

■ “Day of Affirmation” Address at Cape Town University

Date: June 6, 1966

Author: Senator Robert F. Kennedy

Genre: speech

Summary Overview

On June 6, 1966, New York Senator Robert F. Kennedy addressed a gathering of students at South Africa’s Cape Town University as part of his five-day visit to the white minority-ruled nation. Kennedy came at the request of the liberal, predominantly white National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) to deliver the Annual Day of Affirmation Speech. His speech came to be known as the “Ripple of Hope” speech and is widely considered one of Kennedy’s best. Kennedy compared the apartheid state’s oppression of the nation’s Black majority to America’s own legacy of racism, and emphasized the impact of accumulated small acts of resistance over time. Kennedy’s speech was a rare unpunished public criticism of white supremacy in South Africa and became a source of inspiration to South African opponents of apartheid.

Defining Moment

By 1966, many Americans viewed Robert Kennedy as the inheritor of President John F. Kennedy’s legacy. Robert Kennedy’s biographers often view the assassination of his brother in 1963 as a turning point in his life, transforming an aloof and often ruthless politician into one with greater empathy who spoke to the restless idealism of America’s youth in mid-1960s America. Robert Kennedy had served as attorney general in his brother’s administration with a mixed record on civil rights. However, subsequent to his election to the Senate in 1964, Kennedy emerged as a champion of racial equality, the poor, and, gradually, of peace in Vietnam.

Meanwhile, the anticolonial independence movements of Africa became a source of inspiration to African Americans who were waging their own struggle for freedom. The fight against apartheid in South Africa was of especial concern. The white descendants of Dutch settlers, known as “Afrikaners,” had come to power in 1948 in the previously British-dominated nation and instituted a system of strict racial classification and segregation known as apartheid. In 1960, white police shot and killed many Black protestors in the “Sharpeville Massacre,” and in 1964, the government imprisoned the leader of the African National Congress (ANC), Nelson Mandela.

As national liberation movements—many of them Marxist—swept Africa in the 1960s, the South African government viewed itself as a bulwark against communism. Thus, when the president of the



Robert F. Kennedy. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), Ian Robertson, invited Kennedy to address students at Cape Town University, it became a dilemma for both Kennedy and the South African government. For Kennedy, the question was how far he could go in criticizing the South African government without giving comfort to communists. For the white minority government the choice was between permitting outlawed criticism, or alienating a possible future U.S. president. Consequently, the government decided to register its displeasure by sentencing Robertson to internal exile, while reluctantly allowing Kennedy to visit. For good measure, they banned American journalists from accompanying Kennedy.

Kennedy aides Adam Walinsky and Richard Goodwin wrote the first draft of the Cape Town speech. When progressive activist Allard Lowenstein read the draft, he angrily denounced it as tepid. This led to a revised speech that was a masterful balance between criticism and humility, realism and hope. Kennedy arrived at Jan Smuts Airport on June 4, with a small entourage including his wife Ethel, secretary Angie Novello, and speechwriter Walinsky. Approximately 1,500 to 4,000 enthusiastic supporters greeted Kennedy, who made some gracious comments directed to all segments of South African society while speaking in the non-white section of the terminal.

Kennedy spent five days in South Africa during which he gave five speeches. Although he received a warm welcome at Cape Town University, he encountered some hostility at other venues. He also visited the recently banned Ian Robertson to whom he gave a copy of John Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage*, signed by

himself and former First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy. He also visited banned Zulu ANC leader Albert Luthuli, the first African to win the Nobel Peace Prize. In addition, Kennedy toured the impoverished Black township of Soweto. The most memorable part of his historic visit, however, was his inspiring speech at Cape Town University.

