to Harris Wofford, Kennedy's reaction led State Department officials to wonder whether the president was behind their efforts to end discrimination on Route 40. Still, as Carl M. Brauer notes, because Kennedy "wanted to improve America's image in the Third World and because he had served as chairman of a Senate subcommittee on Africa, Kennedy came to office disposed to be especially sensitive to this problem."³⁸

The seriousness of the problem required a systematic response. The administration established a new program within the State Department Protocol Office. The Office of Special Protocol Services, and its director Pedro Sanjuan, worked on long-term solutions to the problem of race discrimination against foreign diplomats. While Sanjuan was charged with handling the vast array of difficulties foreign diplomats encountered throughout the country, a particular focus of his work was Route 40. When a bill prohibiting discrimination in public accommodations was introduced in the Maryland state legislature, Sanjuan testified in favor of the bill on behalf of the Department of State. Federal government involvement in state legislative action would seem to be a great breach of federalism. Sanjuan acknowledged that some people might wonder "why the Department of State is interested in what may appear to some to be an internal matter within the State of Maryland." He recast his

appearance as "a request by the Department of State for the assistance of the State of Maryland in insuring the success of the foreign policy of the United States." The State Department strongly supported the bill because it would "eliminate a source of embarrassment that greatly damages our relations with not only the neutral nations of the world, but many nations which are stoutly with us in the fight for freedom." The importance of civil rights to U.S. foreign relations seemed to take precedence over the usual boundaries between state and federal authority.³⁹

Sanjuan drew an analogy between this request for assistance and the U.S. government's appeal to private industry to help by building better weapons during World War II. This time the war was a Cold War, and the weapons required were different. "GIVE US THE WEAPONS TO CONDUCT THIS WAR OF HUMAN DIGNITY," he urged. "The fight for decency against Communism is everyone's war in America." After an initial setback, the Maryland public accommodations bill was passed by the state legislature in January 1963.⁴⁰

The impact of race in America on international politics came to a head in the spring of 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama. On May 3, more than a thousand African American children and teenagers embarked on a civil rights march. Birmingham's jails were already filled with protesters, so it was Police Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor's objective to deter the demonstrators without arresting them. To do that, he used fire hoses. The strength of the city's high-pressure hoses knocked down protesters. Water guns were backed up by police dogs that lunged at demonstrators.⁴¹

The police tactics did not deter Birmingham's determined civil rights movement, but they had a profound impact that Connor may not have contemplated. Dramatic photographs in newspapers throughout the country captured the nation's attention, focusing concern on the need for civil rights reform. News coverage throughout the world underscored international concerns about racial injustice in America.⁴²

On May 14, 1963, the USIA reported that the Soviet Union had "stepped up its propaganda on Birmingham over the weekend to

campaign proportions, devoting about one fifth of its radio output to the subject." This propaganda was more extensive than during the Meredith dispute. In most other countries, with the exception of African nations, "coverage has been unexpectedly moderate and factual, except in the Communist and leftist press." Nevertheless, "the damaging pictures of dogs and fire hoses have been extremely widely used." In Lagos, Nigeria, for example, "substantial improvement over [the] past two years in Nigerian public understanding of progress in U.S. race relations is being rapidly eroded by reports, photographs and TV coverage from Alabama. Growing adverse local reactions [are] in marked contrast [to the] situation at [the] time [of the] Meredith case when [the] strong stand [of the] Federal Government [was] widely understood and applauded." In Kenya, police dogs and fire hoses were featured on television, and front page newspaper stories featured headlines such as: "Riots Flare in U.S. South—Infants Sent to Jail." The nation also took a "heavy beating in Ghana over Birmingham." The U.S. embassy in Accra reported that the United States had "definitely lost ground" due to the crisis.⁴³

When trouble began in Birmingham, as John Walton Cotman put it, initially "President Kennedy did not take the lead in promoting civil rights" in that city. "Prior to May 3rd the President made no discernable attempt to confront the clear pattern of Bill of Rights violations, systematic abuse of police authority and police brutality. . . . President Kennedy was cautious and conservative," Cotman argues, "only acting when forced to by political crisis."⁴⁴

Following the May 3 demonstrations, Kennedy called a meeting of his top advisors. According to Burke Marshall, the reason for the meeting was that Birmingham "was a matter of national and international concern at the time because of the mass of demonstrations." The administration was under pressure to take action, yet the course of federal involvement was unclear. As Marshall remembered it, "the pictures of the police dogs and fire hoses going throughout the country stirred the feelings of every Negro in the country, most whites in the country, and I suppose particularly colored persons throughout the world. And all of that emotion was directed at President Kennedy. 'Why didn't he do something?' " The

concern about Birmingham's impact led the administration to play a key role in resolving the crisis. Kennedy dispatched Marshall to the city, and Marshall helped manage negotiations that led to an agreement between the SCLC, the local government, and the business community. Under the pact, steps would be taken to desegregate facilities in large department stores, redress employment discrimination, and release jailed civil rights demonstrators.⁴⁵

Yet once Birmingham had focused the world's attention on racial brutality in America, resolving problems on the local level would not fully resolve the crisis. As with so many civil rights crises in the 1960s, Birmingham required a global, as well as a local, response.

In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the diplomatic consequences of discrimination reached a particularly dramatic level. African leaders had gathered in that city for an historic moment of an entirely different kind. On May 22, 1963, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia convened the Conference of African Heads of States and Governments. Gathered together were heads of state and other representatives of all but two independent African nations.⁴⁶ This was a moment, Selassie told the assembled leaders, "without parallel in history."

We stand today on the stage of world affairs, before the audience of world opinion. . . . Africa is today in mid-course, in transition from the Africa of Yesterday to the Africa of Tomorrow. . . . The task on which we have embarked—the making of Africa—will not wait. We must act to shape and mould the future and leave our imprint on events as they pass into history.⁴⁷

The task before this body was to chart the future of African politics. Out of the meeting would come the Organization of African Unity. It was Selassie's hope that this gathering, and the foundation it laid, would ultimately bear fruit in the formation of a unified Africa, operating as a political body like the United States of America or the Soviet Union.⁴⁸

Over the next few days, African leaders worked together to produce a series of resolutions embodying their common goals and aspirations. As they did so, the focus of their deliberations strayed far

from the shores of Africa. These heads of state believed that their own interests were implicated in a dramatic conflict many miles away.

The news of Birmingham was fresh in the minds of African leaders as they gathered in Addis Ababa. On the second day of the conference, Prime Minister Milton Obote of Uganda released an open letter to President Kennedy protesting the treatment of African American demonstrators in Birmingham.

