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Two Sides of a Democratic Coin: President Johnson's International Approach to the Civil Rights Movement

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**Two Sides of a Democratic Coin:
President Johnson's International Approach to the Civil Rights Movement**

A senior thesis submitted to the History Faculty of Dominican University of California
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in History.

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San Rafael, CA
Spring 2019**

Acknowledgements

This paper is dedicated to my uncle, Rodger Higgins, and my grandfather, Bill Cain.

Unfortunately, they could not see this paper flourish to its ultimate status, but I know they have been with me in spirit throughout the course of completing this paper. I want to thank my family and friends who have supported me in this journey and my academic advisor, Jordan Lieser, who has meticulously edited and supported the completion of this paper.

Abstract

The Declaration of Independence famously states, “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.” These words quintessentially set the course for the American ideal of democracy; yet, debate as to who was and was not included in this ‘equality’ has clouded this American ideal. This debate sparked international concerns at the end of World War II; specifically, the Soviet Union, which questioned the validity of democracy in the United States. As the United States entered the Cold War against the Soviet Union, both ideologically and physically across the globe, the Civil Rights Movement gained increased popularity, domestically with grassroots organization calling for equality in their democratic government. Up until Lyndon Johnson’s presidency in the 1960s, the United States government treated the Cold War and Civil Rights Movement as issues requiring separate actions with the Cold War taking precedent. President Johnson, known for his focus on domestic action, saw these two issues, not as separate, but rather two sides of the same coin. Through his ability to merge the Cold War and Civil Rights Movement together, Johnson held the key to legislative success seen in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s as opposed to any other period in civil rights history. This argument relies heavily on methodology focused on primary resources from President Johnson’s administration including speeches, meetings with Civil Rights leaders, and executive orders made. In addition, this argument relies heavily on comparisons between Cold War presidents to President Johnson and their engagement with the Civil Rights Movement as well as increased actions amongst grassroots organizations to support their cause for equality in the United States.

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Introduction

*“Today in this moment of new resolve, I would say to all my fellow Americans, let us continue.”*¹

President Lyndon Baines Johnson echoed these words to a special joint session of Congress in his first address as president on November 27, 1963. This address, ‘Let Us Continue’, was delivered five days prior to Johnson being sworn in on Air Force One after the shocking death of his predecessor, President John F. Kennedy. Throughout this half-hour address, Johnson provided words of sympathy and understanding to the grieving American people. The speech served as a promise to carry on Kennedy’s legacy while providing the opportunity for Johnson to unveil both domestic and international agendas. This speech served as a de-facto inaugural address, setting a precedent for legislative initiatives to come in his six years as president. This speech would be, as Presidential Historian Patricia Witherspoon put it, “critical to the cultivation of a mandate from the divergent and disparate factions that were emerging in American society.”²

Building upon Kennedy’s relatively weak framework for Civil Rights, Johnson ensured the saliency in focusing on this in his legislative actions. He introduced the promise to provide more than Kennedy planned with a clear legislative act that he pushed the importance of passing onto Congress. In addition to civil rights domestically, Johnson dedicated time in his speech to address the growing conflicts abroad with those who are fighting for equality in their own countries, specifically East Berlin and Vietnam. Throughout his term, Johnson merged these two usually separate political arenas together to gain legislative support.

¹Lyndon B. Johnson, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress,” November 27, 1963, The American Presidency Project, University of California at Santa Barbara.

² Patricia D. Witherspoon, "Let Us Continue:" The Rhetorical Initiation of Lyndon Johnson's Presidency," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (1987): 533.

A recurring point of contention amongst Civil Rights scholars is the answer to the question ‘Why President Johnson in the 1960s?’ In short, historians such as Mary Dudziak, Harvard Sitkoff and Alon D. Morris, cannot come to a consensus to answer this question, perhaps because this issue requires multiple types of analysis. It is crucial to emphasize that there is not one definitive answer in tackling this difficult cause and effect question. Historians, since the passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, cite a number of reasons: including federal governmental intervention in local and state level government, strong legislative actions, international pressure on the United States government, and non-violent passive resistance led by strong equal rights advocacy groups. These claims are each supported by strong evidence to assert their role in the success of this movement and have been thoroughly examined by scholars. Generally, historians fall into two different schools of thought emphasizing either domestic or international influence on Civil Rights legislation.

The domestic argument is significantly more prevalent and emphasizes the abilities of Civil Rights leaders to take advantage of the change in the socio-political climate caused by the end of World War II. Notable among this group are historians Harvard Sitkoff and Alon D. Morris.³ Sitkoff, who began writing on this topic in the early 1970s, argues that the events of World War II had a direct influence on the directions taken by Civil Rights actors following the war.⁴ Aldon Morris focuses on the creation of strong nonviolent groups to combat Jim Crow laws in the southern part of the United States, laying the organizational groundwork for the

³Aldon D. Morris, "A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement: Political and Intellectual Landmarks," *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999): 517-39.

⁴Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality 1954-1980* (Hill and Wang, 2008)

Harvard Sitkoff, *King: Pilgrimage to the Mountaintop* (Hill and Wang, 2009)

See Also: Robert Jerome Glennon, "The Role of Law in the Civil Rights Movement: Montgomery Bus Boycott 1955-1957," *Law and History Review*, 1, No 1 (Spring 1991): 59-112.

Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck, *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2012.)

success of the Civil Rights Movement. Both historians' arguments provide validity to the answer of the desired question and complement each other in order to create a strong domestic influenced argument.

The United States, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, was engaged internationally in the Cold War, typically defined as a ideological battle against the Soviet Union. This Cold War primary focus was, for the United States, a desire to protect democracy, their foundational ideal, and to protect newly sovereign countries from the spread of communist ideology in their newly established governments. The Soviet Union on the other hand, saw the United States as an imposing western superpower who was not only a threat to their communist government, but as a democratic bully to countries that had a right to choose what ideology they wanted to adapt and maintain. The United States and Soviet Union, consequently, found ways to discredit each other's ideological views. Both sides utilized propaganda to make their point against the other to an international audience. As historian Mary Dudziak argues in *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, connects this propaganda to fueling the United States government's support for the Civil Rights Movement.⁵

When highlighting the domestic and international reasons for the success of this movement, it is best to view them as linked together in a chain. If one link is removed, this movement itself would not have been successful, invoking the popular idiom that a chain is only

⁵ Mary L Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000.)

Mary L. Dudziak, "Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative," *Stanford Law Review* 41, no. 1, (1988): 61-120.

See Also: Eric Arnesen, "The Final Conflict? On the Scholarship of Civil Rights, the Left and the Cold War," *American Communist History*, Vol 11, no. 1 (2012.)