Author Biography

Robert Francis Kennedy was born on November 20, 1925, in Brookline, Massachusetts, to Joseph and Rose Kennedy. He was the seventh of nine children. He attended Milton Academy and served in the U.S. Naval Reserve from 1944 to 1946. In 1948, he graduated from Harvard and earned a law degree from Virginia Law School in 1951. In 1950, Kennedy married Ethel Skakel with whom he had eleven children. In 1951 to 1952, Kennedy served on Senator Joseph McCarthy's Subcommittee on Investigations. He later served as chief counsel for the Senate Select Committee on Improper Activity in Labor and Management from 1957 to 1959. He was campaign manager for his brother John's 1952 Senate campaign and 1960 presidential campaign. He served as attorney general in his brother's administration and into the Lyndon B. Johnson presidency from 1961 to 1964. In 1964, Kennedy won election to the U.S. Senate from New York. He entered the Democratic presidential primary on March 16, 1968. After winning the California primary on June 5, Kennedy was shot in the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles and died the next day.



Historical Document

“Day of Affirmation” Address at Cape Town University

Delivered 6 June 1966, Jameson Hall, Cape Town, South Africa

Mr. Chancellor, Mr. Vice Chancellor, Professor Robertson, Mr. Diamond, Mr. Daniel, and Ladies and Gentlemen:

I come here this evening because of my deep interest and affection for a land settled by the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth century, then taken over by the British, and at last independent; a land in which the native inhabitants were at first subdued, but relations with whom remain a problem to this day; a land which defined itself on a hostile frontier; a land which has tamed rich natural resources through the energetic application of modern technology; a land which once the importer of slaves, and now must struggle to wipe out the last traces of that former bondage. I refer, of course, to the United States of America.

But I am glad to come here—and my wife and I and all of our party are glad to come here to South Africa, and we’re glad to come to Cape Town. I am already greatly enjoying my stay and my visit here. I am making an effort to meet and exchange views with people of all walks of life, and all segments of South African opinion, including those who represent the views of the government.

Today I am glad to meet with the National Union of South African Students. For a decade, NUSAS has stood and worked for the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—principles which embody the collective hopes of men of good will all around the globe. Your work at home and in international student affairs has brought great credit to yourselves and to your country. I know the National Student Association in the United States feels a particularly close relationship with this organization.

And I wish to thank especially Mr. Ian Robertson, who first extended the invitation on behalf of NUSAS. I wish to thank him for his kindness to me in inviting me. I am very sorry that he can not be with us here this evening. I was happy to have had the opportunity to meet and speak with him earlier this evening. And I presented him with a copy of *Profiles in Courage* which was a book that was written by President John Kennedy and was signed to him by President Kennedy’s widow, Mrs. John Kennedy.

This is a Day of Affirmation, a celebration of liberty. We stand here in the name of freedom. At the heart of that Western freedom and democracy is the

belief that the individual man, the child of God, is the touchstone of value, and all society, all groups and states exist for that person's benefit. Therefore, the enlargement of liberty for individual human beings must be the supreme goal and the abiding practice of any Western society.

The first element of this individual liberty is the freedom of speech: the right to express and communicate ideas, to set oneself apart from the dumb beasts of field and forest; the right to recall governments to their duties and to their obligations; above all, the right to affirm one's membership and allegiance to the body politic—to society—to the men with whom we share our land, our heritage, and our children's future.

Hand in hand with freedom of speech goes the power to be heard, to share in the decisions of government which shape men's lives. Everything that makes man's life worthwhile—family, work, education, a place to rear one's children and a place to rest one's head—all this depends on the decisions of government; all can be swept away by a government which does not heed the demands of its people, and I mean all of its people. Therefore, the essential humanity of man can be protected and preserved only where government must answer—not just to the wealthy, not just to those of a particular religion, not just to those of a particular race, but to all of the people.

And even government by the consent of the governed, as in our own Constitution, must be limited in its power to act against its people, so that there may be no interference with the right to worship, but also no interference with the security of the home; no arbitrary imposition of pains or penalties on an ordinary citizen by officials high or low; no restriction on the freedom of men to seek education, or to seek work or opportunity of any kind, so that each man may become all that he is capable of becoming.

These—These are the sacred rights of Western society. These were the essential differences between us and Nazi Germany, as they were between Athens and Persia.