The Negroes who, even while the conference was in session, have been subjected to the most inhuman treatment, who have been blasted with fire hoses cranked up to such pressure that the water could strip bark off trees, at whom the police have deliberately set snarling dogs, are our own kith and kin. The only offences which these people have committed are that they are black and that they have demanded the right to be free and to hold their heads up as equal citizens of the United States.⁴⁹

These matters were relevant to African leaders, for "the tasks before us of effecting closer union of African states both in the political and economic fields necessarily include the emancipation of the people of dark races, and . . . colonialism and race discrimination are one of the fundamental issues for the future of our civilization." Obote believed that "[n]othing is more paradoxical than that these events should take place in the United States and at a time when that country is anxious to project its image before the world screen as the archetype of democracy and the champion of freedom." Africans, who had "borne the white-man's burden for . . . centuries, . . . feel that our own freedom and independence would be a mere sham if our black brethren elsewhere in Africa and in the United States still remain in political, social and economic bondage." Obote told President Kennedy that "the eyes and ears of the world are concentrated on events in Alabama and it is the duty of the free world and more so of the countries that hold themselves up as the leaders of that free world to see that all of their citizens, regardless of the colour of their skin, are free."⁵⁰

According to the U. S. embassy in Addis Ababa, the idea for this critique of the United States came from an "American Negro black

Muslim representative, resident [of] Cairo," who had "been very active in lobbying among journalists and delegates to [the] conference against racial discrimination in [the] US." Accordingly, this episode may be an example of the increasing effectiveness of African American efforts to use international pressure as leverage for social change at home.⁵¹

African leaders engaged in a lengthy discussion of Birmingham and debated the proper way to express concern over the incidents in their joint resolutions. The Reuters news agency reported that, in its original form, a resolution on Birmingham had said "it 'could lead to a break in relations' between the United States and African countries." According to reports, some delegations objected, "and in the end all agreed on substitution [of] the word 'deterioration' for 'break.'" According to Agence France-Presse, some delegates suggested that other nations be "black-listed" as well. "It was then realized that the resolution would lose its value if it mentioned a long list of states." The result was a milder resolution that mentioned only the United States. The French wire service called it a "well-balanced plan adopted after long debate," and a "painful compromise."⁵²

In its final version, the resolution indicated that the conference:

Expresses the deep concern aroused in all African peoples and governments by the measures of racial discrimination taken against communities of African origin living outside the continent and particularly in the United States of America. *Expresses* an appreciation for the efforts of the Federal Government of the United States of America to put an end to these intolerable mal-practices which are likely seriously to deteriorate relations between the African peoples and governments on the one hand and the people and government of the United States of America on the other.⁵³

The State Department's reaction was that the resolution on discrimination was "appreciably better from our standpoint, than the preliminary proposal." According to a State Department memorandum for the White House, U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia Edward M. Korry thought it was "as good an outcome as possible." The adoption of the watered-down version "was a remarkable tribute to

the United States Government, considering the depth of African feeling about the Alabama incidents." This achievement was "tangible evidence of the international impact of local incidents, and in the context of our African relations reinforces the wisdom of Federal policy." From the State Department's perspective, the federal government's role in resolving the Birmingham crisis had concrete and beneficial effects on U.S. foreign relations. This perspective was reinforced in post-Addis Ababa correspondence with African leaders. For example, President Nyerere of Tanganyika wrote to Kennedy that he "appreciated your efforts in connection with the reinvigorated demand by the Negro Citizens of America for full equal rights." Nyerere had confidence that Kennedy would "find a solution which gives justice to all American citizens. In doing so you will be making a great contribution to the cause of non-racialism throughout the world."⁵⁴

There was another reason for the turnabout in Addis Ababa. President Youlou of the Congo had written to Kennedy on the eve of the conference. Knowing that Birmingham would be on the minds of participants in the meeting, Youlou noted that "[c]ertainly you can measure better than anyone else the repercussions which the events in Birmingham are having in Africa." However, Youlou would not support a reaction to Birmingham at Addis Ababa. He had argued against UN intervention in his own country, and he believed that problems in Africa could be solved without the involvement of those outside the continent. "This is the same argument I shall give to those who would like to see me take a position on the events in Alabama," Youlou wrote. "I believe that the American Negroes are Americans, and that, at the present stage of your difficulties, they do not yet have any aspiration for national independence. It is your government that either will or will not be able to keep them in the United States, or else make foreigners of them. But it is, first of all, *among Americans* that the solution must be sought." President Kennedy's response to Youlou after the conference noted his pleasure that the resolution on discrimination in the United States mentioned the progress made by the government to abolish segregation. He also indicated that he appreciated Youlou's "concern that any intervention in African affairs by non-Africans

might encourage a counterreaction involving the United States' own affairs." Each nation, it was clear, had an interest in handling its domestic matters on its own.⁵⁵ Now that the Congo was independent, that nation's leaders shared with Kennedy an interest in national sovereignty. The desire to avoid foreign interference in their own domestic difficulties led some African leaders to soften their criticism of the United States.

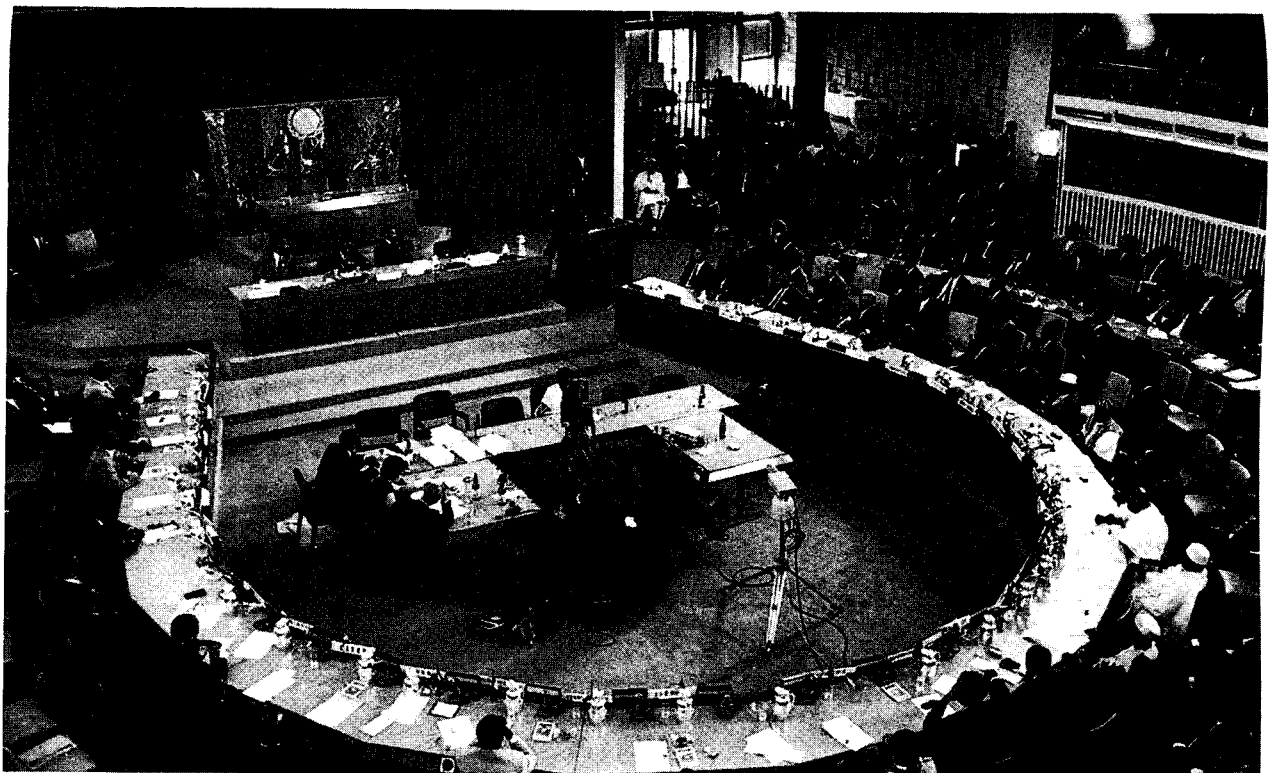
A crisis was averted in Addis Ababa. No "break" in United States-African relations was contemplated. Yet following the meeting much work remained to be done. Secretary of State Dean Rusk sent a circular on race and foreign relations to all American diplomatic and consular posts. Rusk emphasized that the Kennedy administration was "keenly aware of [the] impact of [the] domestic race problem on [the] US image overseas and on achievement [of] US foreign policy objectives." Rusk felt that "[t]here should be no illusions as to [the] seriousness of [the] situation." Foreign reaction to race in the U.S. was a "source of great concern. Evidence from all parts of [the] world indicates that racial incidents have produced extremely negative reactions." The reaction of African heads of state at Addis Ababa was just one example illustrating the "depth of emotional feeling" throughout the world. Such incidents suggested that "we have a certain amount of time before our racial problem will impinge even more seriously upon our policies and objectives."⁵⁶

