

Historians have disagreed about whether John F Kennedy or Lyndon B Johnson played the biggest role in securing civil rights in America by 1968. What is your view about whether John F Kennedy or Lyndon B Johnson played the biggest role in civil rights in America by 1968?

The varying contributions made by Johnson or Kennedy during their presidencies and who played the biggest role in securing civil rights by 1968 is a point of contention for historians who study this area. The origin of the Civil Rights Movement is similarly disputed, as issues of civil rights stem back to reliance on slavery for economic prosperity in the nineteenth century. Perhaps the desire for racial progression arose “at least as early as the end of the nineteenth century” (Cassimere,1977:3-8) as Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation 1862 stated slaves would be ‘forever free’. Nonetheless, racial tension continued as the Jim Crow Laws were implemented in 1865. These laws marginalised black Americans as they were removed the right to vote or be educated. The presence of white supremacy grew with groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and racially motivated violence become increasingly prominent in society. As a result, civil rights activism escalated with the establishment of the National Advancement Association of Coloured People in 1909. Although racial inequality was not considered a new issue, it is possible that “the politics of civil rights first arose as an issue in the 1930s” (Berman,1970:5). However, the greatest advances in the Civil Rights Movement came with the Washington March (1963) and Birmingham Marches (1963) that led to Johnson’s Civil Rights Act in 1964, a transformative piece of legislation. Despite this reform, protests such as the 1965 Selma March continued and led to Johnson’s publication of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

This turbulent history has led to contrasting perspectives on the presidential involvement in securing civil rights. Historians such as Stern and Fairclough offer similar arguments that Kennedy was limited in securing civil rights and it was Johnson who played the biggest role, however, differ slightly on the focus of their praise. Stern praised Johnson’s transgression of southern democratic expectations and states that he transformed the status of civil rights in America. Whereas, Fairclough highlights Kennedy’s misguided intentions and limitations as a direct contrast to Johnson’s remarkable legislative successes. This opposes Field who focuses on the attempts that Kennedy made as president as he prioritized equality within his administration and suggests that the Civil Rights Act was published by

Johnson but initiated by Kennedy. Despite differing views and a turbulent political landscape, admittedly both Kennedy and Johnson influenced civil rights progression in their own ways. However, similarities across historical arguments demonstrate that ultimately it was Johnson who had played the biggest role in securing civil rights in America by 1968 through his legislative successes and enthusiastic approach to this controversial issue.

Mark Stern

Stern's thesis suggested Johnson played the biggest role in securing civil rights. Johnson was arguably motivated to implement legislation that directly addressed this controversial issue rather than avoiding it. His successes in these areas are evident through his legislative contributions and significant economic developments such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which outlawed racial discrimination and greatly influenced his ability to secure civil rights by 1968.

Johnson "gave black support for their economic needs" (Stern, 2011:120) through the implementation of the Economic Opportunity Act in 1964. This \$800 million investment as part of Johnson's 'War on Poverty' complimented civil rights progression as it focused on economic and housing disparities that exacerbated the existing discrimination within society. Poverty and housing discrimination was a profound issue for many black Americans as suburbs held restrictive covenants and many lived in ghettos in northern cities or in poverty as the average income black American income was 57% of the average white household in 1960. Not only did Johnson tackle housing issues but also "participated in White House discussions with black union leaders" (Stern, 2011:120). Johnson was willing to collaborate and have an active involvement in black American social groups. However, during Johnson's political career and Vice Presidency, initially his "posture seemed to be I will do what I can for blacks, but the timing is not right for any public support" (Stern,2011:120). This shifted greatly during his presidency as civil rights became a more prominent issue to confront in congress. Therefore, his original stance as a politician, prior to his presidency, was to give "his explicit assent on behalf of the administration for the civil rights leadership to lobby the congress in an effort to strengthen the bill" (Stern,2011:237). This validates that Johnson's commitment was not only short-term as he was dedicated to strengthening Kennedy's legislation even prior to his presidency.

However, “Johnson had political ambitions and he was quick to learn that the fulfilment of political ambitions sometimes required the subordination of personal beliefs” (Stern,2011:117) Therefore it is possible that Johnson’s enthusiasm was not a true personal contribution, but rather he was solely fulfilling his job as a politician. Regardless, the progression that he did make was extensive and the fact that “innovation and immediacy, touched with a sense of political aggressiveness defined Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidential approach to civil rights legislation” (Stern, 2011:238) is a clear indication of his dedication to overcoming this issue. For this reason, Johnson may have been passionate about securing equality in America by 1968 and therefore, could have played the biggest role.