They are the essence of our differences with communism today. I am unalterably opposed to communism because it exalts the State over the individual and over the family; and because its system contains a lack of freedom of speech, of protest, of religion, and of the press, which is characteristic of a totalitarian regime. The way of opposition to communism, however, is not to imitate its dictatorship, but to enlarge individual human freedoms. There are those in every land who would label as Communist every threat to their privilege. But may I say to you as I have seen on my travels in all sections of the world, reform is not communism. And the denial of freedom, in whatever name, only strengthens the very communism it claims to oppose.

Many nations have set forth their own definitions and declarations of these principles. And there have often been wide and tragic gaps between promise and performance, ideal and reality. Yet the great ideals have constantly recalled us to our own duties. And with painful slowness, we in the United States have extended and enlarged the meaning and the practice of freedom to all of our people.

For two centuries, my own country has struggled to overcome the self-imposed handicap of prejudice and discrimination based on nationality, on social class or race—discrimination profoundly repugnant to the theory and to the command of our Constitution. Even as my father grew up in Boston, Massachusetts, signs told him: “No Irish Need Apply.” Two generations later President Kennedy became the first Irish Catholic, and the first Catholic, to head the nation; but how many men of ability had, before 1961, been denied the opportunity to contribute to the nation’s progress because they were Catholic or because they were of Irish extraction? How many sons of Italian or Jewish or Polish parents slumbered in the slums—untaught, unlearned, their potential lost forever to our nation and to the human race? Even today, what price will we pay before we have assured full opportunity to millions of Negro Americans?

In the last five years we have done more to assure equality to our Negro citizens, and to help the deprived both white and black, than in the hundred years before that time. But much, much more remains to be done. For there are millions of Negroes untrained for the simplest of jobs, and thousands every day denied their full and equal rights under the law; and the violence of the disinherited, the insulted, the injured, looms over the streets of Harlem and of Watts and of the South Side Chicago.

But a Negro American trains now as an astronaut, one of mankind’s first explorers into outer space; another is the chief barrister of the United States government, and dozens sit on the benches of our court; and another, Dr. Martin Luther King, is the second man of African descent to win the Nobel Peace Prize for his nonviolent efforts for social justice between all of the races.

We have passed laws prohibiting—We have passed laws prohibiting discrimination in education, in employment, in housing, but these laws alone cannot overcome the heritage of centuries—of broken families and stunted children, and poverty and degradation and pain.

So the road toward equality of freedom is not easy, and great cost and danger march alongside all of us. We are committed to peaceful and nonviolent change, and that is important to all to understand—though change is unsettling. Still, even in the turbulence of protest and struggle is greater hope for the future, as men learn to claim and achieve for themselves the rights formerly petitioned from others.

And most important of all, all of the panoply of government power has been committed to the goal of equality before the law, as we are now committing ourselves to the achievement of equal opportunity in fact. We must recognize the full human equality of all of our people before God, before the law, and in the councils of government. We must do this, not because it is economically advantageous, although it is; not because the laws of God command it, although they do; not because people in other lands wish it so. We must do it for the single and fundamental reason that it is the right thing to do.

We recognize that there are problems and obstacles before the fulfillment of these ideals in the United States, as we recognize that other nations, in Latin America and in Asia and in Africa, have their own political, economic, and social problems, their unique barriers to the elimination of injustices.

In some, there is concern that change will submerge the rights of a minority, particularly where that minority is of a different race than that of the majority. We in the United States believe in the protection of minorities; we recognize the contributions that they can make and the leadership that they can provide; and we do not believe that any people—whether majority or minority, or individual human beings—are “expendable” in the cause of theory or of policy. We recognize also that justice between men and nations is imperfect, and the humanity sometimes progresses very slowly indeed.

All do not develop in the same manner and at the same pace. Nations, like men, often march to the beat of different drummers, and the precise solutions of the United States can neither be dictated nor transplanted to others—and that is not our intention. What is important, however, is that all nations must march toward increasing freedom, toward justice for all, toward a society strong and flexible enough to meet the demands of all of its people—whatever their race—and the demands that the world of immense and dizzying change that face us all.