Thomas Borstelmann. *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena*. (Harvard University Press, 2003)

Jordan Patrick Lieser, "Ethnic Diplomacy: Race, the United States and Mexico during World War II," *Journal of the West* 57, No. 1 (January 2018) 60-79

John David Skrentny, "The Effect of the Cold War on African-American Civil Rights: America and the World Audience: 1945-1968," *Theory and Society* 27, No. 2 (Apr. 1998): 237-285.

as strong as its weakest link. This paper's purpose is to focus specifically on the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 to reveal the domestic and international influences on their legislative successes and why their passing in Congress relied on the events that unfolded prior to the 1960s with regard to the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War.

The first half of the paper is dedicated towards establishing context, specifically how tensions built up within the African American community due to the Great Depression, World War II, and, most importantly, the Cold War to deliver the best potential environment in the 1960s to secure the passing of this strong civil rights legislation. In the second half of the paper, the focus shifts specifically to how President Johnson was able to take advantage of the continual saliency of Civil Rights and utilize his strengths as a career politician to deliver on promising civil rights legislation. With this said, the Civil Rights Movement gained more legislative success under President Lyndon B. Johnson than any other president since the end of World War II due to: 1) Strong grassroots organizations promoting nonviolent resistance allowed President Johnson to publicly support them and is well evidenced in meetings between Johnson and civil rights leaders, 2) Johnson's reputation in the Senate of the United States to work with legislative leaders in order to get his agenda accomplished, and 3) Johnson's ability to merge domestic equality within the 'Great Society' and apply this into international approaches towards preserving democracy in East Berlin and Vietnam.

Saliency Building for Civil Rights

Scholars debate on where the Civil Rights Movement began. Most commonly, the movement is framed with the famous *Brown V. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in May of 1954 and the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act, in 1965. However, scholars on the topic have recently moved away from referring to the Civil Rights Movement as a period from the 1950s to the 1960s and have, in turn, moved towards encompassing the efforts made as early as the 1930s to as late as the 1970s in the push for Civil Rights in the United States. Some outlier historians even pinpoint the start date of civil rights to the end of the Civil War, as early as 1865, citing the influence of Radical Republicans and the passing of the 1866 Civil Rights Act as examples of civil rights evolving.⁶ This new timeframe for the movement is known as the ‘long civil rights movement’.⁷ Regardless of time period, the struggle for civil rights needs contextualization. Given this framework, it is necessary to speculate what events prior to the passing of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act that had to have happened in order to create saliency needed to secure the passing of these acts by Johnson and Congress.

This paper chooses three major events that occurred within this model’s time period that created the saliency for equal rights under United States law. The Great Depression, World War II and its’ aftermath, and the rise of the Cold War put civil rights at its climax during Johnson’s presidency. In addition, these three events showcased the passive and non-committed nature of presidents to support and enact legislation to directly support the movement by African Americans, specifically the presidencies of Herbert Hoover, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John

⁶ Robert Kaczorowski, “To Begin the Nation Anew: Congress, Citizenship, and Civil Rights after the Civil War,” *Fordham University School of Law*, (1987): 45-68.

See Also: Eric Foner. “Why Reconstruction Matters,” *New York Times*, March 28 2015.

⁷ Christopher W. Schmidt, “Legal History and the Problem of the Long Civil Rights Movement,” *Law & Social Inquiry*, 41, (2016): 1081–1107.

F. Kennedy. Hoover, among other initiatives, focused on the economy after the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and had a gradualist approach to civil rights. This weak approach caused a shift amongst of African American loyalties to the Republican Party to the Democratic Party and enticed African Americans to build up the civil rights groups that were formed two decades prior. Roosevelt, a Democrat, was too focused on the broken economy and war in Europe and Japan to focus on his stance for civil rights. Perhaps, more importantly, because of tensions amongst Northern and Southern Democrats, he refused to make statements regarding civil rights for fear that it would stalemate his domestic agenda, the New Deal. Kennedy also was focused heavily on keeping his party coalition while also distracted on international concerns in Vietnam, East Berlin and Cuba. The Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War, created the necessary saliency needed to push for legislation to be passed with Johnson. The mistakes of Presidents Hoover, Roosevelt, and Kennedy in handling the civil rights issues in the United States provided the necessary insight for Johnson to ensure he did not follow their same mistakes.

Herbert Hoover and the Great Depression

The Great Depression was an all-encompassing situation for the United States, following the Stock Market Crash of 1929. The United States, along with nations all over the world, were thrown into an economic crisis. The U.S. struggled to keep itself afloat and many citizens found it difficult to hold a steady job, provide for their families, and keep a roof over their heads. African Americans struggled as early as two years before the crash to secure stable jobs due to racial prejudice. By 1929, some “300,000 Negro industrial workers were estimated to be unemployed.”⁸ The economic depression caused them to struggle more than ever, often being turned away for their skin color or were given less pay than their white counterparts.⁹ While they had always suffered from low wages and higher unemployment, the Great Depression escalated these problems on a much higher scale. They were the first to be fired and last to be hired due to racial inequity and racist views of employers and society as a whole. The presidencies of Herbert Hoover and Franklin Delano Roosevelt did not specifically support the plights of African Americans, who were not only dealing with employment disparities, but were also suffering from lynching in the South at the hands of those who benefited from the economic stimulus program like the New Deal. Although the New Deal did not intend to be exclusively for whites, it did not address the racial disparities that were rampant in the country. This inequity gave rise to calls to action by newly formed civil rights groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). These groups formally “mobilized early grassroots resistance”¹⁰ since their founding.

⁸ Charles H. Martin, "Negro Leaders, The Republican Party, and the Election of 1932." *Phylon*, 32, no. 1, (1971) 85-93.

⁹ Juliet R. Aiken, Elizabeth D. Salmon, and Paul J. Hanges, "The Origins and Legacy of the Civil Rights Act of 1964." *Journal of Business and Psychology* 28, no. 4, (December 2013) : 383-99.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

President Hoover came into office on March 4, 1929, months prior to the stock market crash in October of the same year. In his inaugural address, Hoover outlined his plans for the United States, a country who thrived despite a small post World War I recession and emerged as a world power following World War I almost a decade prior. Hoover highlighted this point in his inaugural address stating, “Through liberation from widespread poverty we have reached a higher degree of individual freedom than ever before.”¹¹ The United States was a world power with a strong economy and strong military force. Hoover, even as a well-versed economist, could not have anticipated that his plans outlined in his inaugural address for education, strong diplomatic relations, and revitalization of the U.S. criminal justice system would soon become second to the economic crisis months later.

Hoover was not prepared to fix this economic recession. With the pressure to fix the growing problem of a failing economy and weakened job force, Hoover approached civil rights with a uninterested gradualist approach.¹² From his inaugural address, Hoover outlined the dangers of a large and activist federal government and this stance on government influenced his beliefs regarding civil rights issues.¹³ He did not believe it was necessary for the federal government to step in and create laws protecting inequality in the workforce and other aspects of American society. There is little mention of civil rights by Hoover throughout his presidency with only one mention of African Americans themselves in public speeches. Hoover believed in a classic liberal democracy that allowed states to freely dictate laws and values on their own accord. Eventually, as education, the economy, and social customs changed, African Americans would become equal amongst their white counterparts. However, the government was not and

¹¹ Herbert Hoover, “Inaugural Address of 1929,” March 4, 1929, American Presidency Project, University of California at Santa Barbara.

