The Presidential Campaign of 1960 – Nixon vs Kennedy

During the 1960 campaign both parties realised the increasing importance of the black vote. The Republican Party highlighted Eisenhower’s achievements of the 1957 and 1960 Civil Rights Acts.

The northern liberal wing of the Democrats responded by offering support for the sit-ins and proposing new laws to protect black voting rights.

- However, the candidates fought the election mostly on foreign policy, and neither made Civil Rights a priority.

Kennedy’s record before his election had been mixed. In 1957 he had voted to limit the impact of the Civil Rights bill. His choice of the Southern Lyndon Johnson as his Vice-President had dismayed many Civil Rights campaigners.

In October 1960 Kennedy telephoned Coretta King to offer his support for her husband, who had been imprisoned in Georgia.

The election of John F Kennedy

When Kennedy was elected, MLK wrote “It is no exaggeration to say that the President could give segregation its death blow through a stroke of the pen.”

Kennedy’s priorities as president

Foreign Relations and the economy were his main priorities, and so responsibility for Civil Rights was entrusted mainly to the Robert Kennedy as Attorney General and to Lyndon Johnson, as head of the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity.

- State funding was provided for the Voter Education Project, a charitable campaign to encourage more black people to enrol on the electoral list.

Kennedy’s Objectives on Civil Rights:

Principally, Kennedy wanted to neutralise Civil Rights as a major political issue and to maintain the support of the Southern Democrats.

NOTE: the problem for Kennedy was that the “gradualist” approach of the 1930s was no longer acceptable to the majority of black Americans.

Robert Kennedy as Attorney General

On 29 May 1961 Robert Kennedy asked the Interstate Commerce Commission to issue regulations banning segregation in interstate bus terminals.

- The Commission issued the order on 22 September 1961, which became law on 1 November 1961.

The Freedom Riders

In April 1961 the Freedom Rides campaign began. The purpose of the campaign was for campaigners of both races to travel by bus throughout the Southern States.
The early riders were subjected to serious attacks in Alabama. Groups of white protestors tried to burn the buses and murder the riders with clubs and iron bars.

When the riders reached Birmingham, Alabama, the chief of police, Eugene “Bull” Connor allowed white campaigners to attack the riders.

Further attacks were committed by white protestors against another set of Freedom Riders in Montgomery, Alabama. This attack resulted in Federal Marshals being sent into Montgomery by the President.

The Jackson (Mississippi) campaign

In June 1961 a wave of freedom riders went to Jackson, the state capital of Mississippi.

By September 1961 328 freedom riders had been arrested in Jackson for breaking the local state rules on segregation.

Support from the local black community in Jackson was limited for a number of reasons. Some regarded them as ‘outside agitators’ who were damaging race relations in the city. Also, Jackson was a stronghold of the NAACP, and the “gradualist” tradition was well established in Mississippi.

The SCLC’s Southern Campaign of 1962

The Albany Demonstrations

The SNCC began its campaign in Albany (Georgia) in October 1961. Several campaigners were arrested in November.

On 10 December 1961 Martin Luther King was invited by the SNCC to lead the movement in Albany.

15 December 1961, King led a demonstration to City Hall in Albany, resulting in the arrest of the leaders of the campaign.

The Failure of the Albany Campaign

Police Chief Laurie Pritchett was determined to avoid the mistakes made by other Southern Police chiefs, such as Eugene Connor in Birmingham (Alabama), whose brutality increased support for the campaigners.

Pritchett ensured that he had enough gaol space for activists, but also that MLK received bail, and his policemen treated the activists with courtesy. The relatively civilised behaviour of the police (compared to their behaviour in Birmingham) gave no reason for Federal intervention.

The black community in Albany was not entirely united behind the civil rights campaign.

The campaigners in Albany were divided between “accommodationists” who wanted peaceful pressure and others who wanted more vigorous protest.

The strategy of Chief Laurie Pritchett succeeded in absorbing and dissipating the energies of the campaigners, with the result that in August 1962 MLK withdrew from Albany.

Pritchett had read MLK’s book Stride Toward Freedom which outlined the tactics which he used.
Bayard Rustin explained the failure of the Albany campaign in the following terms –

“Protest becomes an effective tactic to the degree that it elicits brutality and oppression from the power structure.”