"Under these circumstances," Rusk continued, "we recognize there is no effective substitute for decisive action on [the] part of [the] United States Government. This will include [a] special Presidential message to Congress today, Administration-backed legislation, and [a] continued series of positive Federal actions throughout [the] country."⁵⁷

Rusk's concerns were emphasized in a June 1963 speech by USIA Deputy Director Donald Wilson to the Women's National Democratic Club in Washington. According to Wilson, Birmingham "opened a new era in race relations." Due to the efforts of the civil rights movement, international attention given to U.S. race relations would be sustained. "We are no longer coping with isolated incidents. Where the span between a Little Rock and an Oxford could be marked by months and years, now we are wit-



Firefighters bear down on civil rights demonstrators who had tried to seek refuge in a doorway, Birmingham, Alabama, May 3, 1963. Photographs of Police Commissioner Bull Connor's brutal tactics blanketed the world's press. (UPI/CORBIS-BETTMANN)



The harsh treatment of civil rights protesters in Birmingham was a subject of discussion at the first meeting of the Organization of African Unity, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, May 23, 1963. (UPI/CORBIS-BETTMANN)

nessing a massive effort throughout the nation, and there will be no long pauses which allow us to slip into apathy." A State Department analyst put it this way: "This movement is watched from abroad not always tolerantly, not always patiently—the picture of a dog attacking a Negro, of a police officer pinning a Negro woman to the ground—these pictures have a dramatic impact on those abroad who listen to our words about democracy and weigh our actions against those words."⁵⁸

The difficulty of managing this problem was magnified by the fact that the civil rights movement sought to use international concern to increase pressure on the Kennedy administration for civil rights reform. As State Department analyst Richard N. Gardner put it, "The American Negro himself has made the link between the international and domestic problems." For example, James Baldwin quoted one African American as saying, "At the rate things are going here, . . . all of Africa will be free before we can get a lousy cup of coffee." Baldwin added, "What is demanded now, and at once, is not that Negroes continue to adjust themselves to the cruel racial pressures of life in the United States but the United States readjust itself to the facts of life in the present world."⁵⁹

The need for positive federal action presented itself yet again when Alabama Governor George Wallace stood in the schoolhouse door to block the integration of the University of Alabama. On May 21, 1963, a federal district judge had ordered the university to admit two African American students to its summer session. At his inauguration earlier in the year, Wallace had pledged "Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!" in front of television cameras and a crowd of reporters from around the world. Now, he stood behind a line drawn in front of the doorway of the university administration building, decrying the "unwelcome, unwanted and force-induced intrusion . . . by the central government." With careful planning, and the president's order to federalize the Alabama National Guard, the students were quietly registered later that day. Still, Wallace and southern defiance had an important moment in the spotlight. A need to respond helped motivate President Kennedy to take a step his advisors and civil rights activists had been urging

for some time. On the evening of June 11, 1963, Kennedy delivered an impassioned plea for civil rights reform before a nationwide television audience.⁶⁰

Administration officials were also concerned about continuing civil rights demonstrations. As Robert Kennedy put it, "street demonstrations" were likely to continue. "The result is that someone is very likely to get hurt. It's bad for the country. It's bad for us around the world." Civil rights legislation would enable the Justice Department to bring suit to enforce civil rights, and that would "get this into court and out of the street."⁶¹ Placing civil rights problems in a manageable judicial forum would help accomplish one of the president's objectives: avoiding photo opportunities that embarrassed the nation overseas.

President Kennedy responded by calling for landmark civil rights legislation, explaining his course of action in a televised address to the nation. It was the president's most dramatic and heartfelt statement on civil rights. Kennedy asked all Americans to examine their conscience on the subject of race discrimination. The nation had been founded upon the principle of equality, he noted.

Today we are committed to a worldwide struggle to promote and protect the rights of all who wish to be free. And when Americans are sent to Viet-Nam or West Berlin, we do not ask for whites only. It ought to be possible, therefore, for American students of any color to attend any public institution they select without having to be backed up by troops.⁶²

Kennedy called civil rights "a moral issue . . . as old as the scriptures and . . . as clear as the American Constitution." He believed that "[t]he heart of the question" was "whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated." While Kennedy presented the issue as a question of morality, its resolution would protect the freedom of all Americans, for "this Nation . . . will not fully be free until all its citizens are free."⁶³

We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it, and we cherish our freedom here at home, but are we to say to the world, and much more importantly, to each other that

this is a land of the free except for the Negroes; that we have no second-class citizens except Negroes; that we have no class or cast [sic] system, no ghettoes, no master race except with respect to Negroes?⁶⁴

The president described an ambitious civil rights agenda that would depend upon more than congressional action, executive branch enforcement efforts, and court orders. Kennedy called upon "every American in every community across our country" to join together in a national commitment to equality.⁶⁵

The following week, President Kennedy appeared before a joint session of Congress and urged that body to take up the fight. If Congress did not act on civil rights, the consequences would be widespread, he argued. Legislative inaction would result in "continued, if not increased, racial strife—causing the leadership on both sides to pass from the hands of reasonable and responsible men to the purveyors of hate and violence, endangering domestic tranquility, retarding our Nation's economic and social progress and weakening the respect with which the rest of the world regards us."⁶⁶

Kennedy's civil rights speech marked a critical shift. No longer holding civil rights at arm's length, the president seemed to embrace it. What had led to this dramatic turnabout? Carl Brauer has written:

Intellectually Kennedy had long believed in the principle of racial equality, but the disturbing events of the spring added an emotional dimension to that belief. . . . With Birmingham, American race relations seemed to be entering a period of crisis, yet the federal government lacked the necessary tools to deal with it. Thousands of blacks were taking to the streets to demand their rights—rights no federal law guaranteed. When local authorities proved obdurate and arrested or repulsed the demonstrators, a situation was created that both soiled America's reputation abroad and bred violence and extremism among blacks at home.