¹² George F. Garcia, “Herbert Hoover and the Issue of Race,” *The Annals of Iowa* ,44, no. 7, (Winter 1979): 507-15.

¹³ David E. Hamilton, “Herbert Hoover: Domestic Affairs,” Miller Center, August 01,2017.

should not be expected to create and enforce laws that would create this change. As Garcia states, "Social improvement, however, as Hoover envisioned it, was to be the product of 'progressive individualism,' not of government coercion and regulation of mass emotionalism and unthinking equalitarianism."¹⁴

This disregard for African Americans was detrimental for the Republican Party.¹⁵ Since the time of Lincoln, African Americans had voted loyally with the Republican Party. Hoover's presidency would begin the shift from African American loyalty with the Republican Party to the Democratic Party. The 1932 election between incumbent President Hoover and Franklin Delano Roosevelt "well illustrated the Republican Party's loss of support among Negro leaders and newspapers."¹⁶ Hoover was tarnished in black newspapers and the papers highlighted his shortcomings with regard to race in his presidency. This began the switch from Republican loyalty to Democrat voting amongst African Americans. Roosevelt gained more support with African Americans beginning in 1936 than any Democrat candidate before him. By 1936, Roosevelt was able to take seventy one percent of the African American vote.¹⁷ This was due in part to his initiative for relief programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and Public Works Administration.¹⁸ African Americans were frustrated with Republican presidents who seemingly abandoning the principles of Abraham Lincoln. African Americans, at the end of Hoover's term and the subsequent years, were ready to take a chance on another party.

¹⁴ Garcia, "Herbert Hoover and the Issue of Race." 507-15.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Martin, "Negro Leaders, The Republican Party, and the Election of 1932." 85-93.

¹⁷ R. W. Apple, "G.O.P. Tries Hard to Win Black Votes but Recent History Works Against It," *New York Times*, Sept. 19, 1996.

¹⁸ David Greenberg, "The Party of Lincoln," *Slate Magazine*, August 10, 2000.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt and World War II

This realignment in party loyalty came in the form of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a Democrat from New York who brazenly pledged to lead the country out of depression and into a new era. This new founded change, however, was not inclusive of lifting African Americans out of poverty and into equal job creation. In President Roosevelt's 1933 inaugural address he highlighted the resolve of the American people as a whole and the strength of the nation to persevere through the hardships it faced. "This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."¹⁹ Roosevelt's primary focus, echoed from his campaign promises, was on the economy. This promise for a better economy was coined as the New Deal throughout his campaign and his term in office. He tackled the economy by sending Congress a number of legislative bills within his promise for a 'New Deal' that targeted workers and the poor, in an effort to restart the economy. This plan, however, did not adequately encompass all Americans and favored poor white males over their black counterparts with regard to employment opportunities and access to social support programs such as welfare.

The plan Roosevelt unleashed to attack poverty lacked the political means to support causes for racial justice that activist and civil rights groups hoped it would. Roosevelt faced a tough problem in Congress. He, as a Democrat, wanted to maintain strong support for his economic stimulus programs that he submitted to Congress. He did not want to lose support from Southern Democrats, widely opposed to the federal government stepping in on civil rights legislation amongst the states. If he lost support from this group, his legislative agenda would not get passed in Congress. This would cause the Democratic party to loose control in Congress and

¹⁹Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "Inaugural Address of 1933," March 4, 1933, American Presidency Project, University of California at Santa Barbara.

hinder his ability to win re-election. This is why Roosevelt “spoke rarely on civil rights issues.”²⁰ Roosevelt’s reluctance to push on civil rights was clearest in his handling of the anti-lynching movement throughout his presidency.

The anti-lynching movement of the 1930s rose to prominence in response to the Great Depression amongst African Americans, tired of not being protected under the law while having a growing number of lynching occur every year. The movement attracted national and international attention which required a call to action by Roosevelt. Roosevelt received increased pressure to “protect the country against this type of mob violence.”²¹ In December of 1934 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) contacted the Roosevelt administration with “support from nine governors or ex-governors, twenty-seven majors, fifty-eight bishops and churchmen, fifty-four college presidents and professors, and one hundred nine lawyers, editors, writers, and jurists”²² to support the upcoming anti-lynching bill. First Lady of the United States, Eleanor Roosevelt, strongly and actively supported African American issues and quickly involved herself in the anti-lynching movement. She strongly supported the bill and attempted to persuade her husband to support the measure. However, Roosevelt refused, for fear of losing support amongst Southern Democrats in the House and Senate. He feared he would not be able to get any other legislation passed for his New Deal Program if he angered the Southern Democrats in Congress.²³ Eleanor was upset about this matter and expressed her frustration in a letter to Walter White, the secretary of the NAACP, writing, “I told him (President Roosevelt) that it seemed rather terrible that one could get nothing done and that I did not blame you in the

²⁰ Melissa Cooper, "Reframing Eleanor Roosevelt's Influence in the 1930s Anti-Lynching Movement around a 'New Philosophy of Government,'" *European Journal of American Studies*, Vol 12, No. 1, (Spring 2017).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Robert L. Zangrando, "The NAACP and a Federal Antilynching Bill, 1934-1940," *The Journal of Negro History* 50, no. 2 (1965): 109

²³ Cooper, "Reframing Eleanor Roosevelt's Influence in the 1930s Anti-Lynching Movement around a 'New Philosophy of Government.'"

least for feeling there was no interest in this very serious question....I am deeply troubled about the whole situation as it seems to be a terrible thing to stand by and let it continue and feel that one cannot speak out as to his feeling."²⁴

Roosevelt, by not supporting the anti-lynching bill, was on the same side as Southern Democrats, who excluded civil rights issues from their agenda. Once again, African Americans felt excluded from the legislative agenda set forth by the president. The inability to pass this legislation arguably forced for African Americans to continue growing grassroots support as well as develop better lobbying techniques, in order to enact legislative change. It would not be until the start of World War II when civil rights would forever become salient with the issues plaguing the world and the United States together.

On December 7, 1941, the United States was attacked by Japan at the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Roosevelt, the following day, delivered a speech to a joint session of Congress. In what would become one of his most famous speeches, Roosevelt noted that the previous day's events would "live in infamy."²⁵ He declared war on the nation of Japan and called upon all Americans to fully support this move stating, "No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory."²⁶ In this call, Roosevelt was shedding light on the importance of full support amongst *all* Americans including African Americans, showcasing a united front against Japan and Germany.

