

THE SOUL OF AMERICA

KNOW OUR PAST.
SHAPE OUR FUTURE.

LESSON FIVE
**LBJ and MLK: Fighting
for the Better Angels
of Our Nature**



OVERVIEW

Essential Questions

- Why are the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act considered landmark pieces of legislation?
- What does the fight for civil rights in America during this time period reveal about Meacham's idea of the "soul of America?"
- What can we learn about political movements, political leadership, and coalition building from the passage of the civil rights legislation in '64 and '65?
- What lessons does this struggle teach us about our lives today?

The civil rights legislation of the 1960's demonstrates how our better angels won in the struggle for racial equity. Students will continue to develop their historical thinking skills by analyzing first person accounts and primary sources. They will reflect on the interplay between social movements, the presidency, political coalitions that ultimately lead to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Objectives

Students will:

- Define political will, leadership, and coalition building
- Research the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act
- Examine the role the presidency, especially of President Lyndon B. Johnson, played in pushing these two pieces of civil rights legislation forward
- Connect the 1964 and 1965 civil rights legislation to current events

Materials

- Equipment to screen video segments
- Copies of Handouts:
 - One: Lesson Five Film Transcript
 - Two: President Lyndon Baines Johnson Radio and Television Remarks Upon Signing the Civil Rights Bill, July 2, 1964

Length

One 55-minute class period

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It is important to situate the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Acts within the long history that included generations of activism, leadership of men, women, and children, political will, political leadership, and the strength and tensions inherent in coalition building.

The 1965 Voting Rights Act, and its subsequent amendments, effectively enfranchised all minority voters, not only African Americans. Since its passage, it has policed voting discrimination. The fight to achieve their full potential continues.

You may want students to read blog posts from the [National Museum for African American History](#) that connect to **THE SOUL OF AMERICA** film excerpt:

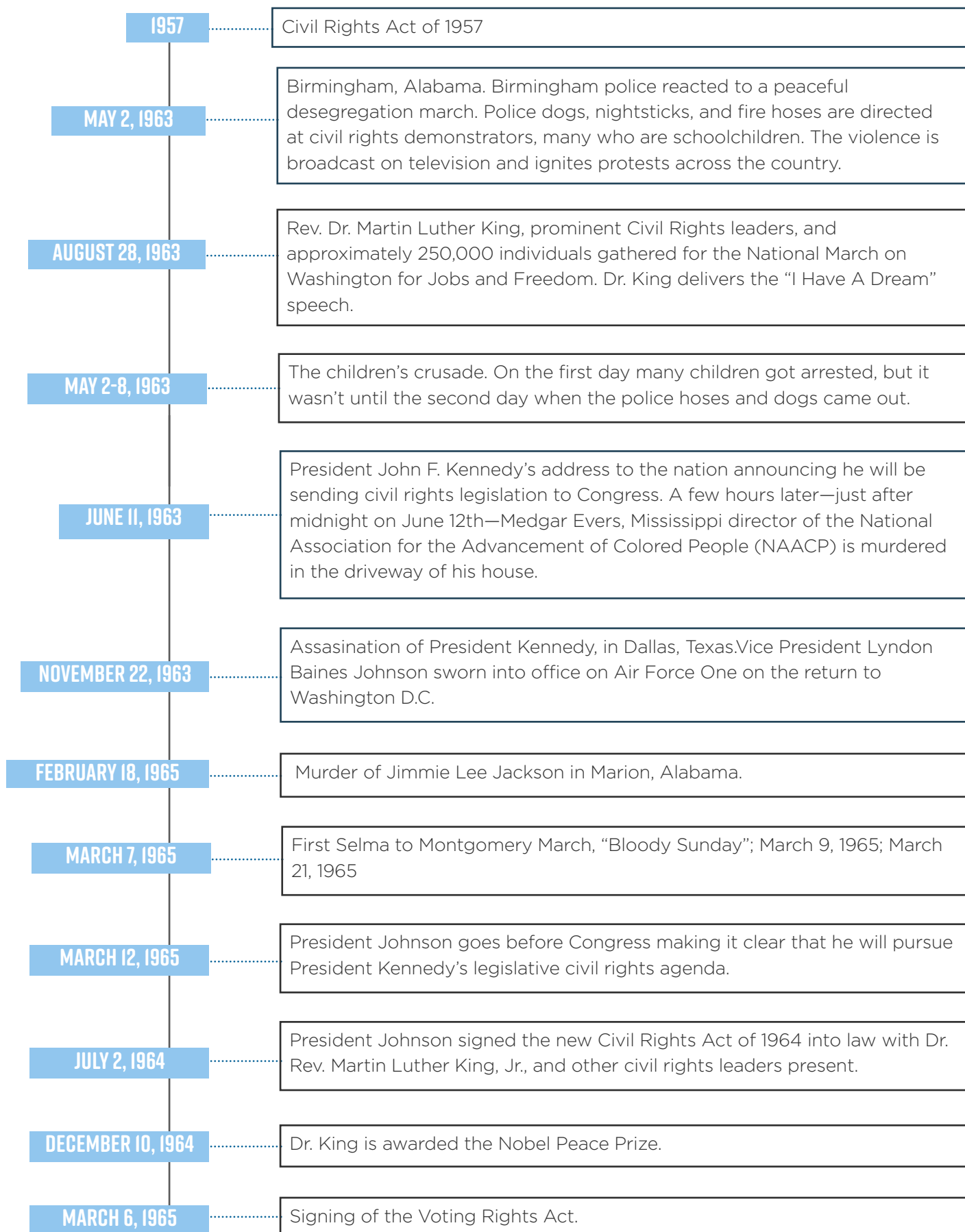
- [“The Children’s Crusade”](#)
- [“The Leesburg Stockade Girls”](#)
- [“America Sees the Truth”](#)