In Brauer's view, the most important factor was Kennedy's "perception of himself as a decisive leader." Birmingham "fostered an atmosphere in which he could only weakly respond to events rather than

direct and shape them. It cast him in a weak and defensive position when his personality and view of the Presidency called for decisive leadership and a measure of control over events."⁶⁷ President Kennedy's strengthened commitment to civil rights came at a time when international criticism was heightened and the goodwill developed from the Meredith affair had been undermined. If Kennedy's sense of himself as a leader was at stake, then surely his sense of himself as a world leader, as well as a national leader, was implicated.

As Jennifer See has illustrated, the drama of Kennedy's June 11 civil rights speech was enhanced by the fact that it was part of a broader political moment. The speech followed by just one day a critical address on foreign relations that he delivered at American University. In that speech, the president hoped to move public opinion in favor of détente to help generate political support for a proposed nuclear test ban treaty. As he would on civil rights, Kennedy asked Americans to examine their consciences on peace, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War as well. "[E]very thoughtful citizen who despairs of war and wishes to bring peace, should begin by looking inward," he said. The prospect of nuclear war was so horrendous that Cold War adversaries had a mutual interest in getting past their differences, and pursuing peace. While earlier presidents hoped to save the world for democracy, Kennedy thought that "we can at least make the world safe for diversity." Because no nation could survive a nuclear holocaust, the United States and the Soviet Union had a mutual interest in peace and in arms control.⁶⁸

The Nation commented that the president had let "two genii out of their respective bottles on successive days": civil rights and the Cold War. *Newsweek* writer Kenneth Crawford called it the "politics of courage."⁶⁹

While he spoke most directly to the American people, the target audience for President Kennedy's address on civil rights was much broader. The speech was distributed to all American diplomatic posts with directions from the secretary of state and the president himself regarding how the speech should be used, and why this issue was of such importance.⁷⁰

World reaction to the speech was highly favorable. U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia Edward M. Korry wrote to President Kennedy about

the "quick turnaround in attitudes" that his civil rights statements had caused in Ethiopia. Emperor Haile Selassie thought the statements were "masterpieces." In addition to Ethiopian royalty, "student leaders, the up-and-coming educated middle bureaucrats and the younger Army elite" discussed Kennedy's actions "without trace of the sensitivity that reportedly characterized their remarks in years gone by." Korry sent the president an *Ethiopian Herald* editorial that called him "the Abraham Lincoln of the Democratic Party" and lauded the fact that the U.S. government, "in the person of John F. Kennedy, has at long last come out in defence of the Constitution." Predictably, in the Soviet Union, the speech was virtually ignored, as Soviet broadcasting continued a barrage at an unprecedented level, criticizing racism in America as an inevitable consequence of capitalism and as an illustration of "the hypocrisy of US claims to leadership of the free world."⁷¹

All eyes then turned to Congress and the effort to pass civil rights legislation. During the Kennedy administration, the public battleground over civil rights reform was more focused on Congress than on the courts. This was not because the courts were unengaged in racial equality during the early 1960s. The Supreme Court handed down important rulings protecting the rights of civil rights organizations and activists, among other areas. The defining *public* battleground had shifted from the courts to Congress in part because the movement demanded rights beyond what the courts were likely to provide. Discrimination by seemingly private parties—restaurant, hotel, and gas station owners, for example—was discrimination the Supreme Court considered a matter of state, not federal, concern. Federal rights to equal protection of the laws only came into play when the state itself practiced discrimination. Private discrimination, in contrast, was not a matter of federal constitutional concern.⁷²

The discrimination against African diplomats on Route 40 and against African American students at Greensboro lunch counters was not discrimination at the hands of the state. As a result, based on an understanding of federalism and individual rights dating back to the 1880s, this was discrimination that the courts, acting alone,

would not redress. To remedy this problem, the civil rights movement, supporters of civil rights in Congress, and, ultimately, President Kennedy himself, set their sights on a new civil rights bill. In what would later become the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Congress relied on its expansive power to regulate private activities that had an impact on interstate commerce. Because discrimination in private businesses was thought to harm the economy, Congress could outlaw it under the Commerce Clause.⁷³

Because of its importance in resolving the kinds of civil rights crises that so often blanketed the world's press in the early 1960s, the civil rights bill was closely followed overseas, and developments in the courts received much less attention. Even though the principal civil rights front, at least in the eyes of foreign observers, was in Congress, the Constitution continued to play a role in the way federal obligations were understood. Over and over again, federalism played a crucial role in the rhetorical strategy to explain to foreign audiences that continuing racial injustice in the United States did not mean that the American political system was unjust.

Many members of Congress were anxious to pass a civil rights bill and were well aware of the diplomatic importance of such action. While the USIA kept the president informed of the details of the overseas reaction to Birmingham, members of Congress did not need USIA briefings to be aware of the international uproar over this particular civil rights crisis. The foreign press reaction to Birmingham was a story in American newspapers. Senator Jacob Javits of New York inserted into the *Congressional Record* news stories about the foreign press. Javits was concerned about the foreign affairs impact of Birmingham. He thought that "the propaganda value of what has happened can only help those who are opposed to our free institutions, and is unfortunately a forceful incentive to them in propagating communism in Africa, Asia and Latin America." While Javits thought that the executive branch had failed in its responsibilities in Birmingham, he also believed that Congress had a crucial role to play in resolving civil rights crises. "[T]he role of Congress is as vital as the role of the executive department," he argued, and Congress had "failed signally" to meet its responsibilities. "The national interest will not let us wait; we had better get at it now."⁷⁴

When the Kennedy administration's civil rights bill came before the Senate Commerce Committee, the president asked Secretary of State Dean Rusk to lead off the administration's testimony with a discussion of the impact of discrimination on U.S. foreign affairs. In the desegregation cases, it had been the Justice Department's job, relying on State Department evidence, to educate the Supreme Court about the foreign relations consequences of discrimination. When the civil rights bill came before Congress, the secretary of state himself took on the task of explaining to members of Congress the national security implications of their votes on civil rights.⁷⁵

The Civil Rights Act of 1963, as proposed by the Kennedy administration, would address a range of problems. Proposals included enabling the Justice Department to bring school desegregation lawsuits, creation of an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, some protection of the right to vote, and authority to deny federal funding to programs that discriminated on the basis of race in hiring. Of particular interest to the secretary of state was Title II of the bill, which prohibited discrimination in public accommodations. Lobbying on behalf of the civil rights bill was an extension of State Department efforts to address the embarrassment that discrimination in housing, restaurants, theaters, and hotels had caused the administration. As Pedro Sanjuan had stressed, there was only so much the federal government could do to protect foreign diplomats from discrimination when American persons of color were segregated. If the public accommodations section became law, a foreign passport would not be a prerequisite to equal treatment.⁷⁶

As a result of incidents like Birmingham, Rusk believed that race relations in the nation as a whole in the 1960s "had a profound impact on the world's view of the United States and, therefore, on our foreign relations." He told the Commerce Committee that the "primary reason why we must attack the problems of discrimination" was not foreign affairs but because racism was "incompatible with the great ideals to which our democratic society is dedicated. If the realities at home are as they should be, we shan't have to worry about our image abroad." All was not as it should be, however, and as a result, "racial discrimination here at home has important effects

on our foreign relations." Racial and ethnic discrimination existed elsewhere in the world, he told the senators.