African Americans, throughout the duration of the war, served the United States both abroad and domestically, revealing the inequality within the country. Forces, serving overseas,

²⁴ Eleanor Roosevelt to Walter Francis White, 25 September 1918, Library of Congress."

²⁵ "FDR's "Day of Infamy" Speech," *Our Heritage in Documents* 33, no. 4 (Winter 2001), December 13, 2017.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

were segregated throughout the war and the American Red Cross segregated blood donations. The war also shifted segregation-based employment within the United States. Domestically, African Americans worked in production plants across the country and production warehouses, short of white male workers, turned to African Americans to fill positions.²⁷ The number of members of civil rights organizations also began to grow as the inequalities amongst African Americans domestically were shown more as the country engaged in the war against fascist and racist nations.²⁸ Domestically, the Civil Rights Movement gained an immense following during and following World War II, when African American soldiers would return home from serving the United States in the military only to be treated as second class citizens.

²⁷ Larry Peterson, "Black Workers played role on the Home Front," *New York Times*, Nov. 25, 1992.

²⁸ Kruse and Tuck, *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement*, 22.

John F. Kennedy and the Cold War

World War II was inherently important in setting the political and international demeanor of the next fifty years, not only for the United States, but the whole world. At the end of World War II, the United States awoke as an international super power and entered into the Cold War with their communist rival, the Soviet Union. The U.S. attempted to protect the international reputation of democracy. In doing so, the United States was susceptible to scrutiny amongst communist leaning countries, like their rival the Soviet Union. In addition, countries around the world became independent and were able to set up their own systems of government.

George Keenan, Foreign Service Officer under the United States government discussed this belief in what has become known as the “The Long Telegram”. In this message to President Truman, Keenan explained what the United States must do in order to protect democracy abroad and outlined what he believed to be the best plan for the United States moving forward in the world. He believed that if one country ‘fell to communism’ the other countries around it would quickly follow. The United State did not want to take the chance of losing a vast amount of countries to communism and engaged in the Cold War in an effort to stop this potential spread. The Soviet Union saw this as an opportunity to expand their communist influence around the globe. Thus, began the Cold War.

While perhaps less obvious than the Great Depression or World War II, the Cold War played an equally important role in shaping the movement for Civil Rights legislation. As Cold War historian Mary Dudziak writes, “efforts to promote civil rights within the United States were consistent with and important to the more central U.S. mission of fighting world communism.”²⁹ Dudziak, in her statement, notes that the civil rights movement had a direct

²⁹ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, 17.

effect on the ability for the United States to fight communism abroad. The Soviet Union, highlighted the hypocrisy of the United States as a 'beacon of democracy' while simultaneously entangled in a battle for racial equality on the home front.

The Soviet Union, through propaganda, attempted to highlight this hypocrisy to the rest of the world. In a number of political propaganda messages, the Soviet Union showcased the differences between African Americans and the rest of the American population in a society that claimed to be built on democracy in the United States. Stalin encouraged young African Americans to immigrate to the Soviet Union for a better outcome. In the article, "An African-American Worker in Stalin's Soviet Union: Race and the Soviet Experiment in the International Perspective"³⁰, Barbara Keys notes the example of Robert Nathaniel Robinson. Robinson was a toolmaker from Detroit, Michigan who immigrated to the Soviet Union during the Great Depression to work in the newly revitalized industries in the Soviet Union. Within months of living in the Soviet Union, however, he was able to succeed in his community and served, for the Soviet Government, as a direct example of "the racial oppression under capitalism and of communism's promise of racial equality."³¹ These examples of African American immigration were commonly propagandized throughout the Cold War.

It was not until the end of World War II that this representation through Soviet Union propaganda affected the United States politically. The Civil Rights Movement and the Cold War were completely intertwined because of the international agenda the United States engaged with during this time. All around the world, countries of color attempted to break free or were forced to break from white colonizing empires and looked to establish their own form of government.

³⁰ Barbara Keys, "An African-American Worker in Stalin's Soviet Union: Race and the Soviet Experiment in International Perspective," *The Historian* 71, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 31.

³¹ Ibid.

The United States attempted to promote the values of democracy to these newly created forms of countries to no avail by propaganda made by the Soviet Union. “The Russian objective then was to disrupt U.S. international relations and undermine U.S. power in the world and undermine the appeal of U.S. democracy to other countries”³² This worked. The United States struggled to gain support in Asian and African countries. In addition, this propaganda and outcry by the Soviet Union gave protection for the Soviet Union in terms of human rights violations. Whenever the Soviet Union was accused of breaking human rights law, the Soviet Union released political cartoons that would portray African Americans hung in a tree with the caption, “And you lynch negroes”.³³ President Eisenhower and Kennedy saw this public relations nightmare as a problem needing to be solved if the United States was to get anywhere in the promotion of democracy amongst these countries.

Although Kennedy had a platform of domestic civil rights in his presidential campaign, Kennedy and his advisors placed the most importance of victory in the Cold War. In order to win, however, Kennedy knew he needed support from *all* Americans, just as Roosevelt had suggested at the start of the U.S.’s involvement in World War II. However, just like Roosevelt, Kennedy found it difficult for fear of creating conflict within the Democratic Party.³⁴

John F. Kennedy’s presidential term was more focused on his international agenda than his domestic agenda. Despite this, he is often credited with drafting what would become the Civil Rights Act of 1964, however, Kennedy’s approach to the Civil Rights Movement at the time of his presidential terms was an approach of passive noncommitment. Kennedy took a passive approach to legislation surrounding civil rights until the last months of his presidency, when then

³² Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, 37.

³³ Julia Ioffe, "The History of Russian Involvement in America's Race Wars," *The Atlantic*, October 21, 2017.

³⁴ Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena*, 26.

he changed course to create a civil rights bill. This changed happened after the protests and arrests in Selma in May of 1963. Kennedy, however, was also aware of the potential issues in splitting the Democratic Party over this issue amongst Northern and Southern Democrats if he pushed too much for civil rights measures in federal law.³⁵ The issue of civil rights hurt his popularity in the South and in order to secure a second presidential term, his advisors believed he needed to be impartial to the movement. Then, after he secured his second term, they would focus on civil rights. It would fall onto Kennedy's successor and Vice President, Lyndon Baines Johnson, to not only continue what Kennedy marginally involved himself with, but to intensify and mimic the saliency of the issue to the hearts and minds of the American people.

Kennedy took office January 20th, 1961 in the midst of the Cold War and his inaugural address mirrors that. His team wanted to make sure Kennedy appeared, throughout his campaign, as 'hard on communism'. In his inaugural address, Kennedy focused his speech on the importance of liberty and freedom amongst the globe and the continued hope for peace in the world for countries emerging from colonial rule and pursuing their own freedom. He called upon Americans to "ask not what your country can do for you-ask what you can do for your country."³⁶ His address embellished that Americans are a united people, founded in the importance of democracy and most importantly, freedom. The American people as a collective and united front would rally together to fight any country or group that attempts to disallow for their own freedom or freedoms of those abroad. In this address, Kennedy set the precedent for his term in office as one spent heavily focused on his international agenda as opposed to domestic affairs, including civil rights.