In a few hours, the plane that brought me to this country crossed over oceans and countries which have been a crucible of human history. In minutes we traced migrations of men over thousands of years; seconds, the briefest glimpse, and we passed battlefields on which millions of men once struggled and died. We could see no national boundaries, no vast gulfs or high walls dividing people from people; only nature and the works of man—homes and factories and farms—everywhere reflecting Man’s common effort to enrich his life. Everywhere new technology and communications brings men and nations closer together, the concerns of one inevitably becomes the concerns of all. And our new closeness is stripping away the false masks, the illusion of differences which is the root of injustice and of hate and of war. Only earth-bound man still clings to the dark and poisoning superstition that his world is bounded by the nearest hill, his universe ends at river shore, his common

humanity is enclosed in the tight circle of those who share his town or his views and the color of his skin.

It is—It is your job, the task of young people in this world, to strip the last remnants of that ancient, cruel belief from the civilization of man.

Each nation has different obstacles and different goals, shaped by the vagaries of history and of experience. Yet as I talk to young people around the world, I am impressed not by the diversity but by the closeness of their goals, their desires and their concerns and their hope for the future. There is discrimination in New York, the racial inequality of apartheid in South Africa, and serfdom in the mountains of Peru. People starve to death in the streets of India; a former Prime Minister is summarily executed in the Congo; intellectuals go to jail in Russia, and thousands are slaughtered in Indonesia; wealth is lavished on armaments everywhere in the world.

These are different evils, but they are the common works of man. They reflect the imperfections of human justice, the inadequacy of human compassion, the defectiveness of our sensibility toward the sufferings of our fellows; they mark the limit of our ability to use knowledge for the well-being of our fellow human beings throughout the world. And therefore they call upon common qualities of conscience and indignation, a shared determination to wipe away the unnecessary sufferings of our fellow human beings at home and around the world.

It is these qualities which make of our youth today the only true international community. More than this, I think that we could agree on what kind of a world we would all want to build. It would be a world of independent nations, moving toward international community, each of which protected and respected the basic human freedoms. It would be a world which demanded of each government that it accept its responsibility to insure social justice. It would be a world of constantly accelerating economic progress—not material welfare as an end in/of itself, but as a means to liberate the capacity of every human being to pursue his talents and to pursue his hopes. It would, in short, be a world that we would all be proud to have built.

Just to the north of here are lands of challenge and of opportunity, rich in natural resources—land and minerals and people. Yet they are also lands confronted by the greatest odds—overwhelming ignorance, internal tensions and strife, and great obstacles of climate and geography. Many of these nations, as colonies, were oppressed and were exploited. Yet they have not estranged themselves from the broad traditions of the West; they are hoping and they are gambling their progress and their stability on the chance that we will meet our responsibilities to them to help them overcome their poverty.

In the world we would like to build, South Africa could play an outstanding role, and a role of leadership in that effort. This country is without question a preeminent repository of the wealth and the knowledge and the skill of this continent. Here are the greater part of Africa's research scientists and steel production, most of its reservoirs of coal and of electric power. Many South Africans have made major contributions to African technical development and world science. The names of some are known wherever men seek to eliminate the ravages of tropical disease and of pestilence. In your faculties and councils, here in this very audience, are hundreds and thousands of men and women who could transform the lives of millions for all time to come.

But the help and the leadership of South Africa or of the United States cannot be accepted if we, within our own country or in our relationships with others, deny individual integrity, human dignity, and the common humanity of man. If we would lead outside our own borders, if we would help those who need our assistance, if we would meet our responsibilities to mankind, we must first, all of us, demolish the borders which history has erected between men within our own nations—barriers of race and religion, social class and ignorance.

Our answer is the world's hope: It is to rely on youth. The cruelties and the obstacles of this swiftly changing planet will not yield to obsolete dogmas and outworn slogans. It cannot be moved by those who cling to a present which is already dying, who prefer the illusion of security to the excitement and danger which comes with even the most peaceful progress.

