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Robert F. Kennedy's 1966 Visit to South Africa

“If the blacks are not inferior to the whites, why may they not take part in your elections? Why do you now spend less on their education than five years ago? Why do you not allow them to worship in your churches? What the HELL would you do if you found out God was black?” asked Senator Robert Kennedy to a crowd of Afrikaner students at the University of Stellenbosch, on June 8th, 1966. The room was tense; Kennedy fumed with anger as the students sat silently, too afraid to respond. Before Kennedy's departure for his South African excursion, President Johnson had made it clear that the trip was a personal choice, with no association to any sort of agenda by the American government. The senator's acceptance of the invitation from the anti-apartheid National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) to deliver its annual Day of Affirmation Speech in Cape Town made Kennedy the nation's most notable international visitor that year. Alongside his wife Ethel, he spent five days in South Africa, traveling to Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, and Pretoria. He met with South Africans of all backgrounds, race, social class, and political affiliation. Robert F. Kennedy's declaration of anti-apartheid solidarity, rooted in his own passion for social justice, revived the resistance movement amongst South African college students in a time of despair.

The 1960s in South Africa and the United States

The 1960s in South Africa and the United States shared a common theme of racial tension within both nations. The 1960s in South Africa began with tragedy. On March

21st, 1960, a crowd of about 5,000-7,000 unarmed protestors associated with the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), went to the local police station in the South African township of Sharpeville, located in the Transvaal, to demonstrate against the pass laws. The South African police responded to the demonstration with open fire, and in result killed sixty-nine people. The effects of the massacre went far beyond the death toll, however.

Sharpeville drew the attention of the international community due to its great death toll (Reeves 1966). With the South African government now with blood on their hands, they launched a new intensive suppression of the resistance movement. Most notably, the apartheid government banned both the ANC and PAC, forcing the organizations into underground movements. Merely supporting the anti-apartheid movement could cost one their life, and thus all hope for a breakthrough to the end of the apartheid government appeared to reach a stop in the 1960s.

For the United States, the 1960s marked perhaps the most turbulent times socially in American history. Though slavery was outlawed nearly a century before, racism was still very much alive through Jim Crow laws, laws created at the state and local levels that enforced racial segregation in the Southern United States. Civil rights activists took a stance against segregation and the blatant racism in Southern society in many ways, however the most common form of demonstration were the “sit-ins,” which began in Greensboro, North Carolina on February 1st, 1960 after four college students refused to leave a “whites only” lunch counter without being served. The nonviolent demonstration caused a ripple effect of other sit-ins through North Carolina and other Southern states. The early 1960s in United States’ history was filled with protest, the most notable of course being the August 28th, 1963 March on Washington, led by Martin Luther King Jr.

Despite overwhelming growing national support for the Civil Rights Movement, racism and violence in the Southern US persisted. In July 1964, it appeared change was on the horizon. President Lyndon B. Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act, a national law preventing employment discrimination due to race, color, sex, religion, or national origin. A little over a year later, he signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to put an end to voter suppression, specifically aimed at the South where literacy tests were commonly given to black voters as a voting requirement. Then in April of 1968, Johnson signed the Fair Housing Act, providing equal housing opportunity regardless of race, religion, or national origin (“Civil Rights Movement Timeline”). Despite all the national legislative success in civil rights in the 1960s, racism in the United States still remained alive and well.

Robert Kennedy’s career was one rooted in social justice. As attorney general under his brother John F. Kennedy’s presidential administration from 1960 to 1963, Kennedy became increasingly committed to the rights of African Americans, specifically in regards to voting, an equal education, and the use of public accommodations, making him an advocate for desegregation in the South (“Robert F. Kennedy: A Brief Biography”). Unlike most politicians, Kennedy was more than just talk. In September 1962, Kennedy sent US Marshals and troops to Oxford, Mississippi to enforce the federal court ruling admitting James Meredith, a young African American man, to attend the University of Mississippi, a previously segregated university (“Robert F. Kennedy”). Meredith’s acceptance was controversial in Mississippi, a state entrenched in racism. Prior to Meredith’s arrival at the university, Kennedy exchanged a number of phone calls with Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett, who famously declared, “no school will be integrated in Mississippi while I am your governor,” forcing Barnett to commit to civil

order (“Civil Rights Movement Timeline”). Kennedy’s advocacy for social justice in civil rights extended past his role as attorney general. In 1965, Kennedy was elected to the Senate in the state of New York (“Civil Rights Movement Timeline”). As a senator, he maintained his progressive thinking and continued to work on behalf of African Americans. Kennedy, an internationally known and loved politician with a passion for social justice, appeared to be the perfect fit for NUSAS’s Day of Affirmation address.