But the United States is widely regarded as the home of democracy and the leader of the struggle for freedom, for human rights, for human dignity. We are expected to be the model. . . . So our failure to live up to our proclaimed ideals are noted—and magnified and distorted.⁷⁷

International developments had crystallized this issue's importance. According to Rusk, decolonization was "[o]ne of the epochal developments of our time." "The vast majority of these newly independent peoples are nonwhite, and they are determined to eradicate every vestige of the notion that the white race is superior or entitled to special privileges because of race." The United States was engaged in a world struggle for freedom, against the forces of communism. Rusk warned that "in waging this world struggle we are seriously handicapped by racial or religious discrimination in the United States. . . . In their efforts to enhance their influence among the non-white peoples and to alienate them from us, the Communists clearly regard racial discrimination in the United States as one of their most valuable assets."⁷⁸

This problem facing the nation would be worse, Rusk argued, if it were not for the progress made to overcome discrimination, and for the role played by the federal government, particularly the executive branch and the judiciary, to protect civil rights. To illustrate the importance of federal action, Rusk cited one example: "The recent meeting of African heads of state at Addis Ababa, condemned racial discrimination 'especially in the United States,' then approved the role of U.S. Federal authorities in attempting to combat it."⁷⁹

Further action was now crucial. Rusk continued, "If progress should stop, if Congress should not approve legislation designed to remove remaining discriminatory practices, questions would inevitably arise in many parts of the world as to the real convictions of the American people. In that event, hostile propaganda might be expected to hurt us more than it has hurt us until now."⁸⁰

While Rusk's testimony was warmly praised by several members of the Commerce Committee, not all senators were sympathetic to

the notion that American race discrimination aided communism. The atmosphere was tense in the crowded Senate caucus room as Senator Strom Thurmond took on the secretary of state. Thurmond asked whether Rusk believed that "Congress should be urged to act on some particular measure, because of the threat of Communist propaganda if we don't?" He also wondered whether the secretary, through his testimony, was "lending at least tacit support to, and approval of, this Communist line." Rusk answered that "the primary issue is for us here at home. . . . I don't think we can create an image abroad unless it fairly represents reality at home. And I believe that, because the rest of the world is so closely watching the United States, the reality at home creates its own image abroad."⁸¹

As to whether he was aiding the communists, Rusk responded that he was present to advise the committee about "the relationships between these problems here at home and our foreign policy." The secretary stressed, "I consider[ed] that relationship to be very grave and I would certainly hope that no committee of the Congress would ever take the view that a Secretary of State can't come before it without having it said he is supporting a Communist line."⁸²

Thurmond continued to press him until, as the *New York Times* put it, Rusk "dropped his normal diplomatic manner of speaking." When Thurmond asked repeatedly whether Rusk supported civil rights demonstrations, Rusk finally retorted, "If I were denied what our Negro citizens are denied, I would demonstrate."⁸³

For earlier secretaries of state, discrimination was a problem to be managed in order to safeguard the nation's image, and civil rights activism was a threat because it called attention to the nation's Achilles heel. For Dean Rusk, however, the civil rights movement was to be embraced. The moral power of the movement could not be denied. In addition, civil rights activists presented the nation with an opportunity. As each crisis broke, it provided the federal government with an opportunity to demonstrate the nation's resolve. As long as the story told overseas could be a story of U.S. government action against injustice, then civil rights crises provided opportunities to demonstrate that American democracy sided with the champions of justice, and that the American government would use its power in battles, small and large, between freedom and tyr-

anny. In that sense, civil rights crises provided a stage upon which the United States could act out in symbolic form its Cold War commitments.

By August 1963, most Americans agreed with Dean Rusk that race discrimination was a foreign policy matter. A Harris Poll reported that seventy-eight percent of white Americans surveyed thought that race discrimination in the United States harmed the nation abroad. Twenty-three percent of respondents volunteered that the primary reason discrimination harmed the United States abroad was that it gave the communists a valuable propaganda weapon. The second major reason was that it generally gave the country a bad name. As a Kingsport, Tennessee, lawyer put it, "The pictures of dogs attacking colored people in Birmingham have been sent abroad and you know what kind of opinion that gives them about us."⁸⁴

Internationally, there was both progress and the need for continued vigilance. On July 9, 1963, Assistant Secretary of State G. Menen Williams returned from a trip to Africa, and reported that, on one hand, the nation's position in Africa was "strong because of our past policy and President Kennedy's image." On the other hand, it was "precarious because of the need to realize the promise of the President's civil rights program."⁸⁵

In this context, civil rights leaders' plans to hold a massive civil rights march represented both a threat and an opportunity. A. Philip Randolph had long advocated a march on the nation's capital, and had used the possibility of a march as leverage to pressure President Franklin Roosevelt to address racial discrimination in defense industries during World War II. As Scott Sandage has argued, the site of the March on Washington—the Lincoln Memorial—had symbolic value in the context of the nationalism of this era. Protest at the Lincoln Memorial, a national cultural space, enabled the movement to portray its demands dramatically as claims to full American citizenship, and therefore within the terms of "Americanism." According to Sandage, "Black leaders assembled at the shrine a compelling universe of national symbols . . . which linked the black political agenda to the regnant cultural nationalism of the era."⁸⁶

President Kennedy and his aides were concerned that a large march would erupt in violence and that the message conveyed might be critical of Kennedy civil rights policy. However, if peaceful, the march might also be seen by the world as an example of effective participation in an open, democratic political process. If supportive of Kennedy administration civil rights policy, it also held potential to be seen as a reinforcement of an argument the administration had been making overseas that the federal government was behind civil rights reform. What better evidence of that than a march by civil rights activists themselves reaffirming Kennedy's policies?

For march organizers, of course, the Kennedy administration's commitment to civil rights reform was a matter of concern. Although the objectives of the march went beyond the civil rights bill pending in Congress, one goal was to pressure Kennedy to strongly support a meaningful civil rights bill. March organizers disagreed among themselves over how directly the march should challenge the administration. Internal disagreement continued until the day of the march itself, when SNCC representative John Lewis was pressured to modify his speech. Lewis had planned to call for a recreation of General Sherman's march through the South, saying "We shall pursue our own 'scorched earth' policy and burn Jim Crow to the ground—nonviolently." As for the pending civil rights legislation, Lewis's speech argued that "we cannot support, wholeheartedly" the bill, for "it is too little, and too late." Some civil rights leaders and Justice Department officials objected to the speech. The Justice Department went so far as to draft an alternative, and, ultimately, Martin Luther King Jr. and Randolph, the father of the original March on Washington movement, pressured Lewis to tone down the speech.⁸⁷

Objecting to the content of John Lewis's speech was only one part of the Kennedy administration's efforts to affect the image of the march. The administration was well aware that a civil rights march on the nation's capital would be followed worldwide. The State Department and the United States Information Agency worked to ensure that the "right" message would be conveyed by the march, and that the message would be understood as consistent with the image of democracy the government tried to project. Before

and after the event, the story of the march was carefully packaged for foreign audiences.⁸⁸

If the march was peaceful, the speeches moderate in tone, and the story of the march appropriately told, the event might be seen as a symbol of progress, a marker of African American political participation, a fulfillment of a liberal democratic vision. Control over the international image of the march slipped through the government's fingers, however, as the March on Washington became a worldwide event.