The National Archives created a Historic Moments online exhibition commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. If access is available, have students explore the site to build their background knowledge.

You may also want to walk students through an overarching timeline that corresponds to the documents included.

“WHEN I PARTICIPATED IN THE MOVEMENT, I WAS FIFTEEN. YOU DON’T HAVE TO BE IN CHARGE OF A MOVEMENT TO BE A PART OF IT AND MAKE CHANGE. ORDINARY LITTLE NOBODIES DOING THEIR PART TO MAKE IT HAPPEN LED TO CHANGE. LEADERSHIP WAS IMPORTANT TO POINT PEOPLE IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION, BUT IF THEY HADN’T FOLLOWED, THERE WOULDN’T HAVE BEEN A MOVEMENT. YOU AND NEED GOOD LEADERS AND GOOD FOLLOWERS.”

- JANICE WESLEY KESLEY, CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST



ACTIVITY



Opening

Transition into Jon Meacham’s perspective by sharing a short film clip from the beginning of the documentary **THE SOUL OF AMERICA**. Explain to students that after watching the film you will be distributing a written transcript of the excerpt for a pair/share exercise.

- 1 Use an excerpt from **THE SOUL OF AMERICA** to introduce this lesson

Watch Film Clip

Begin: 1:57:18 Civil rights card...

End: 2:03:31 “President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the civil rights bill into law. (6:00 mins)”



The Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act

- 1 Project and read aloud Jon Meacham’s statement: “The Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act taken together in ‘64 and ‘65 represent what concentrated acts of citizenship can do when they intersect with the attention and skill of those in power.”

Discuss:

- What do you think the phrase “concentrated acts of citizenship?” means?
- Who are all the key figures—elected officials and ordinary people—who Jon Meacham believes were essential for the passage of civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965?
- What did LBJ risk by supporting civil rights legislation?

2 Reference the definitions of each of the following three terms:

- [Political Will](#)
- [Leadership](#)
- [Coalitions](#)

Discuss:

- What do you imagine is the relationship between these three forces?
- Did you see or hear these ideas in the film segment from **THE SOUL OF AMERICA**?



Exploring the Historical Perspective of *The Soul of America*

Share with students Jon Meacham's reflection:

LYNDON JOHNSON HEADED THE WORK OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, THE WORK OF ROSA PARKS, THE WORK OF JOHN LEWIS, THE WORK OF INNUMERABLE PEOPLE WHOSE NAMES WE WILL NEVER KNOW, WHO STOOD UP IN THE STREETS AND COURTHOUSES AND SCHOOLS IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH AND UNDID AS BEST HE COULD AMERICAN APARTHEID. IF AMERICA WANTS TO DO SOME BIG THINGS ABOUT EDUCATION, ABOUT CLIMATE, ABOUT ECONOMIC INEQUALITY, YOU CAN DO A LOT WORSE THAN TO LOOK AT 1964 AND 1965 AND SEE HOW EVEN IN A COMPLICATED, ULTIMATELY FALLEN UNIVERSE YOU CAN MAKE PROGRESS.

Discuss:

- What can we learn about nonviolence, social movements, political will, political leadership, and coalition building from the fight for civil rights legislation?
- How did political will, leadership, and coalition building lead to their passage?
- The first sentence of this quote is more resonant than ever with the passing of Congressman John Lewis on July 17, 2020. Read the quote a second time and have students spend time silently reflecting on its meaning before opening up the class to share their thoughts.



