

Robert F. Kennedy's speech on the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

For RFK's prepared, formal response to the assassination, see [On the Mindless Menace of Violence](#).

On April 4, 1968, [United States Senator Robert F. Kennedy](#) of [New York](#) delivered an improvised speech several hours after the [assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.](#) Kennedy, who was campaigning to earn the [Democratic Party's presidential nomination](#), made his remarks while in [Indianapolis, Indiana](#), after speaking at two Indiana universities earlier in the day.^{[1][2]} Before boarding a plane to attend campaign rallies in Indianapolis, he learned that King had been shot in [Memphis, Tennessee](#). Upon arrival, Kennedy was informed that King had died.^[3] His own brother, [John Fitzgerald Kennedy](#) had been [assassinated](#) on November 22, 1963. Robert F. Kennedy would be also [assassinated](#) two months after this speech, while campaigning for presidential nomination at the [Ambassador Hotel](#) in [Los Angeles, California](#).

Despite fears of riots and concerns for his safety, Kennedy went ahead with plans to attend a rally at 17th and Broadway in the heart of Indianapolis's African-American ghetto.^[4]

That evening he addressed the crowd, many of whom had not heard about King's assassination. Instead of the rousing campaign speech they expected, Kennedy offered brief, impassioned remarks for peace that are considered to be one of the great public addresses of the modern era.^[5]

Earlier that day

During his speeches at the [University of Notre Dame](#) in South Bend and at [Ball State University](#) in Muncie, Indiana, Kennedy focused on domestic issues, the [Vietnam War](#), and [racism](#).^[6] At Notre Dame's Stepan Center, a crowd of approximately 5,000 heard Kennedy speak on poverty in America and the need for better-paying jobs. When asked about draft laws, Kennedy called them "unjust and inequitable" and argued to end college deferments on the basis that they discriminated against those who could not afford a college education.^[7] His [speech at Ball State](#) was well received by more than 9,000 students, faculty, and community members. One [African-American](#) student raised a question to Kennedy that seems almost a premonition of the speech to come later that night after the horrific events of the day. The student asked, "Your speech implies that you are placing a great deal of faith in white America. Is that faith justified?" Kennedy answered "Yes" and added that "faith in black America is justified, too" although he said there "are extremists on both sides."^[6] Before boarding a plane to fly to

[Indianapolis](#), Kennedy learned that [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) had been shot. On the plane, Kennedy told a reporter "You know, it grieves me. . . that I just told that kid this and then walk out and find that some white man has just shot their spiritual leader."^[8] Kennedy did not learn that King was dead until his plane landed in Indianapolis. According to reporter John J. Lindsay, Kennedy "seemed to shrink back as though struck physically" and put his hands to his face, saying "Oh, God. When is this violence going to stop?"^[8]

In Indianapolis the news of King's death caused concern among representatives from Kennedy's campaign and city officials, who feared for his safety and the possibility of a riot.^[4] After talking with reporters at the Indianapolis airport, Kennedy canceled a stop at his campaign headquarters and continued on to the rally site, where a crowd had gathered to hear him speak.^[4] Both Frank Mankiewicz, Kennedy's press secretary, and speechwriter [Adam Walinsky](#) drafted notes immediately before the rally for Kennedy's use, but Kennedy refused Walinsky's notes, instead using some that he had likely written on the ride over; Mankiewicz arrived after Kennedy had already begun to speak.^[9] The Indianapolis chief of police warned Kennedy that the police could not provide adequate protection for the senator if the crowd were to riot,^[10] but Kennedy decided to go speak to the crowd regardless. Standing on a podium mounted on a [flatbed truck](#), Kennedy spoke for just four minutes and fifty-

seven seconds.^[11]