The shift in Johnson’s dedication is apparent as, “From the onset of his presidency, Lyndon Johnson had a sense of immediacy of the need for civil rights legislation that Senator Johnson did not have” (Stern,2011:238). Johnson’s drastic shift away from the expected stance of southern democrats who generally opposed civil rights legislation, is evident through “the speed and manner in which Johnson committed his prestige to the passage of the 1964 civil rights proposals surprised his critics” (Stern, 2011:238). Possibly, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was “the strongest civil rights bill in History” (Stern,1990:14). Johnson “agreed to include in the pending bill the strengthening amendments that were supported by the civil rights groups” (Stern,2011:239) which allowed the bill to be so successful. This evidences that Johnson played a significant role as he incorporated activist groups when developing his reforms to ensure their support. The implementation of this arguably transformative legislation provides evidence of his development from a Southern politician who was sceptical to support such a controversial issue to a president who was actively involved in civil rights progression and played the biggest role in securing civil rights by 1968.

Kennedy was arguably worse at gaining support for his civil rights propositions, as “the civil rights lobbyists [...] were not enthused by the substance of the administration bill and they were worried about the presidents incessant caution” (Stern,2011:236). Kennedy differed greatly from Johnson when prioritising civil rights reforms as they “remained on the side lines through much of the campaign” (Stern,1989:812) which suggests that Kennedy was negligent of civil rights issues. The presidential roles that both Kennedy and Johnson played differed greatly. Kennedy failed to enthuse the civil rights

lobbyists whereas contrastingly Johnson incorporated their views while strengthening his legislation. This reinforces how Johnson played the biggest role in securing civil rights by 1968, through his commitment and transformative legislation.

Ron Field

Field's portrayal of Johnson's successes parallels Stern's view. However, he offers a possibly limited and contrasting view on Kennedy's involvement as he suggests that overall, it was Kennedy who played the biggest role in securing civil rights by 1968. Admittedly, Kennedy's presidency influenced Johnson's successes and desire to implement concrete civil rights legislation to honour Kennedy following his death. It is possible that Kennedy played the biggest role as he implemented the legislation that Johnson secured and therefore acted as a catalyst. Kennedy's "strong commitment to the cause by promising, if elected, to end discrimination in federal housing provision, with a stroke of a pen" (Field, 2002:89) arguably gives insight into his public commitment and intent to overcome civil rights issues within his presidency. However, intent does not provide evidence that he played the biggest role. This promise of economic contribution that would "end discrimination in federal housing" (Field,200:89) is shown in the proposal of an Executive Order 11063. This may suggest that Kennedy attempted to contribute by funding housing improvements to overcome discrimination issues. However, this was not implemented until 1968. Therefore, despite his attempts to address racial issues within housing, Kennedy did not successfully pass the reform that he promised and in fact it was Johnson who eventually implemented this legislation in the 1968 Fair Housing Act. Thus, Field's argument may be limited as despite Kennedy's commitments he achieved very little in this sector. Therefore, Kennedy could not have played the biggest role as his reforms were not implemented until much later and were implemented by Johnson.

On the other hand, some elements of Kennedy's presidency were successful to a certain extent. Kennedy may have advocated for greater equality within government and even "appointed over 40 blacks to important positions in government" (Field,2002:89) which suggests he may have desired fairer

representation to influence civil rights progression. This lends itself to suggest that Kennedy played the most fundamental role in securing civil rights by 1968. However, this argument refers to Kennedy's public commitment rather than a personal dedication to reform or progress civil rights and therefore this argument may be flawed. Despite Field's argument that "Kennedy placed the full weight of his administration behind a powerful piece of legislation that would later become the Civil Rights Act" (Field, 2002:90), to a certain extent you could argue that Kennedy did not only have a public involvement but a political one also as he focused on passing this legislation rather than demonstrating his support within the community. Therefore, he may have laid the groundworks for Johnson's future successes in legislation, but he could not have played the biggest role in securing civil rights. This argument directly contrasts the views of both Stern and Fairclough who credit Johnson with passing transformative legislation, and therefore the view that Kennedy played the biggest role as he paved the way for further reform is largely flawed. It is also evident that Kennedy's reforms were "not passed as swiftly as he had promised" (Field, 2002:96) and reveals limitations across his presidency. The argument that Kennedy was a catalyst therefore is based upon the view that Kennedy's attempt to address civil rights led him to play the biggest role. Regardless of Kennedy's partial commitment and dedication to the issue, when comparing his achievements to Johnson who passed consecutive and conclusive legislation such as the 1968 Fair Housing Act that addressed housing discrimination, Kennedy ultimately achieved very little.