Robert F. Kennedy’s Visit to South Africa

In October of 1965, NUSAS President Ian Robertson invited Senator Kennedy to South Africa to deliver the Day of Affirmation address. Before Kennedy could even accept or deny the invitation, the question arose as to whether or not the South African apartheid government would grant Kennedy the visa to enter the country. Kennedy appeared to be a controversial figure to the South African government. His open advocacy for the civil rights of black Americans made them question his intentions in an already racially fueled turbulent society.¹ On October 29th, 1965, before the South African government had even made a decision in regard to the possibility of granting him a visa, Kennedy accepted the invitation.² Following the acceptance, the South African government agreed to grant him a visa, however, they made it clear no foreign reporters

¹ Correspondence from Carl D. Reindorf to Adam Walinsky, 29 October, 1965, RFK 561, Box 13, John F. Kennedy Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, United States.

² Telegram from the State Department, 25 October, 1965, RFK 561, Box 13, John F. Kennedy Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, United States.

were allowed to enter the country during Kennedy's visit. In other words, the only press allowed to cover Kennedy's trip to South Africa was South African news outlets.³

To no surprise, white South Africans were not thrilled with Kennedy's visit. *The Cape Argus* published an unflattering caricature of Kennedy alongside an article entitled, "Bob Kennedy, hero of the US teenagers." An excerpt from the article reads, "He's tough and glamorous and the teenagers will go crazy...Robert, more than his President brother John, has been the hero of young Americans. They call him 'Bobby the Bold'.... it was largely the Black vote that got the Kennedy clan into power and the Negroes of the North, especially those of Chicago, regard Robert Kennedy as their patron and benefactor who has promised them equal rights, equal pay, equal status in society."⁴ The article was evidence of the commonly held fear by the South African government and its supporters that Kennedy was coming to radicalize the already resistant black youth. Prominent nationalist newspaper *Die Vaderland* published a more direct article expressing disdain for Kennedy's visit entitled, "Stay Home Bobby." The editorial said, "What we in South Africa can well rightly ask is what Senator Kennedy wants to do in South Africa – to carry off loot from the South African situation for promoting his campaign the next time he opposes President Johnson in the election? To woo the American negro vote through their flight aimed against South Africa?... We would think that the American administration in Washington must strongly consider keeping Senator Kennedy away

³ Telegram from the State Department, 25 October, 1965, RFK 561, Box 13, John F. Kennedy Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, United States.

⁴ Telegram from the State Department, 27 October, 1965, RFK 561, Box 13, John F. Kennedy Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, United States.

from South Africa.”⁵ *Vaderland* further went on to say that Kennedy’s intentions were transparent to South Africans: he was coming to the country solely to cause trouble. Despite the pro-apartheid journalists’ claims, Kennedy made it clear the visit was to do nothing more than observe, learn, and discuss the ways of South Africa. In his essay recapping his visit entitled “Suppose God is Black,” he further reiterates his intentions: “Our aim was not simply to criticize but to engage in a dialogue to see if, together, we could elevate reason above prejudice and myth” (Kennedy 1966). Regardless of his intentions, the question of how the senator would be received in South Africa remained controversial.

Robert Kennedy spent five days in South Africa, traveling throughout the country alongside his wife Ethel. He arrived at the airport in Johannesburg a little after midnight in the early morning on June 5th, and was greeted by a crowd much larger than the administration anticipated. Kennedy spoke to the crowd with enthusiasm and excitement. He said, “I want to emphasize my own earnest desire to [hear] South Africans’ talking about their country and its problems. I am here to listen and learn...I hope that you will regard my visit as evidence of my deep conviction that the dialogue between our nations and between men of good will and high purpose in those nations must be maintained and broadened. If our problems are great, they become only greater through an inability to meet, talk, and listen.”⁶ He was careful in his wording; he did not want to upset or offend the South African government, but he made sure to express his own personal stance on the matters in South Africa discreetly.