The Birmingham (Alabama) campaign, 1963

The SCLC chose Birmingham as the next focus of its campaign because it already had a strong presence there.

The situation in Birmingham was made more complicated because of the divisions within the white community. The extreme segregationalist police commissioner, Eugene Connor, had run for mayor but had been defeated by a moderate, Albert Boutwell.

In April 1963 MLK led a demonstration in the centre of Birmingham, which resulted in his arrest. However, the campaign was not securing the level of publicity for which he had hoped, as Police Commissioner Connor was not acting with the violence that had been predicted.

However, King’s arrest enabled him to write his defence of non-violent direct action, the “Letter from Birmingham City Jail”.

The Letter from Birmingham City Jail:

“We who engage in non-violent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.”

The Children’s March

• On 3 May 1963 a large group of children and teenagers marched peacefully from Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. They were attacked by police with dogs and fire hoses, and the scenes were televised across the USA.

The images from Birmingham prompted Kennedy to send the Assistant Attorney General Burke Marshall.

He negotiated an agreement between the SCLC and the shop-owners in Birmingham:

• The civil disobedience campaign would end.
• A bi-racial committee would be established to discuss the grievances of the black community.
• The segregation of eating facilities inside stores would be ended.
• Back people would be employed in white owned stores.

The Spread of Non-Violent Direct Action through the South

• In 1963 there were more than 930 public demonstrations in 115 cities in the South.
• 20,000 individuals were arrested, and ten people were killed.
• Main areas of campaigning included Danville (Virg.), Jackson (Miss.) and Gadsden (Alabama).

The results of the campaigns were mixed. In some states such as Louisville (Kentucky) the city authorities were so afraid of violence and bad publicity that they declared segregation to be unlawful.
In others, such as Jackson (Miss.), the town authorities were determined to maintain segregation against any pressure.

**Participation in the 1963 demonstrations**

Mostly College and High School students, supported by middle class Civil Rights organisers from the major organisations. The attitude of the parents of the demonstrators was often torn between support for their methods, and efforts to moderate their behaviour.

**What were the consequences of the 1963 campaigns?**

When King left Birmingham, the city was still segregated, and the agreement was never fully implemented.

However, the real significance was the change in Federal Government attitudes. The scenes from Birmingham convinced Kennedy that new civil rights laws would be necessary, rather than just a case-by-case reaction from the Federal Government.

- This resulted in Kennedy and Burke Marshall drafting a new Civil Rights bill.
- On 11 June 1963 Kennedy made a television broadcast to the American people in which he stated publicly his support for new civil rights laws.

**The March on Washington (17 August 1963)**

The March had initially been planned as a campaign for jobs and freedom, organised by Bayard Rustin, Philip Randolph and Roy Wilkins. The speech by Martin Luther King at the Lincoln Memorial was only intended to be one small part of a 250,000 person demonstration.

However, the demonstration was soon manipulated by Kennedy as a sign of support for his planned Civil Rights Bill.

The “I have a Dream” speech was broadcast around the world, and ensured that King and his message came to define the face of the Civil Rights movement. The speech began with King using the metaphor of Civil Rights as a cheque owing to the Black Americans, which they had now come to Washington to cash. However, he departed from his script and improvised the most famous section.

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I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day, even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania. Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that. Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain in Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi, from every mountain side, let freedom ring.

And when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children – black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants – will be able to join hands and to sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last, free at last; thank God almighty we are free at last.’
Southern White Responses to the Washington March and Speech

Three weeks after the August 1963 march, a bomb at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham (Alabama) murdered four and injured twenty-one black children.

Moreover, the Southern Democrats were increasingly opposed to the direction of the Kennedy administration on Civil Rights. Governor George Wallace of Alabama was seeking the Democrat nomination for the Presidency against Kennedy.

- By this time King was under sustained surveillance from the FBI, whose Director, J. Edgar Hoover, believed him to be a Communist.

Summary: By the summer of 1963 the combination of civil rights activism and the decision of the Kennedy administration to try to push through a civil rights bill had become the major domestic political issue. James Meredith’s campaign to gain entry to Mississippi University, Martin Luther King’s speeches and the Birmingham Campaign had received massive media attention. However, the determination of the South to resist – both in Congress and on the streets – was no less strong.