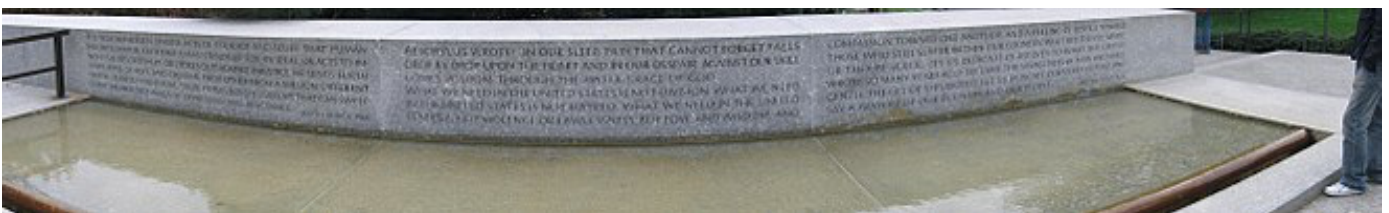
Summary of Indianapolis speech

Kennedy began his speech by announcing that King had been killed.^[12] He was the first to publicly inform the audience of King's assassination, causing members of the audience to scream and wail in disbelief.^[13] Several of Kennedy's aides were worried that the delivery of this information would result in a riot.^[14] Once the audience quieted down, Kennedy spoke of the threat of disillusion and divisiveness at King's death and reminded the audience of King's efforts to "replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand with compassion and love."^[15] Kennedy acknowledged that many in the audience would be filled with anger, especially since the assassin was believed to be a white man. He empathized with the audience by referring to the [assassination of his brother, United States President John F. Kennedy](#), by a [white man](#). The remarks surprised Kennedy aides, who had never heard him speak of his brother's death in public.^[16] Quoting the ancient Greek playwright [Aeschylus](#),^[Note 1] with whom he had become acquainted through his brother's widow, [Jacqueline Kennedy](#),^[16] Kennedy said, "Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the

awful grace of God."^[15]

Kennedy then delivered one of his best-remembered remarks: "What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness, but is love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice towards those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black."^[15] To conclude, Kennedy reiterated his belief that the country needed and wanted unity between blacks and whites and encouraged the country to "dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and to make gentle the life of this world."^[15] He finished by asking the audience members to pray "for our country and for our people."^[15] Rather than exploding in anger at the tragic news of King's death, the crowd exploded in applause and enthusiasm for a second time, before dispersing quietly.^[19]

Aftermath



RFK's memorial in [Arlington National Cemetery](#) incorporates parts of the speech

Despite the fact the crowd which Kennedy spoke to in

Indianapolis was only estimated to be 2,500 people, the speech was credited with boosting his image in the state of Indiana.^[20] Indianapolis remained calm that night, which is believed to have been in part because of the speech.^{[10][21]} In stark contrast to Indianapolis, [riots](#) erupted in more than one hundred U.S. cities including Chicago, New York City, Boston, Detroit, Oakland, Pittsburgh, and Baltimore, killing 35 and injuring more than 2,500. Across the country, approximately 70,000 army and National Guard troops were called out to restore order.^{[19][22]} William Crawford, a member of the Black Radical Action Project who had stood about 20 feet from Kennedy, credited Kennedy's speech for not resulting in riots.^[20] Crawford claimed to the *Indianapolis Star* in 2015 "Look at all those other cities" and "I believe it would have gone that way (in Indianapolis) had not Bobby Kennedy given those remarks."^[20]

The following day, Kennedy gave a prepared, formal response, "[On the Mindless Menace of Violence](#)", in [Cleveland, Ohio](#). It addressed themes that he had alluded to in the Indianapolis speech.^[12]

Robert F. Kennedy himself [was assassinated](#) two months later on June 5, 1968.

Legacy

The speech itself has been listed as one of the greatest in

[American history](#), ranked 17th by communications scholars in a survey of 20th century American speeches.^[23] Former U.S. Congressman and media host [Joe Scarborough](#) said that it was Kennedy's greatest speech and was what prompted Scarborough to enter public service.^[10] Journalist [Joe Klein](#) has called it "politics in its grandest form and highest purpose" and said that it "marked the end of an era" before American political life was taken over by consultants and pollsters.^[14] It is also recounted in the prologue of his book, [Politics Lost](#).^[24]

The [Landmark for Peace Memorial](#), installed in 1995 in the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Park near the site where the speech took place in Indianapolis, includes sculptures of King and Kennedy.^[25]

In 2018, the audio of the speech was selected by the [Library of Congress](#) for preservation in the [National Recording Registry](#) for being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant".^[26]

Film

A Ripple of Hope, a documentary on the speech and the events surrounding it, was produced by Covenant Productions at [Anderson University](#) and released in 2008.^[27] It includes interviews with associates of Kennedy and members of the audience.