This world demands the qualities of youth; not a time of life but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of the imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the life of ease—a man like the Chancellor of this University.

It is a revolutionary world that we all live in, and thus, as I have said in Latin America and in Asia and in Europe and in my own country, the United States, it is the young people who must take the lead. Thus, you, and your young compatriots everywhere, have had thrust upon you a greater burden of responsibility than any generation that has ever lived.

“There is,” said an Italian philosopher, “nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.” Yet this is the measure of the task of your generation, and the road is strewn with many dangers.

First, is the danger of futility: the belief there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world's ills—against misery, against ignorance, or injustice and violence. Yet many of the world's great movements, of thought and action, have flowed from the work of a single

man. A young monk began the Protestant Reformation, a young general extended an empire from Macedonia to the borders of the earth, and a young woman reclaimed the territory of France. It was a young Italian explorer who discovered the New World, and 32 year-old Thomas Jefferson who proclaimed that “all men are created equal.”

“Give me a place to stand,” said Archimedes, “and I will move the world.” These men moved the world, and so can we all. Few will have the greatness to bend history, but each of us can work to change a small portion of the events, and then the total—all of these acts—will be written in the history of this generation.

Thousands of Peace Corps volunteers are making a difference in the isolated villages and the city slums of dozens of countries. Thousands of unknown men and women in Europe resisted the occupation of the Nazis and many died, but all added to the ultimate strength and freedom of their countries. It is from numberless diverse acts of courage such as these that the belief that human history is thus shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

“If Athens shall appear great to you,” said Pericles, “consider then that her glories were purchased by valiant men, and by men who learned their duty.” That is the source of all greatness in all societies, and it is the key to progress in our time.

The second danger is that of expediency: of those who say that hopes and beliefs must bend before immediate necessities. Of course, if we must act effectively we must deal with the world as it is. We must get things done. But if there was one thing that President Kennedy stood for that touched the most profound feeling of young people around the world, it was the belief that idealism, high aspirations, and deep convictions are not incompatible with the most practical and efficient of programs—that there is no basic inconsistency between ideals and realistic possibilities, no separation between the deepest desires of heart and of mind and the rational application of human effort to human problems. It is not realistic or hardheaded to solve problems and take action unguided by ultimate moral aims and values, although we all know some who claim that it is so. In my judgment, it is thoughtless folly. For it ignores the realities of human faith and of passion and of belief—forces ultimately more powerful than all of the calculations of our economists or of our generals. Of course to adhere to standards, to idealism, to vision in the face of immediate dangers takes great courage and takes self-confidence. But we also know that only those who dare to fail greatly, can ever achieve greatly.

It is this new idealism which is also, I believe, the common heritage of a generation which has learned that while efficiency can lead to the camps at Auschwitz, or the streets of Budapest, only the ideals of humanity and love can climb the hills of the Acropolis.

And a third danger is timidity. Few men are willing to brave the disapproval of their fellows, the censure of their colleagues, the wrath of their society. Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is the one essential, vital quality for those who seek to change the world—which yields most painfully to change. Aristotle tells us: “At the Olympic games it is not the finest or the strongest men who are crowned, but those who enter the lists.” “So, too, in the life of the honorable and the good it is they who act rightly who win the prize.” I believe that in this generation those with the courage to enter the conflict will find themselves with companions in every corner of the world.

For the fortunate amongst us, the fourth danger, my friends, is comfort, the temptation to follow the easy and familiar paths of personal ambition and financial success so grandly spread before those who have the privilege of an education. But that is not the road history has marked out for us. There is a Chinese curse which says, “May he live in interesting times.” Like it or not we live in interesting times. They are times of danger and uncertainty; but they are also the most creative of any time in the history of mankind. And everyone here will ultimately be judged, will ultimately judge himself, on the effort he has contributed to building a new world society and the extent to which his ideals and goals have shaped that effort.