³⁵ David Benjamin Oppenheimer, "Kennedy, King, Shuttlesworth and Walker: The Events Leading to the Introduction of the Civil Rights Act of 1964," *Berkeley Law Scholarship Repository*, (January 1, 1994): 560.

³⁶ John F Kennedy, "Inaugural Address of 1961,," January 20, 1961, American Presidency Project, University of California Santa Barbara.

Kennedy's shift from the non-committal passive approach to his directive that the Department of Justice draft a civil rights bill in May 1963 has been credited to the civil rights groups that petitioned Kennedy to get involved after the Birmingham riots in May of 1963. This is important when attempting to understand why civil rights legislation was successfully passed during Johnson's presidential term.

Civil Rights icon and leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Martin Luther King Jr., lobbied Kennedy to get involved in the civil rights movement. King was not happy with the performance of Kennedy in his first two years as president. King and Kennedy had met prior to Birmingham and Kennedy had talked of potentially pushing for a civil rights bill. With re-election on his mind the crisis to address in Cuba at the forefront of his concern, this push fell short.³⁷ King noted, "...the president had reneged on his promise of a comprehensive civil rights bill and instead sought to appease the white South."³⁸ King knew that in order for Kennedy to become involved in the civil rights process, he needed to create a protest event that would gain for international attention, forcing Kennedy to respond and capture the nation's and global media . The importance of the Birmingham Riots in May of 1963 for King was that these civil rights groups promoted nonviolent direct action which allowed for government support. The nonviolent protests reinforced for Kennedy, and ultimately Johnson two years later, to act in the interest of the American people as acting president to step in.

In addition to nonviolent action, popularly called 'civil disobedience' amongst adults protesting, King also utilized children's marches which were met with violent resistance by police in Alabama. The more this happened, the more the media covered it, which caused Kennedy to become increasingly concerned. King was arrested and immediately thrown in

³⁷ Sitkoff. *King: Pilgrimage to the Mountaintop*.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

solitary confinement. In solitary confinement, King wrote one of his most famous works, "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in which he critiques the problems of racial injustice not only in Birmingham, but in the United States at large. He states, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."³⁹ Kennedy saw the possible international repercussions if he allowed for King to stay in prison. Robert Kennedy, the acting Attorney General commented on the nation, citing it was "making our country look ridiculous before the world."⁴⁰

This moment in Birmingham set the precedent for the President to become involved in the civil rights process. King soared in popularity following the Birmingham riots and soon was speaking across the country.⁴¹ Shortly after the events in Birmingham, Kennedy called upon advisors to draft a civil rights bill that he hoped to implement after elected for a second term. On June 11, 1963, nearly six months prior to his death, President John F. Kennedy delivered a televised address focused on the topic of civil rights in the country. The address was in response to the refusal of the Alabama state government to integrate the University of Alabama. In this televised address, he focused on the importance of equal rights amongst all Americans and emphasized his stance on the issue while continuing to practice a position based on the *Brown v Board of Education* Supreme Court case almost a decade prior. In addition to directly focusing on the United States' struggle with integration, Kennedy was the first president to combine the struggles with freedom in the United States to freedom abroad, stating in a June 1963 televised address, "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 Vietnam or West Berlin, we do not ask

³⁹ "Letter from A Birmingham Jail." Martin Luther King, Jr. to My Dear Fellow Clergymen. April 16, 1963. In *Civil Rights and the American Negro*. (New York, NY: Trident Press, 1968): 501-09.

⁴⁰ Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena*.

⁴¹ David Benjamin Oppenheimer, "Kennedy, King, Shuttlesworth and Walker: The Events Leading to the Introduction of the Civil Rights Act of 1964," *Berkeley Law Scholarship Repository*, (January 1, 1994): 565.

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.”⁴² Kennedy hinted to the American public that if the American people, who are founded in the ideals of democracy and equality for all, cannot allow for integration of the country, there is no possibility that the United States can promote equality and freedom abroad. At the end of this televised address, Kennedy announced that he and his White House team would draft a civil rights bill in the following months and encourage Congress to back this bill.

It is difficult to evaluate what President John F. Kennedy would have been able to achieve himself had he lived through two terms as president. Kennedy’s assassination left the future of a civil rights bill up in the air. The bill would need strong leadership from the next president, with a keen ability to create relationships in Congress. Most importantly, unlike Kennedy, the next president would need to put the Civil Rights Bill at the forefront of his initiatives. Fortunately, President Lyndon Baines Johnson had everything he needed to push Civil Rights forward with two major pieces of legislation. Kennedy focused his agenda on his international endeavors and was successful at doing so. Johnson would need to take a role in his domestic agenda similar to Kennedy’s push for international agenda. By this, it is meant that Johnson needed to put civil rights and his domestic programs as a top priority in the United States followed by international issues where as Kennedy had focused primarily on international issues. Internationally, Kennedy was able to secure the issues with Cuba to a manageable situation that freed Johnson to set up domestic initiatives in his term. This was key in setting the most successful environment for his two major civil rights legislations, the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act.

⁴² John F Kennedy, “Televised Address to the Nation on Civil Rights,” June 11, 1963, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

Why Johnson for Civil Rights

On November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was shot and killed while in a presidential motorcade touring the city of Dallas, Texas as part of his reelection campaign. His successor, Lyndon Baines Johnson, Vice President and former Senator from Texas, took the Oath of Office the same day on Air Force One hours after Kennedy was shot. November 22nd set the course for the United States as a whole both internationally and domestically, specifically, his death set a course for the Civil Rights Movement to thrive in the following two years after Kennedy's death.

Johnson, before elected as Vice President in 1960, was a senator from Texas. Throughout his career in the Senate, he often sided with his southern Democrat counterparts in an effort to secure his own re-election in the Senate as well as continue to secure support for his own bills from his southern Democrat colleagues.⁴³ From the time of the Civil War, the Democratic Party was divided amongst Northern liberals in the North and Southern Democratic in the South. Kennedy, in an effort to secure a strong Democratic base, chose Johnson as his Vice President after defeating him at the Democratic National Convention 806 votes to 409.⁴⁴ During the primary, Johnson had secured a majority of the Southern vote. A combination of a Massachusetts Northern Liberal, Kennedy, and a Texas Senator with strong support from Southern Democrats, Johnson, proved to be successful in the closely contested 1960 general election. In 1963, this combination seemed to be reversed with a Southern Democrat now holding the most powerful office in the United States.

⁴³ Robert A. Caro *The Years of Lyndon Johnson Master of the Senate*. (New York: Borzoi Books, 2002).