The speech was performed verbatim by [Linus Roache](#) in the 2002 film [RFK](#).

Notes

1. Preparing his notes without reference books, recalling the quote from memory, Kennedy slightly misquoted a passage from [Edith Hamilton](#)'s translation of Aeschylus's [Agamemnon](#).^[17] Professor Christopher S. Morrissey wrote that it is unknown "whether he misquoted deliberately, fortuitously, or infelicitously".^[18]

References

1. [Klein, Joe](#). (2006). [*Politics Lost: How American Democracy Was Trivialized By People Who Think You're Stupid*](#). New York, Doubleday. p. 2. [ISBN 978-0-385-51027-1](#).
2. *Boomhower, Ray E. (2008). Robert F. Kennedy and the 1968 Indiana Primary. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. pp. 2, 6. ISBN 978-0-253-35089-3*.none
3. Boomhower, p. 3.
4. ^ *a b c* Boomhower, p. 64.
5. Boomower, p. 4.
6. ^ *a b* John Straw, ["RFK in Middletown," 2005](#).
7. Boomhower, p. 58.
8. ^ *a b* *Schlesinger Jr., Arthur M. (1978). Robert Kennedy*

and His Times. Vol. 2 (book club ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin. p. 913.none

9. Klein, *Politics Lost*, pp. 3, 4.
10. ^ a b c "[RFK: Bending History](#)". Scarborough Country. 2005-11-18. Archived from [the original](#) on 2007-10-25. Retrieved 2009-08-30.none
11. Klein, *Politics Lost*, pp. 1, 4.
12. ^ a b Murphy 2009, p. 406.
13. Klein, *Politics Lost*, p. 5.
14. ^ a b Klein, Joe. "[Pssst! Who's behind the decline of politics? Consultants.](#)", *Time*, 2006-04-09. Retrieved 2007-11-17.
15. ^ a b c d e Kennedy, Robert F. "[Remarks on the Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.](#)" (speech, Indianapolis, IN, 1968-04-04), American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank. Retrieved 2012-05-02.
16. ^ a b Klein, *Politics Lost*, p. 6.
17. McConnell, Justine; [Hall, Edith](#), eds. (2 June 2016). [Ancient Greek Myth in World Fiction since 1989](#). *Bloomsbury Studies in Classical Reception*. Bloomsbury Publishing. p. 249. [ISBN 9781472579409](#).none
18. Ramm, Benjamin (5 April 2018). "What King, Kennedy and Obama's Great Speeches Have in Common ?". *Yerepouni Daily News*. [ProQuest 2021624332](#).none
19. ^ a b Boomhower, p. 68.
20. ^ a b c Higgins, Will (April 2, 2015). "[April 4, 1968: How RFK saved Indianapolis](#)". *The Indianapolis Star*.

*Retrieved August 30, 2020.*none

21. [Statement of Mayor Bart Peterson](#) 2006-04-04 press release [[dead link](#)]
22. Thomas, Evan (2000). [Robert Kennedy: His Life](#). New York: Simon and Schuster. p. [368](#). [ISBN 0-684-83480-4](#).none
23. ["Top 100 American Speeches of the 20th Century"](#).
*Retrieved 2009-08-30.*none
24. Klein, *Politics Lost*, prologue.
25. Boomhower, p. 2.
26. Andrews, Travis M. (March 20, 2019). ["Jay-Z, a speech by Sen. Robert F. Kennedy and 'Schoolhouse Rock!' among recordings deemed classics by Library of Congress"](#). *The Washington Post*. Retrieved March 25, 2019.none
27. ["Ripple of Hope"](#). Anderson University. Archived from [the original](#) on August 27, 2008. Retrieved August 13, 2019.none

Works cited

- Murphy, John M. (June 5, 2009). "'A time of shame and sorrow': Robert F. Kennedy and the American jeremiad". *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. **76** (4): 401–414. [doi:10.1080/00335639009383933](#).none

External links

- [Text, Audio, Video Excerpt of Speech](#)

- [v](#)
- [t](#)
- [e](#)