The writer James Baldwin took the March on Washington to Paris. Baldwin traveled to that city in August 1963, hoping to find some peace and quiet so that he could complete a play that was soon to enter production. Although he sought isolation in Paris, Baldwin did not wish to disengage from the struggle for racial justice back home. He placed an advertisement in the *Herald Tribune*, calling a meeting about civil rights in the United States, to be held on August 17 at the Living Room, a Paris nightclub. According to Barbara Sargent, wife of the pastor of the American Church in Paris, about one hundred people attended the meeting. Many of them were prominent jazz musicians. While most of the attendees were U.S. citizens, others at the meeting included a leader of the African student movement and a Ceylonese law student.⁸⁹

William Marshall began the meeting, as Sargent reported it, speaking of "the desire of the American negro in Paris to have first hand knowledge of the integration movement in the USA, and to be a part of it, though living and working here." James Baldwin spoke briefly about the march, then "emphasized instead the explosive nature of the situation in Chicago and New York City." According to Sargent,

[M]any of the negroes asked if there was anything they could do. The pianist . . . Art Simmons spoke movingly of being forced every night to explain to foreigners something about America which he could not really explain to himself. They all felt that as jazz musicians they were *the* most influential unofficial ambassador's [sic] that America had. . . .

So they began to plan.

The group discussed the ideas of a sympathy march on the American embassy in Paris the same day as the March on Washington, and possibly a sit-down strike on the embassy grounds. The purpose of such a protest would be "to make a point. They obviously feel that one reason, if not the main reason, that progress has been made toward equality in our country, has been the pressure of foreign opinion, and the fact that our racial troubles cripple us vis a vis the world." The atmosphere at the meeting was "electric. One after another spoke of their bitterness and grief and frustration, each one urging the other on."⁹⁰

At some point, a drafting committee consisting of Marshall, Baldwin, jazz musician Memphis Slim, actor Anthony Quinn, Barbara Sargent, and Silvia Jerico composed a brief petition in support of the March on Washington, to be placed in the international editions of the *New York Times* and the *Herald Tribune*. The petition stated that

I, the undersigned, as an American citizen, hereby publicly express my support of the March on Washington Movement, which aspires not only to eradicate all racial barriers in American life but to liberate all Americans from the prison of their biases and fears. I cannot physically participate in this March, but I, like the rest of the world, have been tremendously stirred by so disciplined an exhibition of dignity and courage and persistence and would like to associate myself with it.

Some published copies of the petition indicated that it was sponsored by "a group of Americans in Paris." All copies asked signers to present the petition at "the American Embassy in your city on Wednesday, August 21, between 1 and 3 o'clock." The ad was paid for by donations, with the overall amount guaranteed by Quinn.⁹¹

Planning continued the next day at a meeting at the American Church. Two hundred attended. The group ultimately did not plan a formal march. Some felt that a march or sit-in would be "irresponsible." According to a U.S. embassy officer, "Another important element in the decision to abandon a 'march' on the Embassy was the fact that an organized demonstration in the streets involved red tape with the French authorities." Instead, many people simply walked

from the American Church to the embassy at about the same time on August 21. No "march" happened in Paris that day, but 80 to 100 people left the church for the embassy at the same time, walking alone or in small groups. Others showed up separately at the embassy, and by the end of the day more than 550 petitions had been delivered.⁹²

The high point of this "walk" came shortly after one in the afternoon, when the leaders arrived at the embassy. William Marshall headed the delegation, which included James Baldwin, Hazel Scott, Memphis Slim, Mezz Mezzrow, and Mae Mercer. They presented a scroll of signatures to Cecil Lyon while approximately 150 others waited in the embassy's main hall.⁹³

This effort, begun in a Paris nightclub, quickly spread across the continent. The newspaper petitions appeared in issues of the *New York Times* and the *Herald Tribune* distributed throughout Europe. Readers clipped out and signed the petitions and delivered them to U.S. diplomatic posts in many countries. Forty-seven were delivered in London, thirty-five in Rome, and eight in Madrid. Petitions were delivered to U.S. missions in several German cities. While most of those signing the petition were American citizens, citizens of other nations at times wrote in their own nationality. Those who could not personally deliver their petitions mailed them in. Many wrote personal notes. Richard C. Longworth hoped to emphasize "the heartfelt desire of us Americans living abroad that our nation, which has stood for so long as a symbol of all that is best, will now be able to extend its liberties and opportunities to all its citizens." A small number of petitions did not support the march. A group of unnamed U.S. tourists in London edited their copy of the petition to state that they "*object* to the March on Washington Movement," and "*don't* associate with it." The tourists complained, "We *resent* this kind of attempt to publicize a *minority* group!" and "p.s. The U.S.A. form of gov't stems from '*The Town Hall*' consent, & will, of the *majority*!!"⁹⁴

James Baldwin returned to the United States, and on August 28, 1963, he marched with more than two hundred thousand people to the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. The news of support

from Americans overseas was conveyed to the crowd as the actor Burt Lancaster read the Paris petition. When Martin Luther King Jr. gave the final speech of this historic day, his words echoed across continents, as well as across time. King decried the fact that one hundred years after Emancipation, "the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land." He emphasized the urgency of the moment: "This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality." Yet King was hopeful for the future, for he held to "a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."⁹⁵

The March on Washington had a worldwide impact, inspiring additional solidarity marches abroad. On the date of the Washington March, in several countries around the world, people marched on American diplomatic posts to express their solidarity with the March on Washington. Others sent telegrams and delivered petitions. The August 28 actions appear to be largely unrelated to the organizing in Paris and uncoordinated with each other. Between twelve hundred and fourteen hundred marched on the U.S. consulate in Amsterdam. This demonstration was organized by the Action Committee for Solidarity with the March on Washington, a local ad hoc group. Approximately twenty-five hundred demonstrated in Kingston, Jamaica, led by the mayor of the city. In Ghana, a smaller, informal group organized a protest at the embassy carrying signs with slogans like "America, Africa is Watching You," and "Stop Genocide in America and South Africa." Students demonstrated at the U.S. legation in Burundi. Another sympathy march occurred in Tel Aviv. In Oslo, one hundred people marched through heavy rain to present a petition to the U.S. embassy supporting President Kennedy's proposed civil rights bill. The actor Al Hoosman led a group of forty to fifty Germans and Americans to the American consulate in Munich. With few exceptions, American diplomatic personnel described these and other demonstrations as peaceful and respectful. A protest in Berlin was marked by disorder, but not due to the

actions of the protesters. As the U.S. consulate reported it, while sixty-five people "gathered quietly" outside the U.S. mission in Berlin, "a short scuffle developed" when two men in civilian clothes (later identified as U.S. soldiers) attempted to harass demonstrators until two MPs stepped in.⁹⁶

The orderliness of protest could sometimes be a sign of government suppression. In at least one context, U.S. embassy complicity in confining the scope of a sympathy march was continuing evidence of U.S. government efforts to protect its image abroad by silencing critics.