⁵ Telegram from the State Department, 27 October, 1965, RFK 561, Box 13, John F. Kennedy Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, United States.

⁶ Robert Kennedy, “Arrival Speech” (South Africa, June 5, 1966), RFK 561, Box 13, John F. Kennedy Library Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, United States.

Shortly after his arrival, Kennedy made his way to the University of Cape Town to deliver his Day of Affirmation Address, a speech he named a “Ripple of Hope.” NUSAS, though a multi-racial student organization, primarily composed itself of white student activists. President of the organization, Ian Robertson, was noticeably absent from the event; after his invitation to the American senator to come speak in South Africa, Robertson was later banned right before Kennedy’s visit.⁷ The crowd consisted of about 18,000 white students, in addition to the South African press. Kennedy’s Ripple of Hope speech spoke to young activist college students; it was a message of liberty, hope, inclusiveness, and the need for justice.⁸ He spoke of both the apartheid system and the American civil rights movement. He called for the involvement in the nation’s youth in their own society, a call very similar to that of his late brother Jack to the American youth a few years before in the foundation of the Peace Corps. The speech revved up the crowd of young college activists. For many in the audience, they had never seen anyone from outside of South Africa in their country. Now standing before them they had Robert Kennedy, an iconic figure both in American politics and the international community because of his name. To have such an influential figure like Kennedy preach these words of activism and hope created a spark amongst many of these college students. In a time like the 1960s, the apartheid government appeared to have assumed control over the resistance, to the point where many saw it as the end of the anti-apartheid movement. However, for the South African youth, the outspoken American senator’s visit helped many regain hope.

⁷ Telegram from the State Department, 21 May, 1966, RFK 561, Box 13, John F. Kennedy Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, United States.

⁸ Telegram from the State Department, 5 June, 1966, RFK 561, Box 13, John F. Kennedy Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, United States.

Later that night, Robert and Ethel had dinner with members of the South Africa Foundation. The dinner was highlighted with pictures throughout the South African press of Kennedy shaking hands with various Afrikaners.⁹ Kennedy recognized much of his visit involved meeting with supporters of the anti-apartheid movement in various mediums and aimed to prove his purpose in that he was not there to criticize and judge the South African government, nor was he there to take sides and fire up members of the resistance.

Kennedy requested to meet with the apartheid government leaders, however they rejected the senator's efforts. News of the government's rejection of Kennedy's invitation spread quickly; on the front page of one of South Africa's leading national newspapers, the headline read "Kennedy Got Cold Shoulder Twice." Blaar Coetzee, the Deputy Minister of the Bantu Administration and Education at the time, declared Kennedy's visit "unnecessary" and "on invitation from NUSAS, whose past chairmen have all been convicted of sabotage or banned as communists, or have fled the country."¹⁰ He claimed that South Africa had never been more united, and Kennedy's presence threatened that unity. He says, "I will thank NUSAS and Mr. Kennedy for their stupidity. Five years ago, there were dire warnings of what would happen if South Africa became a republic. What happened to these forecasts which ol' Kennedy will reiterate?...The South African government would build military might to unprecedented strength, and America, the UN, and others would realize if you touch South Africa, you cannot handle it with

⁹ Telegram from the State Department, 6 June, 1966, RFK 561, Box 13, John F. Kennedy Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, United States.

¹⁰ Telegram from the State Department, 6 June, 1966, RFK 561, Box 13, John F. Kennedy Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, United States.

gloves...the South African government would continue to maintain law and order at all costs, whether it is 90 days, 180 days, or 180 million days.”¹¹

Many South Africans on both sides of the political spectrum were upset with the government’s choice. One editorial from a pro-apartheid journalist of the *Pretoria News* read, “It was churlish and shortsighted of the government to refuse to talk to Senator Robert Kennedy. Here was an opportunity of putting South Africa’s case to a leading Western politician. At worst he would have been given an insight into official mind and what moves it; at best he might have gained an understanding which could have produced sympathy at least for people dealing with problem of agonizing perplexity.”¹² The decision by the government to not meet with Kennedy was one they would come to regret, as Kennedy later reflects in “Suppose God is Black,” his essay on the evils of the apartheid system (Kennedy 1966).