Johnson's presidential involvement in civil rights was extensive as he "specifically prohibited racial discrimination" (Field, 2003:93). Johnson's social improvements to equality are evident by how rather than just politically contributing he was involved in many aspects of civil rights progression. This gives a broader insight into Johnson's approach to civil rights. In the same respect, "Johnson's civil rights legislation did much to help African Americans make substantial progress in the direction of equality" (Field,2002:95) the idea that Johnson only made "substantial progress" in the "direction of" civil rights perhaps suggests that Johnson did not completely secure civil rights by 1968 alone. However, it is without a doubt that he did improve the situation. Possibly, the 1964 Civil Rights Act was "initiated by John. F. Kennedy" (Field,2002:90) and Johnson solely cemented the legislation in his honour.

Nevertheless, this argument states Kennedy played the biggest role by laying provisions, but Johnson improved the situation that Kennedy failed to tackle. However, the argument that it was Kennedy who played the biggest role directly contrasts the view of Stern who demonstrates Johnson's inclusivity and the drastic improvements made to civil rights during his presidency. Therefore, arguably Field's view that Kennedy played the most a significant role in civil rights, as he instigated the legislation that Johnson secured is arguably questionable as Field focuses more on Kennedy's commitment and intent rather than what he achieved.

Adam Fairclough

Fairclough's view directly opposes Field. Perhaps, Kennedy was more motivated by political advancement than he was by tackling racism and discrimination within America. The reference to how Kennedy was largely motivated by the black vote prior to his election is further presenting Field's argument as flawed as Field omits references to Kennedy's successes during his presidency but instead to the intentions he had if he were to become the president. Perhaps, Kennedy's victory was following a phone call he had with Coretta King following Martin Luther King's arrest in 1960. Kennedy's victory was not inevitable from the start and there was a narrow margin between him and republican opposition, Richard Nixon. Kennedy eventually won in 1960, however this was only with a narrow 56% victory. Therefore, Kennedy may have been limited as he was not truly motivated out of sympathy but instead in order to get the political upper hand as "obviously, Kennedy's intervention in the King affair did not account for all the 7 percent increase in democratic support among black voters [...] but it certainly helped [...] without the black vote Kennedy would undoubtedly have lost the election" (Fairclough,2002:252) Therefore, it is possible that Kennedy's public commitment to civil rights was strategic or tactical rather than a true personal desire of his, and therefore the extent of his motivation and success in securing civil rights may have been limited as he was arguably negligent of this issue.

Kennedy's administration's commitment to civil rights was also arguably "modest in scope" (Fairclough, 2002:252) and therefore despite his possible attempts to overcome civil rights issues "Kennedy did not incline to mount a strong challenge to Jim Crow" (Fairclough,2002:252). The Jim Crow Laws epitomized the poor treatment and oppression of black Americans that stemmed back to the

nineteenth century. This legislation that marginalized black Americans largely shaped inherent societal opinions of civil rights and fuelled racism within society. To transgress these prevalent ideologies, Kennedy would have needed to implement transformative legislation rather than ones that were modest. Johnson on the other hand was acknowledged to have had this transformative impact as when he attempted to honour Kennedy's memory, Johnson "not only refused to water the bill down, but he also strengthened it" (Fairclough,2002:281). As this view aligns with Stern's focus on how Johnson strengthened Kennedy's proposed legislation, the perspective that Johnson was passionate about civil rights progression is strengthened.

Johnson's legislation was also possibly a "remarkable tribute to the Civil Rights Movement, he praised the heroism of the 'American Negro'" (Fairclough,2002:292). The remarkability of his legislation was possibly due to how the Civil Rights Act 1964 was a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement as its outlawed segregation and discrimination that the Jim Crow Laws implemented. The profound role that Johnson played is also evident through the Voting Rights Act 1965 as "the crowning achievement of the Civil Rights Movement, the Voting Rights Act refranchised black southerners and democratized the south. It ended the era of Jim Crow" (Fairclough,2002:293). Therefore, the direct contrast between the successes of both Johnson and Kennedy and their ability to abandon the Jim Crow ideologies further cements that it was Johnson who played the biggest role in civil rights.