The U.S. embassy in Cairo anticipated several hundred demonstrators on August 28. The embassy and Cairo police planned accordingly. According to Donald C. Bergus, counselor of the embassy for political affairs, "The police took elaborate precautions not only to see that the 'demonstration' stayed entirely within peaceful bounds but even more to reduce the whole affair to minimal proportions." Preparations included "[s]izeable police contingents" posted at the embassy early in the morning. By the time the march occurred, "[a]bout 200 policemen were stationed in the Embassy area." Only thirteen protesters chose to face these forces. They walked to the center of town, wearing signs that read "Remember Negroes Also Built America," "Down With the Ku Klux Klan," and "Medgar Evers Did Not Die in Vain." As they marched peacefully the thirteen protesters were followed by "a contingent of police." The group had come within one block of the U.S. embassy when "they were intercepted by a strong contingent of police." The group was told that only two of them could approach the embassy. The marchers selected M. A. Makiwame of the African National Congress and R. I. Sibanda of the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union. According to Bergus, the two men "approached the Embassy surrounded by policemen and looking rather frightened that they might be arrested if they did or said the wrong thing. Immediately in front of the gate they were again stopped by a police officer who gave them a three-minute lecture about behaving themselves. The two then presented the petition to the waiting Embassy officers." Makiwame and Sibanda gave the officers a memorandum in support

of the civil rights movement, signed by representatives of African liberation organizations based in Cairo. They viewed "with great concern the plight of the Negro people in the United States of America. . . . The beastly conduct of Governor Faubus and the intimidations against Negroes in Little Rock and Birmingham, Alabama, are fresh in our minds." American racism "fills us with anger." "For generations, the Governments [sic] of the United States have been fooling the world into believing that everything was going on well in the country, they have shouted at the top of their voices about freedom and democracy, but these have only been on paper and never practiced." The statement quoted the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and spoke of the importance of protecting the rights of blacks in the United States to vote. The protesters "strongly condemn[ed] the Kennedy Administration" and called upon the United States government to protect civil rights. The protest was extensively covered on Cairo Radio.⁹⁷

This small but determined protest was met by the full power of the state. The government of Egypt did not support the group's efforts and had "assured the Embassy that it considers African Association attacks on the Kennedy administration grossly mistaken and counterproductive." As Bergus put it, the government's "handling of this protest was in line with the assurances to the Embassy. The action taken by the authorities on August 28 also provided excellent evidence that when the Nasser regime decides it wants to control a demonstration, it knows how to do the job extremely well."⁹⁸

On the same day that two Africans faced the Cairo police, on the other side of the globe hundreds of thousands marched on Washington. The Washington marchers could not have been aware of the extent of support for them by so many people around the world. Great effort and planning had gone into the march, and its success is often measured by the size of crowd and the enduring power of the message of its speakers. Its great success is surely also measured by the thousands abroad, inspired by the march, who made their own personal pilgrimages to register their support.

As expected, the march was a major worldwide news event. In Europe, according to the USIA, "most comment found the Washington March a ringing affirmation of the power of the American



On August 28, 1963, more than two hundred thousand people marched on Washington in support of civil rights. The march was an international event, spawning sympathy marches around the world. (UPI/CORBIS-BETTMANN)



The Soviet Union stepped up its criticism of U.S. racism in 1963. In this cartoon in the Soviet publication *Krokodil*, an African American student is stopped by police from entering an American university. Segregationists in the background carry signs that say: "Nigger Go Away," "Lynch Him," "We Want Segregation," and "Put the Colored on Their Knees." August 24, 1963. (UPI/CORBIS-BETT-MANN)

democratic process." The Cold War implications were evident. "Many papers specifically contrasted the opportunity granted by a free society with the despotic suppression practiced by the USSR." As *Algemeen Dagblad* in Rotterdam put it, "Nowhere in the world has so much been done . . . for the solution of the racial problem as in the US in recent years . . . ; just imagine what would have happened had such a demonstration been planned in East Berlin [or] Moscow." The *Times of India* called the march "a heart-warming reassertion of the dignity of man." In Calcutta, *Jugantar* praised the "freedom fighters," noting that "[i]f Mahatma Gandhi's ideal is living anywhere, it is in the Negro demonstration and in Martin Luther King's goal of life." Meanwhile, the Chinese Communist press, engaged in a "large scale campaign" on the topic of civil rights, found "little to exploit in [the] peaceful nature of [the] march."⁹⁹

In Africa, "[m]uch of the comment hailed [the march] as the greatest event of its kind in history." In Ghana, the *Evening News* called the march one of the "greatest revolutions in the annals of human history." Criticism of the United States was still warranted, however. The *Ghanaian Times* thought that "time is running out." Race discrimination in America "casts much slur on Western civilization championed by the US." A *Times* columnist "urged Negro leaders to 'fuse [their] revolutionary upsurge' with the efforts of the 'victims of U.S. imperialism in other continents.'" In Cairo, *Al-Gomhuriyah* thought that President Kennedy supported the marchers because "he realized the 'disastrous effects' the 'policy of persecuting U.S. Negroes [has] on the general situation inside the United States itself as well as the harm it does to the prestige of the United States in the eyes of all the peoples of the world.'" ¹⁰⁰

There was a lesson in this commentary about the need for federal action to protect U.S. prestige abroad. The USIA reported that most foreign comment agreed "that the meaningful impact of the March would be measured in terms of the response of Congress to the Administration's civil rights proposals and the day-to-day support given to civil rights by the American public." Because of "strong opposition in Congress and the South as well as the indifference of the general public, considerable skepticism prevailed concerning the

passage and implementation of civil rights legislation." There was general consensus that the United States still had "a long way to go to achieve racial equality."¹⁰¹

Before the March on Washington occurred, the USIA had plans to present the story of the march in an advantageous manner. Foreign posts received a USIA telegraph two days before the march indicating that the British Independent Television network (ITV) planned a fifteen-minute feature. This film was intended to "plac[e] [the] March in proper context within civil rights struggle." It would "highlight positive aspects [of the] March and emphasize its significance as [a] manifestation of public sentiment in support [of] civil rights." Because of the march's importance, ITV planned the "most rapid distribution possible," with copies of the film most likely sent out the day after the event. A USIA documentary was later prepared on the march and distributed in 1964.¹⁰²

Yet, as Donald Wilson had written so presciently, a new crisis erupted even as efforts to spin the story of the march were getting underway. On Sunday morning, September 15, a bomb exploded in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Four young girls preparing for Sunday school were killed. David Garrow calls this incident "the greatest human tragedy that had befallen the movement." In the aftermath, "[t]he rage and desperation felt by black Birmingham exploded into the city's streets." Martin Luther King Jr. thought that Birmingham was "in a state of civil disorder" and called upon President Kennedy for a strong federal presence. If the federal government did not act, King telegraphed the president, "we shall see the worst racial holocaust this nation has ever seen." Kennedy issued a statement condemning the bombing, and later would meet with King and other civil rights leaders. In the meantime, SNCC leader Diane Nash Bevel drew up a plan of action to break the back of segregation in Alabama. Among the plans contemplated were "[d]emonstrations at the United Nations to secure the vote."¹⁰³