⁴⁴ W. H. Lawrence, "Kennedy Nominated on the First Ballot; Overwhelms Johnson by 806 Votes to 409," *New York Times*, July 14, 1960.

Lyndon Johnson spoke for the first time publicly as President of the United States five days after the death of Kennedy on November 27, 1963 during a special joint session of Congress to address the death of his predecessor and to give an opportunity to inform Congress and the American people of his plans for the future in what became an informal State of the Union address. This speech became known to many as “Let Us Continue”. As Americans mourned, Johnson utilized this opportunity to both comfort the American people and lay out his legislative agenda in this de facto State of the Union. He noted the importance that the United States forged ahead with the framework Kennedy had initiated months prior, stating, “First, no memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long. We have talked long enough in this country about equal rights. We have talked for one hundred years or more. It is time now to write the next chapter, and to write it in the books of law.”⁴⁵ Johnson made it a point, however, to mention that the issue of civil rights was never far from his own legislative opinion, “acknowledging that President Kennedy had fought long for such a bill, but reminding the audience that he had urged them in 1957 as well as 1960 to enact it.”⁴⁶ In this way, Johnson solidified the saliency of civil rights for not only African Americans, who for decades had fought for equal rights, but for all American people united under Kennedy’s redefined agenda.

The road towards a civil rights bill such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and consequent Voting Rights Act of 1965 was going to be a tough road for Johnson, as it had been for thirty years prior. Johnson, however, was the most qualified president to get these bills passed. This was because three major factors set him apart from his predecessors. Firstly, Johnson had a

⁴⁵ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress” November 27, 1963, The American Presidency Project, University of California at Santa Barbara.

⁴⁶ Witherspoon, "Let Us Continue": The Rhetorical Initiation of Lyndon Johnson's Presidency."531-39.

strong reputation in the Senate from his time as a Senator and Senate Majority Leader. This expertise to intimidate, negotiate, and bargain with members of both the Republican and Democratic Party allowed for him to negotiate favorably with regard to these two bills. His reputation as a master politician also credits him to pander his speeches to his audience.

Secondly, Johnson saw the importance of establishing strong, public relationships with civil rights leaders who practiced nonviolent resistance. His predecessors struggled to create these relationships for fear of further separation between northern and southern Democrats. Johnson, confident in his political skillset, was not as concerned with fracturing his party. By strengthening these relationships, Johnson was able to control the image of Civil Rights to both Congress and the American people as a whole.

Finally, as opposed to his predecessors, Johnson saw the issue of civil rights as an issue connected to other issues plaguing the United States at the time. While his predecessors saw civil rights as a separate issue, usually not as important of other issues, Johnson saw the importance of intertwining civil rights within his greater domestic initiative, the Great Society, modeled after Roosevelt's New Deal. Hence, the issue of civil rights was not just an issue that plagued African Americans but rather an issue that plagued all of the American people.

Reputation in the Senate and Appeal to the American People

When Johnson first took office, he mentioned to his speechwriter and friend Horace Busby, “do you realize that when I came back to Washington last night as President there were on my desk the same things that were there when I came to Congress in 1937. Now, he said, he had the opportunity to remove the roadblocks that had been preventing the enactment of federal aid to education, Medicare and a comprehensive civil rights bill.”⁴⁷ By becoming President, Johnson was able to set in motion all that he had not been able to accomplish in the Senate.

Johnson entered the United States Senate in 1948. Soon after his election, Johnson became close with Senator Richard B. Russell, a Democratic senator from Georgia who was chair of the Southern Caucus.⁴⁸ Johnson became powerful by aligning himself with the Southern Democrats enough to gain support but not as excessively as to eliminate the Northern liberal democrats support.

The 1960 election caught the eye of Johnson, who wanted to secure the Democratic nomination from his party. He knew that he would need the support of the Southern Democrats in order for this to be possible. Unfortunate for Johnson, what became known as the Southern Manifesto and the Civil Rights Bill of 1957 came up for a vote. Johnson knew that the publicity received from a bill on civil rights, and the southern Democrats strict opposition to it, would cause Johnson to have to voice his opinion as the Majority Leader of the Senate. Johnson strategically would have to voice his ill support of the bill and would have to cut off his Northern Democrat relations in order to keep his southern support. Johnson knew he would have to find a way for both sides of his party to feel like they won the battle. Johnson strategically sent the bill

⁴⁷ Randall B. Woods, “The Politics of Idealism: Lyndon Johnson, Civil Rights, and Vietnam,” *Diplomatic History* 31, no.1 (January 2007): 1-18.

⁴⁸ Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson Master of the Senate*.

to the Senate Judiciary Committee, which was head by Southern Democrat James Eastland of Mississippi. The Committee edited the bill completely. One of the edits took away an amendment that allowed the use of presidential power to use troops to enforce existing civil rights law and another which would have permitted the Attorney General to institute civil action for preventative relief in civil rights cases. Most importantly, the bill took away the voting right clauses.⁴⁹and presented the bill to the Senate and the House. The bill passed and President Eisenhower signed it into law on September 6, 1957. In this instance, Johnson was able to secure the Northern Liberals of the Senate that the bill supported civil rights while simultaneously being able to allow Southern anti-civil rights Democrats that the bill was weakened enough.⁵⁰

Johnson's political savvy attracted Kennedy's campaign enough to invite Johnson to be his running mate for the 1960 campaign. Kennedy knew that his background of being a democrat from Massachusetts would cause him to lose potential votes desperately needed in the South. Johnson provided the ability of being a southern Democrat that was just moderate enough to be the perfect running mate.

Johnson's ability to master the senate allowed for the Civil Rights Act of 1965 to pass Congress after the death of Kennedy. Before Kennedy's death, Johnson and Kennedy's advisors feared that the civil rights bill created before Kennedy passed did not have the necessary votes of support to get through Congress and become a law. Even worse, Johnson feared that the best-case option would be to enact the same tactic that was used for the Civil Rights Act of 1957 to pass the 1963 bill. The Senate, in an effort to pass the bill and appease southern Democrats, avoiding a filibuster, would lessen the power of the bill. Johnson stated, "Even the strongest supporters of President Kennedy's Civil Rights bill in 1963 expected parts of the it to be watered

⁴⁹ "Congress Approves Civil Rights Act of 1957." *CQ Almanac 1957*, Congressional Quarterly, 1958.

⁵⁰ Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson Master of the Senate*.

down in order to avert a Senate filibuster. The most vulnerable sections were those guaranteeing equal access to public accommodations and equal employment opportunity. I had seen the ‘moderating process at work for many years. I had seen it happen in 1957. I had seen it happen in 1960. I did not want to see it happen again.’⁵¹ Johnson, after Kennedy’s death, focused his attention on his power of persuasion to ensure that he would be able to pass a full and comprehensive civil rights legislation.