The next day, Kennedy visited Stellenbosch University to address a crowd of Afrikaner students. Despite a surprisingly warm welcome, following his speech, he was met with many antagonizing questions as to why the senator was so sympathetic to blacks. Kennedy, growing angry, retaliated. He said, “If the blacks are not inferior to the whites, why may they not take part in your elections? Why do you now spend less on their education than five years ago? Why do you not allow them to worship in your

¹¹ Telegram from the State Department, 6 June, 1966, RFK 561, Box 13, John F. Kennedy Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, United States.

¹² Telegram from the State Department, 6 June, 1966, RFK 561, Box 13, John F. Kennedy Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, United States.

churches? What the HELL would you do if you found out God was black?”¹³ Kennedy no longer held back in his criticism of the apartheid movement.

The rest of his trip was one rooted in the utmost support of the liberation movement, highlighted by his meeting with banned ANC leader Chief Albert Luthuli later on June 8th. Luthuli and Kennedy met in Groutville, Natal, where Luthuli was confined to house arrest, discussing the problems facing black Americans in the United States and the future of black South Africans in a nation of separateness (Mtshali 2016). Though the meeting was highly publicized, there is no account as to what exactly was said, as a part of Luthuli’s banning order was he could not be quoted or photographed by the media, however one photo of the two meeting was published. Both the meeting and Luthuli himself left a lasting impression on Kennedy, who said, “the United States government cannot ignore what’s going on in South Africa” after the meeting.¹⁴

Consequences of Robert F. Kennedy’s Visit

“In my judgment, the spirit of decency and courage in South Africa will not surrender. With all of the difficulties and the suffering I had seen, still I left tremendously moved by the intelligence, the determination, the cool courage of the young people and their allies scattered through the land,” Kennedy wrote, a little over two months after his visit (Kennedy 1966). The young people the senator met with appeared just as moved by him and his ideas themselves. Suddenly, the resistance movement amongst college students appeared alive once again. One journalist described Kennedy’s impact amongst

¹³ Telegram from the State Department, 8 June, 1966, RFK 561, Box 13, John F. Kennedy Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, United States.

¹⁴ Telegram from the State Department, 8 June, 1966, RFK 561, Box 13, John F. Kennedy Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, United States.

the young activists, “This is what so many of the young people of South Africa have been yearning for – some sort of clear and unequivocal endorsement that hopes and ideals, that all decent youngsters feel, are indeed part and parcel of great traditions of contemporary western world, and not as they are being told so often, something alien, unwholesome or worse.”¹⁵ He continues on, “How much of this sort of inspiration do they get? Precious. Little. This is a patriarchal society and young people are expected to be seen and not heard... a campaign of denigration and intimidation has been directed as NUSAS for years. The wonder of it is, there are so many young people who still feel the way they do. With a sure instinct, Senator Kennedy drew them out and they responded wholeheartedly.”¹⁶ Though Kennedy had no political agenda in his visit, his idealistic and outspoken vision sparked a fire in the young people of South Africa. He compared his own fight for equality back in the United States to that of the students in South Africa. In a time of suppression, he preached how important it was to not lose hope. He did not put an end to the apartheid government. He did not open political debate with apartheid leaders. Rather, he left a “ripple of hope” amongst the youth: “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.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Telegram from the State Department, 11 June, 1966, RFK 561, Box 13, John F. Kennedy Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, United States.

¹⁶ Telegram from the State Department, 11 June, 1966, RFK 561, Box 13, John F. Kennedy Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, United States.

¹⁷ Robert Kennedy, “Ripple of Hope” (speech, University of Cape Town, South Africa, June 6, 1966), RFK 561, Box 13, John F. Kennedy Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, United States.

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