Other Historian's Perspectives

From this, the varying historical perspectives on this issue are apparent. Both Stern and Fairclough uphold the argument that it was Johnson who played the biggest role in securing civil rights. However, their perspectives differ slightly as Stern focuses on Kennedy's commitment economically, socially, and politically with his transformative legislation and dedication to housing reforms whereas Fairclough focuses on the remarkable way Kennedy overcame pre-existing ideas and effectively strengthened Kennedy's legislation. Alternatively, Field's view differs slightly. While he acknowledges Johnson's successes, he argues that Kennedy instigated the legislation and therefore perhaps he played the largest role in securing civil rights. Historical debate on this matter may therefore be dependent upon their perception of what constitutes a successful presidential contribution. Field focuses more on the

promises and intentions that Kennedy had whereas both Fairclough and Stern focus on Johnson's concrete achievements as president, such as the legislation and economic contributions. However, Field's view that Kennedy played the largest role is limited. It is possible that instead of highlighting his contributions, Field highlights how Kennedy was an alliance to the issue which therefore possibly does not give insight into Kennedy's role as president.

Bryant's opinion differed as he suggested Kennedy's presidency impacted Johnson's successes. Perhaps, both Kennedy and Johnson were limited due to fear of political alienation as "Kennedy rarely adopted a stance on civil rights without first considering its possible impact on his reputation in the south" (Bryant,2006:52). Clearly both recognised the controversy of civil rights and were cautious in their approaches however, "Had Kennedy lived, he would almost certainly have secured passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act" (Bryant,2006:462) The certainty in this argument contrasts Fairclough's account that Kennedy's involvement was modest. Kennedy perhaps may also be limited through how he was "temperamentally averse to confrontation, which partly explained his preference" (Byrant,2006:467). This view aligns with the opinion of Field who suggests that Kennedy did not pass his legislation as "swiftly as he had promised" (Field, 2002:96) but he did initiate it. Therefore, it is possible that Kennedy was more cautious with his approach than Johnson and therefore limited as he withdrew himself from the issue due to the controversy.

John Hart similarly referenced Kennedy's struggles of political stereotypes and suggested that although Kennedy lacked significant impact on civil rights, this is justified as he wanted to ensure he was implementing legislation that improved the situation rather than exacerbated it. Some historians suggest that Kennedy failed as president to improve civil rights as he was restricted by the chaotic political landscape. However, perhaps this is justified as "Civil rights issues were to be dealt with in a low-key manner without confronting the Congress if it could be helped." (Hart, 1979:169) which suggests that Kennedy's involvement may not have been recognised as it was addressed in a private matter. This may have limited Kennedy as he was consistently driven to ensure he did not exacerbate the controversial status of civil rights. Nevertheless, leading up to 1968 civil rights was a critical issue within society and therefore the fact that Hart suggests that Kennedy was negligent out of fear of surrounding controversy

cements that he did not play a profound role in securing civil rights. Regardless of his reluctance and willingness to address civil rights in private Kennedy was limited due to a possible lack of public support. However, congress was overcoming issues with Soviet threat and foreign policies which may suggest that Kennedy was preoccupied. Despite the complexity of the congressional climate, Kennedy neglected this issue as he “did not believe that the introduction of a major Civil Rights Bill was the most productive line of action and that he would seek a more pragmatic or realistic approach” (Hart,1979:169). Thus, Kennedy may have been driven by a desire to maintain a positive reputation within congress and his original comments on a commitment to civil rights were “made in unusual circumstances” (Hart, 1979: 170). This may justify why Kennedy was “modest in scope” (Fairclough, 2002:252) as suggested by Fairclough. Nevertheless, this lends itself to suggest that Kennedy did not play the biggest role in securing civil rights as he neglected the issue to the controversy and did not fulfil his promise of dedication to progression.

However, one could argue this is limited as it only addressed Kennedy’s political involvement rather than his personal attitude towards civil rights. Perhaps, Kennedy was solely focused on “the appeasement of Southern legislators” (Hart,1976:176) however this was “only a partial explanation for the delay and the opposition of some northern liberal democrats made Kennedy’s task more complex than generally recognized” (Hart,1979:176). This gives insight into the congressional complexity that may have influenced Kennedy’s limitations as president. This understanding of Kennedy’s problematic political climate may coincide with both Stern and Fairclough who believe it was Johnson who played the biggest role. Although, Hart attempts to justify the factors that may have prevented Kennedy from making significant reforms, this instead reinforces the fact that Kennedy may not have played the biggest role in securing civil rights as he prioritised maintaining a positive reputation within the southern legislators and largely neglected civil rights in his agenda.