Johnson’s persuasion for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 included his vision to not compromise any aspect of the bill. Johnson knew he would have to call upon certain members of the Senate in order to get the bill passed. He met Northern Democrats, Southern Democrat Senators and Republicans alike in order to secure the passing of the bill. One of these senators would be Everett Dirksen, a Republican senator from Illinois who helped end the filibuster of the Civil Rights bill. By being able to call upon members of Congress from across party lines, Johnson was able to demonstrate his ability to navigate the Senate. In turn, Johnson was able to secure the most comprehensive piece of civil rights legislation since the development of the New Deal under President Roosevelt almost twenty years earlier. This bill became law on July 2, 1964.

⁵¹ Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*. (London: Andre Deutsch Limited, 1976).

Johnson's use of Grassroots Organizations

Johnson's relationship with Civil Rights Leaders, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and A. Philip Randolph, was an important relationship to support publicly in order to secure the passing of these two acts. Johnson utilized acts of nonviolence to provide saliency within Congress for legislation, specifically with his attempt to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Advisors of the president noted to him the importance of fully supporting civil rights legislation forever, after the original passing of the Civil Rights Act. Johnson used a different tactic to ensure the passing of the Voting Rights Act as opposed to the Civil Rights Act. He would have to address the American people directly to gain their support in order to continue to push for this legislation.

Johnson began to work with these leaders almost immediately after taking office establishing a personal relationship with King that would ultimately deteriorate with the escalation of the war in Vietnam in 1967. Johnson utilized the initiatives being made by King and other Civil Rights Leaders to showcase the necessity for a Civil Rights Bill. Johnson knew that if he were to get civil rights legislation passed, it would be necessary to have only the best forms of protest in opposition of anti-civil rights rhetoric. This meant Johnson needed nonviolent resistance over riots and destruction. King provided this ideal of protest to show the necessity for law without causing violence.

Harvard Sitkoff notes in his book, *King: Pilgrimage to the Mountaintop*, the importance of one civil rights event that was the climax of providing Johnson the support necessary to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Selma would prove to be King's, and the movement's crowning moment, the passage of the Voting Rights Act the apex of their success. In less than a decade, they had gone from asking to be treated decently on segregated buses to demanding their full and equal rights as American citizens. In less than two years, they had rewritten American law to destroy de jure segregation and disenfranchisement.... The awesome power of nonviolent direct action to expose the foundations of white supremacy lay in ruins. As never before, it

surely seemed as if God, History, and the United States government were committed to the movement and to King.⁵²

It was the nonviolent marches from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery organized by King that provided the motivation and precedent for Johnson's "We Shall Overcome" Address, pushing for voting rights for African Americans. Peaceful protestors during this march were hosed and attacked by police and subsequently showcased on national media for the entire nation and the international community to see. In this address, named after a popular gospel song and civil rights anthem, Johnson specifically and unapologetically addressed his support for full civil rights for African Americans, the first president to ever do so. Johnson states, "There is no cause for pride in what has happened in Selma. There is no cause for self-satisfaction in the long denial of equal rights of millions of Americans....Our mission is at once the oldest and the most basic of this country-to right wrong, to do justice, to serve man."⁵³ Johnson continued his speech by directly calling upon action by Congress to provide constitutional rights to all American people, "The Constitution says that no person shall be kept from voting because of his race or his color. We have all sworn an oath before God to support and to defend that Constitution. We must now act in obedience to that oath...."⁵⁴

In addition to non-violent marches providing Johnson the saliency to continue to meet with Civil Rights groups, his relationship with Civil Rights leaders allowed him the ability to control the narrative of civil rights for the rest of the country along with Congress. Johnson controlled the views of civil rights, often highlighting in his speeches the non-violent direct actions taken by civil rights groups as means to provide saliency to the legislation. This control

⁵² Sitkoff, *King: Pilgrimage to the Mountaintop*: 103.

⁵³ Lyndon B. Johnson, "We Shall Overcome," March 15, 1965, *Ripples of Hope: Great American Civil Rights Speeches*, Perseus, 2003.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

allowed for Johnson to call upon Civil Rights Leaders when violence erupted during protests. One example of this was two weeks after the passing of the Civil Rights Act, where riots arose in Harlem. Johnson called upon civil rights leaders Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, and Martin Luther King Jr. to speak out against this type of violence amongst the different groups. In this way, Johnson was able to control the narrative that both the American people and their legislative officials were witnessing, which secured the success of legislation. At the very least, Johnson was able to keep the U.S. domestically at peace and control the civil rights “brand” as positive as possible.

The Great Society for Equality

One of Johnson's key initiatives while in office was for what he deemed the Great Society, a number of domestic programs that attempted to eliminate poverty and prove the American way of life. Johnson was able to connect his push for civil rights in this Great Society initiative which centered around poverty and education. Johnson knew that his most important legislation within the Great Society was civil rights themselves and that his strongest move to ensure the saliency of both would to connect poverty with racial injustice and in turn intertwine race issues within his domestic policy, the Great Society.⁵⁵ In a commencement speech at the University of Michigan on May 22, 1964, Johnson mention these two topics, "For in your time we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society. The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time. But that is just the beginning."⁵⁶

Johnson made it a point to mention civil rights and poverty within his speeches, knowing that the voter would be more inclined to support civil rights in a larger attempt to end poverty. In the "We Shall Overcome" speech, for example, Johnson mentions poverty and racial injustice within the same paragraph in an effort to create purposeful saliency of this issue amongst all Americans,

For Negroes are not only the victims. How many white children have gone uneducated? How many white families have lived in stark poverty?... And so, I say to all of you here and to all in the nation tonight that those who appeal to you to hold onto the past do so at the cost of denying you your future. This great rich, restless country can offer opportunity and education and hope to all-all black and white, all, North and South, sharecropper and city dweller. These are the enemies: poverty, ignorance, disease. They are our enemies,

⁵⁵ Joshua Zietz, *Building The Great Society Inside Lyndon Johnson's White House*, (New York: Viking, 2018).

⁵⁶ Lyndon Johnson, "Remarks at the University of Michigan," May 22, 1964, American Presidency Project, University of California at Santa Barbara.

not our fellow man, not our neighbor. And these enemies too- poverty, disease and ignorance- we shall overcome.⁵⁷

Johnson strategically mentioned poverty and lack of education in his speech on voting rights for Americans in order to gain support for his legislative agenda. He also showcased the saliency of this issue for not only African Americans denied right to vote in Southern States, but for all Americans who are denied success in the United States due to poverty and a lack of education. The “We Shall Overcome” speech was given to a joint session of Congress. Whereas, for example, in the commencement address at Howard University, a predominantly African American University, in June of the same year, Johnson does not mention any part of the Great Society except the voting rights bill. He tailored his speech to his audience. By mentioning his other domestic programs within a speech devoted to civil rights, Johnson framed the issue of civil rights within the Great Society. Whereas, prior presidencies saw civil rights as an issue that was singular and separate to the issues of poverty or education, Johnson saw that if he attached civil rights to the other domestic programs that affected everyone, there would be more support and saliency for the issue of civil rights.