Exit Ticket: Echoes and Connections to Today

Discuss as a class or assign as a short reflective writing assignment:

- How does the story of the civil rights movement support Jon Meacham's historical argument about the soul of America?
- Did the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Act mitigate the problem of racism in America? Why or why not? What are the limitations inherent in the law?
- What is an example of a contemporary fight for expansion of civil rights and of voting rights? What does the struggle reveal about our worst instincts and our better angels?
- Familiarize yourselves with the 2013 [*Shelby County v. Holder*](#) Supreme Court case and explore its direct relationship to the 1965 Voting Rights Act.



HANDOUT ONE:

Lesson Five Transcript

CASE STUDY TITLE: Civil Rights

STILL: Black family uses "Colored Only" fountain

LOWER THIRD: JOHN LEWIS / Congressman and Civil Rights Activist

JOHN LEWIS:
During the '60s we felt the stain of segregation and racial discrimination.

STILL: Young black girls look through wire fence at a playground in distance

JOHN LEWIS:
And when you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have to do something.

B-ROLL (archival): Birmingham streets filled with black demonstrators walking holding signs

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. (at press conf.):
We cannot continue to accept these conditions of oppression for this is not a struggle for ourselves alone, it is a struggle to save the soul of America.

B-ROLL (archival): Birmingham streets filled with black demonstrators walking holding signs; demonstrators gathered with signs; 18th Street Baptist Church sign; church members holding hands, clapping and singing together

LOWER THIRD: JANICE WESLEY KELSEY / Civil Rights Activist

JANICE KELSEY:
When I participated in the movement, I was fifteen. It would not have been successful, had it not been for ordinary little nobodies doing their part to make it happen.

B-ROLL (archival): Birmingham streets filled with black demonstrators walking holding signs; MLK being arrested

JON MEACHAM: By 1963 the full panoply of segregation was under attack. It begins to culminate on the streets of Alabama.

B-ROLL (archival): Black student protesters behind bars

REPORTER (archival):
The campaign was directed against racial discrimination in Birmingham, the most totally segregated big city in the South.

JANICE KELSEY:
I had a made-up mind that I could handle whatever was coming, and be non-violent.

B-ROLL (archival): Demonstrators fill the streets of Birmingham; police on motorcycles; firefighters unscrew fire hydrant and hose children; police dogs go after children

JON MEACHAM:
In May, thousands of children march against segregation in Birmingham.

MAN (archival):
The city is determined to maintain order.

JON MEACHAM:
They're attacked by fire hoses, by police dogs...

JANICE KELSEY:
To see children treated like this, the whole nation rose up in arms.

STILLS: Young demonstrators in Birmingham being attacked by police dogs; newspaper photo of man demonstrating against use of police dogs against children; HEADLINE: 950 Arrests in Two Days in Birmingham

REPORTER (archival):
The events in Birmingham have sent a chill through most Americans.

JON MEACHAM: What the movement did was dramatize the stakes between good and evil.

GEORGE WALLACE (archival): I will be present to bar the entrance of any Negro who attempts to enroll at the University of Alabama.

HEADLINE: "Gov. Wallace Retreats From University Door"

B-ROLL (archival): aerial of March on Washington; crowds waiting to hear MLK speak; King at the podium

JON MEACHAM:
All of these incidents have a slow cascading effect on the opinion of the country.

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR:
I have a dream today! (applause)

B-ROLL (archival): Ext. White House

JON MEACHAM:
And honestly the opinion of President Kennedy.

B-ROLL (archival): JFK walks towards Oval Office desk to make announcement; press cameras ready

JOHN LEWIS:
I remember President Kennedy saying to us on one occasion, "We now understand."

JOHN F. KENNEDY (archival):
This nation was founded on the principle that all men are created equal, and that the rights of every man are diminished, when the rights of one man are threatened. Now the time has come for this nation to fulfill its promise.

B-ROLL (archival): Sign: "Two Great Democrats" with images of JFK and LBJ; Presidential Motorcade in Dallas

JON MEACHAM:
Kennedy and Johnson propose a far-reaching civil rights act. It was not going particularly well.

B-ROLL (archival): Motorcade rushes by

REPORTER 1 (archival): It appears as though something has happened in the motorcade group.

B-ROLL (archival): hospital ext.; roses in backseat where JFK was shot

JON MEACHAM: Kennedy is shot to death in Dealey Plaza.

REPORTER 2 (archival):
It's official now, the president is dead.