Although Kennedy was possibly devoted to the cause, “The legislation that Kennedy tried to promote was so weak that wasn’t going to make any significant changes” (Karatzas,2016:300). The fact that the weakness of his legislation is common ground amongst many historians, in particular Fairclough truly reinforces that perhaps Kennedy lacked a profound role in securing civil rights. Field contrastingly

suggested that Kennedy “placed the full weight of his administration behind a powerful piece of legislation” (Field,2002:90) The direct contrast between the “powerful” legislation that Field suggests and the “weak” nature that Karatzas suggests clear re-establishes the differing opinions of Historians. However, Field’s view lacks utility in comparison to those of Karatzas and Fairclough as he focuses more on the intentions that Kennedy had rather than what he achieved. The fact that the view that Kennedy was weak is widely accepted across historians’ who have studied this period suggests that opinions that Kennedy was extremely successful may be flawed. Therefore, Johnson must have played the biggest role in securing civil rights by 1968.

Despite this, Bryant viewed Kennedy’s presidency as heavily influencing Johnson. This view aligns with Field to a certain extent as he portrayed how Kennedy influenced the passing of the Civil Rights Bill. Even though they possibly influenced each other, “the greatest strides in this area came not under Kennedy but with the passage of Lyndon Johnson’s 1965 Voting Right Act” (Byrant,2006:466). The Voting Rights Act is praised across many historians which reinforces how pivotal it was and how Johnson played the biggest role in securing civil rights. Although it was arguably Johnson’s legislation that had the most significant impact, perhaps “Kennedy’s strategy ultimately transformed the politics of race in America. Lyndon Johnson pressed for fresh Civil Rights Legislation, but he also acutely understood the value of symbolic change” (Bryant,2006:468). The comparison between these two influential presidents suggests both Kennedy and Johnson as playing equally significant roles in Civil Rights as Kennedy heavily influenced Johnson, which indicated a similar opinion to that of Field. However, as Field’s perspective is questionable this view may be limited.

Karatzas’ view of Johnson’s draws parallels to many other historians. Although Johnson may have faced struggles in the initial stages of his career, the 1964 Civil Rights Bill was strong and he was “the dominant presidential figure in the Civil Rights Movement, more than any other President” (Karatzas,2016:300). Therefore, maybe it was Johnson who played the biggest role. Similarly, Fairclough and Stern praise the passing of the Civil Rights Act as “a strong and important civil rights law” (Karatzas,2016:308). Perhaps, this was “the president’s greatest legislative triumph” (Karatzas,2016:304). Not only does this give insight into Johnson’s legislative contribution but also

“the importance of the civil rights laws to the public and to gain support” (Karatzas, 2016:305). The emphasis on public support may demonstrate his desire to be democratic in his reforms and to gain more overall support. This aligns with how Stern portrayed Johnson’s public involvement in civil rights and how he was inclusive within his senate, therefore it is clear that as a majority Historians uphold the view that Johnson played the biggest role in securing civil rights.

Conclusion

In conclusion, deciphering who played the biggest role in securing civil rights by 1968 is an area of debate for historians. However, Fairclough’s perspective demonstrated the most value. His view was supported by historians including Stern and Karatzas, and he argued that it was indeed Johnson who secured civil rights. He praised Johnson’s remarkable legislation yet calculated the limitations of Kennedy’s modest administration to create a comparison between the two presidencies. When reaching his conclusion, Fairclough highlighted both the successes and limitations of both presidencies and incorporated the impact of external forces. His argument also portrays how legislation such as the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights demonstrates the political contribution that Johnson made. Not only did he highlight the legislation that Johnson passed, but he also highlighted Kennedy’s true intentions and how he was perhaps motivated by electoral gain. Other Historians such as Field and Stern focus their argument on Johnson’s overall success and the occasional support that Kennedy demonstrated, however Fairclough demonstrates the drawbacks of Kennedy’s presidency which thoroughly helps to cement this view. Therefore, although many factors contributed to securing civil rights by 1968, Johnson’s involvement both politically, socially, and economically as accounted by most historians, played the biggest role. Johnson’s transformative legislation such as the Voting Rights Act 1965, The Civil Rights Act 1964 and The Economic Opportunity Act 1964 abandoned pre-existing legislation left behind by Jim Crow and should be considered a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement. Despite the controversy surrounding civil rights, the problematic political landscape, and surrounding protests, both Johnson and Kennedy attempted to overcome the discrimination and inequality in American society. However, it was the revolutionary commitment and work of Lyndon Johnson that led to Civil Rights being secured by 1968. He was active and addressed this issue with immediacy and passion. Not only

did Johnson implement legislation that politically improved the status of civil rights but had a profound effect on the freedom and treatment of black American's as a whole and acted as a catalyst for progression with civil rights that continues into the modern day.

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