[Robert F. Kennedy](#)

November 20, 1925 – June 6, 1968

[64th United States Attorney General, 1961–1964](#)

[United States senator from New York, 1965–1968](#)

Life

- [1948 Palestine visit](#)
- [Senate Committee investigation of Labor and Management](#)
- [Cuban Missile Crisis](#)
 - [ExComm](#)
- [Civil rights](#)
 - [Freedom Riders](#)
 - [Voter Education Project](#)
- [Baldwin–Kennedy meeting](#)
- [1964 Democratic National Convention](#)
- [Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation](#)
- [Mississippi Delta tour](#)
- [Kennedy Compound](#)
- [Hickory Hill home](#)

Electoral

- [1964 U.S. Senate election](#)
- [1968 presidential campaign](#)
 - [primaries](#)
 - [Boiler Room Girls](#)

- [Law Day Address](#) (1961)

<p>Speeches</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Day of Affirmation Address (1966) • Conflict in Vietnam and at Home (1968) • University of Kansas (1968) • Ball State (1968) • On the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. (1968) • "On the Mindless Menace of Violence" (1968)
<p>Books</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Enemy Within (1960) • The Pursuit of Justice (1964) • To Seek a Newer World (1967) • Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis (1969)
<p><u>Assassination</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sirhan Sirhan • Ambassador Hotel • Conspiracy theories • Gravesite
<p>Legacy and memorials</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Robert F. Kennedy Department of Justice Building • Robert F. Kennedy silver dollar • Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Human Rights Award ○ Journalism Award ○ Book Award • Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Stadium • Brooklyn Memorial • Landmark for Peace Memorial • Arch of Dignity, Equality, and Justice • Kennedy–King College • Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools • Robert F. Kennedy Bridge

Popular culture

- [Robert F. Kennedy in media](#)
- [Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment](#) (1963 documentary)
- [Robert Kennedy Remembered](#) (1968 documentary)
- ["Abraham, Martin and John"](#) (1968 song)
- [The Missiles of October](#) (1974 docudrama)
- [Kennedy](#) (1983 miniseries)
- [Blood Feud](#) (1983 film)
- [Prince Jack](#) (1985 film)
- [Robert Kennedy and His Times](#) (1985 miniseries)
- [Hoover vs. The Kennedys](#) (1987 miniseries)
- [Thirteen Days](#) (2000 film)
- [RFK](#) (2002 film)
- [Bobby](#) (2006 film)
- [RFK Must Die](#) (2007 documentary)
- [The Kennedys](#) (2011 miniseries)
- [Ethel](#) (2012 documentary)
- [Killing Kennedy](#) (2013 film)
- [Jackie](#) (2016 film)
- [Bobby Kennedy for President](#) (2018 miniseries)

- [Ethel Skakel](#) (wife)
- [Kathleen Kennedy](#) (daughter)
- [Joseph Patrick Kennedy](#) (son)
- [Robert F. Kennedy Jr.](#) (son)
- [Michael LeMoyne Kennedy](#) (son)
- [Kerry Kennedy](#) (daughter)
- [Christopher G. Kennedy](#) (son)
- [Max Kennedy](#) (son)

[Family,
family tree](#)

- [Douglas Harriman Kennedy](#) (son)
- [Rory Kennedy](#) (daughter)
- [Maeve Kennedy McKean](#) (granddaughter)
- [Joseph P. Kennedy III](#) (grandson)
- [Max Kennedy Jr.](#) (grandson)
- [Joseph P. Kennedy Sr.](#) (father)
- [Rose Kennedy](#) (mother)
- [Joseph P. Kennedy Jr.](#) (brother)
- [John F. Kennedy](#) (brother
[presidency](#))
- [Rosemary Kennedy](#) (sister)
- [Kathleen Kennedy Cavendish](#) (sister)
- [Eunice Kennedy Shriver](#) (sister)
- [Patricia Kennedy Lawford](#) (sister)
- [Jean Kennedy Smith](#) (sister)
- [Ted Kennedy](#) (brother)
- [Patrick J. Kennedy](#) (grandfather)
- [Mary Augusta Kennedy](#) (grandmother)
- [John F. Fitzgerald](#) (grandfather)