B-ROLL (archival): woman crying; JFK's casket being loaded onto plane

STILL: LBJ being sworn in on Air Force One

LYNDON B. JOHNSON (on AF-1):
I solemnly swear...

JON MEACHAM:
Johnson takes the oath of office on Air Force One, becomes President.

B-ROLL (archival): JFK's casket being moved from airplane to hearse, crowds observe

LYNDON B. JOHNSON (archival):
We have suffered a loss that cannot be weighed. I ask for your help, and God's.

B-ROLL (archival): White House ext. at night

STILL: Cut out of LBJ's face deep in thought

JON MEACHAM:
That night Johnson's lying in bed and he's listing all the things he wants to do—foreign leaders that need to be called, funeral arrangements. But in the midst of this, he says he wants to pass the administration's civil rights bill without changing a comma. And it was kind of a remarkable moment because Johnson had a presidential race coming up.

B-ROLL (archival): LBJ on ranch, with cows; Lyndon Johnson for Senator banner; Johnson as Senator on podium; black woman in crowd listening to Johnson; Senator LBJ disembarks plane

STILLS: LBJ eye-to-eye with Lincoln statue; LBJ in discussions with MLK

JON MEACHAM: No more political man ever drew breath than Lyndon Baines Johnson. Johnson had been a senator from Texas, a segregated state. A lot of debate about to what extent he watered down civil rights legislation in the '50s, but he did. He was in no way a leading progressive. And so you wouldn't've bet that Lyndon Johnson was going to finish the work of Lincoln. Everything about that moment would have led him politically to have made all kinds of promises, all kinds of rhetorical nods to the civil rights legislation but not to pursue it. There was something in Johnson's

soul that led him to believe that this was the moment to strike.

STILLS: LBJ on phone; MLK on phone

LYNDON B. JOHNSON (phone call audio): We've got a civil rights bill that hasn't even passed the house and it's November and Hubert Humphrey told me yesterday everybody wanted to go home. I'm going to ask the Congress Wednesday to just stay there until they pass them all. They won't do it but we'll just keep them there next year until they do. And we just won't give up an inch.

MARTIN LUTHER KING (phone call audio): It's so imperative. I think one of the great tributes that we can pay in memory of President Kennedy is to try to enact some of the great, progressive policies that he sought to initiate.

STILLS: LBJ on phone

LYNDON B. JOHNSON (phone call audio): Well, I'm going to support them all, and you can count on that. And I'm going to do my best to get other men to do likewise. And I'll have to have y'all's help. I never needed it more than I do now.

STILL: LBJ in discussions with civil rights leaders, John Lewis; James Farmer.

JOHN LEWIS:

Lyndon Johnson was a strong, strong leader. He made a commitment to those of us in the civil rights movement that he would pick up where President Kennedy left off. And he did.

STILL: LBJ in meeting with MLK and other civil rights leaders.

JON MEACHAM: Lyndon Johnson risked just about everything for civil rights. As he later put it, "What the hell is the presidency for if not to do the big things that other men might not?"

LYNDON B. JOHNSON (archival): Ladies and gentlemen, we are going to pass the civil rights bill because it's morally right.

B-ROLL (archival): White House ext.

STILLS: Johnson talking one-on-one with various congressmen and senators

JON MEACHAM: What Johnson then did from '63 to '64 is he created a remarkable coalition of Republicans and Democrats to pass a law that would finally undo what had been the racist reaction to the verdict of the Civil War.

LYNDON B. JOHNSON (archival): I promise you here and now that we are going to pass a civil rights bill.

JON MEACHAM: Lyndon Johnson was one of the great persuaders of American politics, the "Johnson treatment" it was called.

B-ROLL (archival): view of Washington Monument and reflecting pool; Lincoln memorial; D.C. street with Capitol in background; Capitol building; White House ext.

LYNDON B. JOHNSON (archival): We will pass the strongest civil rights bill in American history.

JON MEACHAM: The trade-offs, the deals cut to get to a legislative solution is the work of politics.

B-ROLL (archival): LBJ signing Civil Rights Bill

NARRATOR (archival): July 2nd, 1964. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the civil rights bill into law.

LYNDON B. JOHNSON (archival): I urge every American to join in this effort to bring justice and hope to all our people and to bring peace to our land (applause).

B-ROLL (archival): LBJ signing Civil Rights Bill, handing out pens

STILLS: A man blocks a police car during student protests in Birmingham; a policeman pushes back a black protester

JON MEACHAM: The Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act taken together in '64 and '65 to represent what concentrated acts of citizenship can do when they intersect with the attention and skill of those in power.