So we part, I to my country and you to remain. We are, if a man of 40 can claim the privilege, fellow members of the world’s largest younger generation. Each of us have our own work to do. I know at times you must feel very alone with your problems and with your difficulties. But I want to say how I—impressed I am with the stand—with what you stand for and for the effort that you are making; and I say this not just for myself, but men and women all over the world. And I hope you will often take heart from the knowledge that you are joined with your fellow young people in every land, they struggling with their problems and you with yours, but all joined in a common purpose; that, like the young people of my own country and of every country that I have visited, you are all in many ways more closely united to the brothers of your time than to the older generations in any of these nations. You’re determined to build a better future.

President Kennedy was speaking to the young people of America, but beyond them to young people everywhere, when he said: “the energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it; and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.” And, he

added, “With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.”

I thank you.



Document Analysis

Kennedy begins his speech with a piece of artful rhetorical misdirection. He describes coming due to his "deep interest and affection for a land settled by the Dutch... then taken over by the British.... A land which defined itself by a hostile frontier... a land which was once the importer of slaves, and now must struggle to wipe out the last traces of that former bondage." The South African students in the audience assumed he was speaking of their own nation, when Kennedy added the twist, "I refer, of course, to the United States of America." That unexpected turn elicited appreciative laughter from his audience.

Kennedy goes on to express his appreciation for the NUSAS and describes his meeting with Ian Robertson, in whose honor an empty chair was kept on the stage behind Kennedy. He then sets out the theme that would run throughout his address: "We stand here in the name of freedom. At the heart of Western freedom and democracy is the belief that the individual man... is the touchstone of value..." Throughout his speech, he refers back to ancient Greece, the birthplace of Western democracy. Rather than taking a chiding tone, as expected by the South African government, Kennedy seeks to inspire white South Africans to embrace the better parts of their Western heritage and join the United States on the journey to overcome the negative parts of that heritage; namely, racial oppression.

Kennedy next invokes key principles of the liberal creed such as freedom of speech, government by consent of the governed and freedom of worship. He ties these liberal values to the fight against communism, declaring that "the denial of freedom, in whatever name, only strengthens the very communism it claims to oppose."

Throughout his speech, Kennedy acknowledges America's imperfections and the difficulty of the road ahead. He portrays that journey, however, as one of halting, yet ongoing progress. He turns to his own family's history to underscore this progress, stating, "Even as my father grew up in Boston, Massachusetts, signs told him, 'No Irish Need Apply.' Two generations later President Kennedy became the first

Irish Catholic, and the first Catholic, to head the nation." Kennedy then refers to recent significant gains by African Americans, including an astronaut (Ed Dwight), a "chief barrister of the United States government" (Thurgood Marshall), and "Dr. Martin Luther King [Jr.]... the second man of African descent to win the Nobel Peace Prize."

In the final part of his speech, Kennedy turns to the role of youth around the world in the fight for freedom. He describes youth as part of a global movement marked by "a shared determination to wipe away the unnecessary sufferings of our fellow human beings at home and around the world." He adds, "It is these qualities which make our youth today the only true international community." He proclaims, "It is a revolutionary world that we all live in... [and] it is the young people who must take the lead."

Kennedy then warns against four obstacles on the journey to transform the world: Futility, Expediency, Timidity, and Comfort. The danger is the temptation of taking the easy road, or giving in to despair and concluding that one person cannot make a difference. It is here where Kennedy inserts the most quoted passage of his speech:

It is from numberless diverse acts of courage [that change comes about]... Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

Kennedy's "Day of Affirmation" speech is remembered for its powerful call for racial equality, social justice, and unity—in America as well as in South Africa. The speech emphasized the importance of affirming human dignity and rejecting racial discrimination and apartheid. Kennedy passionately advocated for the rights and dignity of oppressed peoples, highlighting the interconnectedness of freedom and justice worldwide. The speech is celebrated for its eloquence and its universal message of hope, compassion, and the ongoing struggle for equality.

—Robert Surbrugg, PhD

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