⁵⁷ Lyndon B. Johnson, “We Shall Overcome,” March 15, 1965, *Ripples of Hope: Great American Civil Rights Speeches*, Perseus, 2003.

Civil Rights on a Global Context

Johnson secured the civil rights legislation in part due to his ability to connect the domestic civil rights issue to his commitment to fight communism abroad. As Borstelmann mentions, “Johnson tried to keep civil rights activists and anticolonial nationalists identified with the liberal, Western reformist model of his Great Society....As the most energetic proponent of racial equality to occupy the White House, Johnson hoped to become the real leader of the civil rights movement as well as of the non-Communist world.”⁵⁸ Johnson attempted to balance both his goals for domestic agenda in the form of elimination of poverty and racial injustice with his role as a ‘Cold War President’. Johnson saw the importance of focusing his efforts on making the United States the model for democracy across the globe. When that democracy, plagued by an inability to provide equality for all, hindered the ability for Johnson to promote democracy elsewhere, he mentioned it in his speeches to the American people and to Congress. In March of 1965, in a special message to Congress, Johnson addressed the uncertainty of democracy abroad if democracy domestically could not be achieved. In his speech, entitled the *American Promise*, Johnson specifically states the hypocrisy of promoting democracy abroad if the United States could not promote it at home. “The issue of equal rights for American Negroes is such an issue. And should we defeat every enemy, should we double our wealth and conquer the stars, and still be unequal to this issue, then we will have failed as a people and as a nation.”⁵⁹ This is incredibly important for the time because this is the first time a president during the Cold War had shone light on the issue of civil rights connection to democracy in its integrity. In addition, this

⁵⁸ Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena*.

⁵⁹ Lyndon B. Johnson, “We Shall Overcome,” March 15, 1965, *Ripples of Hope: Great American Civil Rights Speeches*, Perseus, 2003.

statement connected to what the Soviet Union had stated for decades prior about the hypocrisy of democracy without equal protections.

Johnson continued stating,

This was the first nation in the history of the world to be founded with a purpose. The great phrases of that purpose still sound in every American heart, North and South: 'All men are created equal'—'government by consent of the governed'—'give me liberty or give me death.' Well, those are not just clever words, or those are not just empty theories. In their name Americans have fought and died for two centuries, and tonight around the world they stand there as guardians of our liberty, risking their lives.⁶⁰

By noting this in his speech, Johnson provided the context to connect the civil rights domestic struggle to the international context in Vietnam, specifically. Johnson was able to frame the issue of civil rights into a moral issue that the American people should and needed to care about for the sake of the United States. By framing civil rights and the Great Society as a whole as a moral issue, Johnson was able to gain support for his increased presence in the war in Vietnam, under the guise of also providing Vietnam with the ability to gain a moral representation of freedom and equality in their own country. As Randall Wood argues, "Vietnam was intimately intertwined with their support for the Great Society, and especially their acceptance of civil rights movement."⁶¹ When support for Vietnam decreased rapidly in 1968 and violence erupted in riots based on racial injustice in cities across the United States, the two were so intertwined that both equally caused the ultimate demise of Johnson's presidency.

⁶⁰ Lyndon B. Johnson, "We Shall Overcome," March 15, 1965, *Ripples of Hope: Great American Civil Rights Speeches*, Perseus, 2003.

⁶¹ Randall B. Woods, "The Politics of Idealism: Lyndon Johnson, Civil Rights, and Vietnam." *Diplomatic History* 31, no.1 (January 2007): 1-18.

Conclusions of Johnson's Presidency and Public Perception

President Johnson announced on March 31, 1968, via a televised address to the American people, that he would not seek re-election in the 1968 Presidential Election. This decision was made, at least in part, by a continuous increase in public disapproval for the escalating tensions in Vietnam, a subject that became the main focal point of his final address. He concluded his final address as President much in the same way he began his presidency, as he highlighted the importance of peace abroad and the importance of pursuance of peace at all cost. "But let men everywhere know, however, that a strong, a confident, and a vigilant America stands ready tonight to seek an honorable peace--and stands ready tonight to defend an honored cause--whatever the price, whatever the burden, whatever the sacrifice that duty may require."⁶²

As time passes, the reputation of Johnson's presidency continues to improve. At the time of his final address in March of 1968, his approval rating was at forty percent, a thirty percent decrease from the start of his presidency.⁶³ A recent 2017 poll listed Johnson amongst the top ten presidents in United States history.⁶⁴ As time progresses, Johnson is more often credited for his domestic agenda with a primary focus on his welfare and civil rights programs. His presidency often, however, is devalued from his predecessors due to his lack of a strong international agenda, mainly the Vietnam engagement. This is due in part to Johnson's influenced decision to escalate tensions in Vietnam the year 1968 would become definitive of Johnson's political career and the primary reason of his low approval rating at the end of his presidency.

Ultimately, Johnson's goal throughout his presidency was to lead the country through a strong domestic centered agenda. Unfortunately for him, Johnson was unable to support both his

⁶²Lyndon B. Johnson, "Address to the Nation Announcing Steps to Limit the War in Vietnam and Reporting His Decision Not To Seek Reelection," March 31, 1968, The American Presidency Project, University of California at Santa Barbara.

⁶³ "Presidential Job Approval," *American Presidency Project*, University of California Santa Barbara.

⁶⁴ Chris Cillizza, "The Best (and Worst) Presidents, Ranked." *The Washington Post*. February 20, 2017.

domestic and international goals and his presidency suffered for it. His own goal for his presidency was always that it would be “remembered in history for its great civil rights legislation.”⁶⁵ In this case, through his success, history looks at Johnson as the true champion for civil rights. The building tensions that emerged from the Great Depression, World War II, and most importantly, the Cold War, created the perfect environment to pass civil rights legislation. Johnson was a career politician that saw the perfect opportunity for civil rights legislation to be passed in his term because of the built-up tensions created by these events. However, Johnson was ultimately the most accomplished President to secure this legislation because of the tactics he used to secure the passing of this bill. These tactics included creating a strong public relationship with Civil Rights leaders and organizations, the ability to stretch his influence as president across both divides within his own Democratic party and crossing party lines by working with Republicans, and finally his ability to merge the issue of civil rights within his broader domestic policy known to many as the Great Society.

The tactics invoked uniquely by Johnson, in addition to an environment of strong saliency for the civil rights issues allowed for the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and consequent passing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Both bills, in comparison to Kennedy’s initial draft, were more comprehensive and provided by more rights than Kennedy’s team could have ever envisioned.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson Master of the Senate*.

⁶⁶ Vaughn Davis Bornet, *The Presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson*. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1983).

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