HANDOUT TWO:

Radio and Television Remarks Upon Signing the Civil Rights Bill, July 2, 1964

President Lyndon Baines Johnson

[Broadcast from the East Room at the White House at 6:45 p.m.]

My fellow Americans:

I am about to sign into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964. I want to take this occasion to talk to you about what that law means to every American.

One hundred and eighty-eight years ago this week a small band of valiant men began a long struggle for freedom. They pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor not only to found a nation, but to forge an ideal of freedom—not only for political independence, but for personal liberty—not only to eliminate foreign rule, but to establish the rule of justice in the affairs of men.

That struggle was a turning point in our history. Today in far corners of distant continents, the ideals of those American patriots still shape the struggles of men who hunger for freedom.

This is a proud triumph. Yet those who founded our country knew that freedom would be secure only if each generation fought to renew and enlarge its meaning. From the minutemen at Concord to the soldiers in Viet-Nam, each generation has been equal to that trust.

Americans of every race and color have died in battle to protect our freedom. Americans of every race and color have worked to build a nation of widening opportunities. Now our generation of Americans has been called on to continue the unending search for justice within our own borders.

We believe that all men are created equal. Yet many are denied equal treatment.

We believe that all men have certain unalienable rights. Yet many Americans do not enjoy those rights.

We believe that all men are entitled to the blessings of liberty. Yet millions are being deprived of those blessings—not because of their own failures, but because of the color of their skin.

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The reasons are deeply imbedded in history and tradition and the nature of man. We can understand—without rancor or hatred—how this all happened.

But it cannot continue. Our Constitution, the foundation of our Republic, forbids it. The principles of our freedom forbid it. Morality forbids it. And the law I will sign tonight forbids it.

That law is the product of months of the most careful debate and discussion. It was proposed more than one year ago by our late and beloved President John F. Kennedy. It received the bipartisan support of more than two-thirds of the Members of both the House and the Senate. An overwhelming majority of Republicans as well as Democrats voted for it.

It has received the thoughtful support of tens of thousands of civic and religious leaders in all parts of this Nation. And it is supported by the great majority of the American people.

The purpose of the law is simple.

It does not restrict the freedom of any American, so long as he respects the rights of others.

It does not give special treatment to any citizen.

It does say the only limit to a man's hope for happiness, and for the future of his children, shall be his own ability.

It does say that there are those who are equal before God shall now also be equal in the polling booths, in the classrooms, in the factories, and in

hotels, restaurants, movie theaters, and other places that provide service to the public.

I am taking steps to implement the law under my constitutional obligation to “take care that the laws are faithfully executed.”

First, I will send to the Senate my nomination of LeRoy Collins to be Director of the Community Relations Service. Governor Collins will bring the experience of a long career of distinguished public service to the task of helping communities solve problems of human relations through reason and commonsense.

Second, I shall appoint an advisory committee of distinguished Americans to assist Governor Collins in his assignment.

Third, I am sending Congress a request for supplemental appropriations to pay for necessary costs of implementing the law, and asking for immediate action.

Fourth, already today in a meeting of my Cabinet this afternoon I directed the agencies of this Government to fully discharge the new responsibilities imposed upon them by the law and to do it without delay, and to keep me personally informed of their progress.

Fifth, I am asking appropriate officials to meet with representative groups to promote greater understanding of the law and to achieve a spirit of compliance.

We must not approach the observance and enforcement of this law in a vengeful spirit. Its purpose is not to punish. Its purpose is not to divide, but to end divisions—divisions which have all lasted too long. Its purpose is national, not regional.

Its purpose is to promote a more abiding commitment to freedom, a more constant pursuit of justice, and a deeper respect for human dignity.

We will achieve these goals because most Americans are law-abiding citizens who want to do what is right.

This is why the Civil Rights Act relies first on voluntary compliance, then on the efforts of local communities and States to secure the rights of citizens. It provides for the national authority to step in only when others cannot or will not do the job.

This Civil Rights Act is a challenge to all of us to go to work in our communities and our States, in our homes and in our hearts, to eliminate the last vestiges of injustice in our beloved country.

So tonight I urge every public official, every religious leader, every business and professional man, every workingman, every housewife—I urge every American—to join in this effort to bring justice and hope to all our people—and to bring peace to our land.

My fellow citizens, we have come now to a time of testing. We must not fail.

Let us close the springs of racial poison. Let us pray for wise and understanding hearts. Let us lay aside irrelevant differences and make our Nation whole. Let us hasten that day when our unmeasured strength and our unbounded spirit will be free to do the great works ordained for this Nation by the just and wise God who is the Father of us all.

Thank you and good night.