There had been, and would later be, other deaths. The brutal killing of children, however, seemed especially horrific. The international press condemned the "slaughter of innocents" while also

giving prominent coverage to President Kennedy's expression of outrage over the killings. American embassies around the world were flooded with petitions condemning the bombing and calling for civil rights reform. Funds from abroad were sent to rebuild the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The deputy premier of Western Nigeria sent a check for the "relatives of [the] deceased as [a] small token of my genuine sympathy for their loss and as an expression of my oneness with them, and their oneness with all people in Africa in our common struggle for equality, justice and democracy." The deputy premier's letter, which was released to the press, noted the "determination and positive action" of the Kennedy administration to fight racism, but nevertheless suggested that "increasing brutalities and bestialities of white men to black men, black women and black children in the United States of America is really becoming unbearable."¹⁰⁴

The bombing undercut U.S. efforts to play up the March on Washington as an example of racial progress. In Cameroon, the U.S. embassy reported that the march had "captured the local imagination and focused attention on the Negro drive for equality as no other event before it had done." When news of the church bombing broke, it did much to "dissipate any feeling of hopefulness and sympathy evoked by the march." When the embassy public affairs officer invited a top government official to a screening of a March on Washington film, he replied, "Don't you have a film of the church dynamiting, too?"¹⁰⁵

The narrative of American racial progress was threatened by protest against American racism, so U.S. embassy officers in at least one country took solace in government repression of critics. In Tanganyika, the government "squashed" a demonstration in reaction to the church bombing at the U.S. embassy because, in the words of a Tanganyikan official, the "Tanganyikan government saw no basis for [the] demonstration since [the] policy [of the] U.S. government [is] so firmly against such outrages." The U.S. embassy response was to express "appreciation" for Tanganyikan government confidence.¹⁰⁶

The Birmingham bombing, coming on the heels of successful efforts to project a positive message about the March on Washing-

ton, powerfully underscored the fact that a new era had begun. There were to be no breaks in the international side of the U.S. civil rights crisis. In terms of its impact on foreign affairs, by 1963 civil rights was a constant, critical theme. This meant that President Kennedy's ability to control the place of civil rights on his policy agenda was limited. The moral power of the movement, the brutality of resistance, and the ever present international gaze meant that civil rights could not be subordinated. The circumstances required strong civil rights leadership if the president wished to be seen as an effective statesman at home and abroad.

On November 22, in Dallas, Texas, an assassin's bullet ended Kennedy's life and cast a shadow of uncertainty over the future. Having embraced him so recently as a civil rights hero, many wondered whether his passing would eclipse American civil rights progress. The world deeply mourned the young president—the man, and the ideas he had come to represent.

Shock and despair over Kennedy's assassination swept the globe. Concerned about how these events would affect U.S. standing overseas, the USIA surveyed the international reaction. On December 6, the agency reported that "[n]ations first reacted by relating events to their own preoccupations and predicaments." Western European and Soviet concerns focused initially on "Soviet-American relationships and the prospects for peace." In Africa, in contrast, the focus was on "the fate of the civil rights movement." Overall, "The most damaging aspect of world reaction is to the image of the United States as a nation of laws and morality."¹⁰⁷

In the Philippines, a commentator eulogized President Kennedy this way:

A sniper's bullet killed his body. His spirit lives. The legacy is there, for the American government, particularly the American Congress, to accept or reject. . . . [T]he American Congress could kill his spirit by refusing to pass the civil rights bill he fought for, or passing it in meaningless form. There is physical and there is spiritual assassination. Body and soul would be dead then. May the spirit of John F. Kennedy live on.¹⁰⁸

* * *

By the time of his death, the nation and the world had taken notice of President Kennedy's commitment to civil rights. Even those close to the president had noticed a change. Harris Wofford thought that during Kennedy's last year, "he was not only seeing it straight" on civil rights, "but he was putting it as central—or beginning to put it as really central—to our body politic, the soul of the country and things like that." Wofford said that Martin Luther King Jr. had felt of Kennedy that "he's got the understanding and he's got the political skill and he'll probably bring it about, but the moral passion is missing on this issue." However, after the deaths of the four girls in Birmingham in September 1963, and the other events in Birmingham that year, King "began to feel the moral passion was there, too."¹⁰⁹

Earlier Kennedy had put off civil rights so that it would not interfere with his other objectives, including foreign affairs. In June 1963, he took bold steps on civil rights and foreign affairs simultaneously. He seemed to be moved by both issues. The human drama in Birmingham was inescapable. At the same time, he had also come to terms with a point Roy Wilkins and Arnold Aaronson had pressed upon him during his first days in office. Civil rights was not a distraction from economic and foreign policy. Rather, it was intertwined with Kennedy's other objectives: "the third leg of the stool."¹¹⁰ A president who campaigned for office using foreign affairs—Africa policy—to court a domestic constituency—black voters—ultimately understood that questions of justice at home reflected overseas, affecting his role as a world leader.

If the lever was foreign relations, the pressure had been applied by the children of Birmingham, by civil rights leaders, by all those who stood up to racial injustice in the South and who faced the terror of massive resistance. Civil rights activists had generated the worldwide headlines that so troubled Dean Rusk and members of Congress. Africans and African Americans drew strength and inspiration from each other's liberation movements, coming to see their struggles as one. The civil rights movement's global reach was evident in August 1963 when hundreds of thousands marched on

Washington, both directly in the nation's capital and at American embassies all over the world. The international character of the movement and the role of foreign affairs in moving government policy might seem to take civil rights far from the strategy meetings of the SCLC, CORE, and SNCC, and far from the grassroots activism at the heart of the movement. Yet it was the movement that generated this worldwide interest. And the world reciprocated, placing new power in the movement's hands.

CHAPTER 6

Shifting the Focus of America's Image Abroad

[I]t seems probable that we have crossed some sort of watershed in foreign judgments and perspectives on the racial issue in the U.S.

UNITED STATES INFORMATION AGENCY, 1966¹

As the world grieved for the fallen president, Lyndon Johnson stepped forward to comfort and to heal. Tragedy had enabled him to replace his former rival. This tragedy also shaped the contours of his leadership in the early months of his presidency. Johnson could not cast off the memory of Kennedy, or its hold on the world's emotions. Instead, he embraced it, elevated it, and shaped it. In so doing, he presented himself as the vessel of another's good intentions.

On November 27, two days after John F. Kennedy had been laid to rest, Lyndon Johnson stood before a joint session of Congress and delivered an address to the nation and to the world. "No words are sad enough to express our sense of loss," he said. "No words are strong enough to express our determination to continue the forward thrust of America that he began." Johnson constructed Kennedy as a visionary, with dreams of progress extending to the heavens. These dreams now shaped the obligations of those who followed after him.