

Equal Opportunity Legislation with Some Teeth

On June 11, 1963, President John F. Kennedy set the stage for the passage of civil rights legislation that made meaningful change when he stated in a speech he was seeking..."the kind of equality of treatment which we would want for ourselves." And despite his tragic assignation, that leadership set the wheels in motion for one of the most important pieces of legislation that the United States government has ever passed to protect the civil rights of African Americans. That legislation was the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

This bill represented the culmination of a decades if not century's long struggle to achieve true civil rights for African Americans in the USA. President Kennedy saw this as the chance to put some real teeth into the law to give it the power to really change the way the country worked, played and lived together. It was a powerful continuation of the work that was started with The Civil Rights Act of 1875 but with much more enforceability combined with language that made it contemporary in an era of the expanding civil rights movement.

The bill was broad sweeping the scope of areas of civil life in this country to be impacted by restrictions against discrimination. The five "titles" of the bill cover many needed social changes including...

Title I - Banned discriminatory voter registration practices that were used to try to deny black people the right to vote.

Title II - Made it illegal to discriminate in public venues such as restaurants, theaters or hotels based on race.

Title III - Banned discrimination from public facilities such as government services or schools.

Title IV - Enforcement of desegregation of public schools

Title V - Made it illegal to discriminate in the workplace including race based hiring practices.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 touched on virtually every aspect of public life in America from schools to the work place even to public gatherings such as entertainment and eating establishments. In every way that Americans gathered together as a people, The Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned discrimination against African Americans in that setting.

But there are other important steps forward for civil rights that were an important part of the development of this bill. The bill did not just address civil rights for African Americans and in fact, it does not address that population directly at all. Instead the bill protects the civil rights for all minority groups. As such this made the struggle for equality that the African American community had been involved with ever since the Civil War everyman's struggle for equality and it made all Americans brothers in seeking equal opportunity and treatment for all who are citizens of this great country.

In approaching the bill in this way, Congress forged some powerful allies for

the African American cause and put legislation in place to begin to positively view the emerging movement for equal rights for women which was just as much in need of correction and support to see that woman's rights became the law of the land too. Again, this built a strong alliance between these movements which added "clout" not only to the bill to make sure it made it through congress but it gave "clout" to those who were charged with enforcement of this important legislation.

You have to admire the courage of the leadership of this country for taking a stand on behalf of equal rights in putting this bill into effect. We especially add our admiration to the work of President Kennedy and then President Johnson who did not let the Kennedy assassination damage the chances that this bill would become law. For President Johnson, putting the muscle of the presidency behind this bill gave it the power to push past objections and become the law of the land.

Many say that this one political stand he took destroyed Johnson's chances to be reelected because of the animosity it caused in the south toward him. But President Johnson did what all presidents should do. He saw the good of the country and of the society as more important than his own political ambitions and he defied the danger to make sure equal rights for African Americans and all Americans became the law. We need that kind of leadership today and in every generation of leaders of this nation so we always seek the common good in the laws we see passed by our government.