



**ROBERT F.  
KENNEDY  
HUMAN  
RIGHTS**

# **SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER**

**HUMAN RIGHTS  
DEFENDERS WHO  
ARE CHANGING  
OUR WORLD**

**ROBERT F. KENNEDY: COURAGEOUS IDEAS, WORDS  
AND ACTIONS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL**



# ROBERT F. KENNEDY

(HE/HIM/HIS)

**“EVERY TIME WE TURN OUR HEADS THE OTHER WAY WHEN WE SEE THE LAW FLOUTED; WHEN WE TOLERATE WHAT WE KNOW TO BE WRONG; WHEN WE CLOSE OUR EYES AND EARS TO THE CORRUPT BECAUSE WE ARE TOO BUSY, OR TOO FRIGHTENED; WHEN WE FAIL TO SPEAK UP AND SPEAK OUT—WE STRIKE A BLOW AGAINST FREEDOM AND DECENCY AND JUSTICE.”**

Robert Francis Kennedy, affectionately known as Bobby, was born in 1925, in Brookline, Mass., to Rose and Joseph P. Kennedy. He served in the navy, graduated from Harvard University in 1948, and earned his law degree from the University of Virginia Law School. In 1950, he married Ethel Skakel, and they had 11 children.

In 1952, he made his political debut as manager of his older brother John’s successful campaign for the U.S. Senate. And then he led John F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign. After the election, RFK was appointed attorney general in President Kennedy’s cabinet, winning respect for his diligent administration of the Department of Justice. He ran successfully for the United States Senate in New York in 1964 and, on March 18, 1968, announced his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination. He campaigned to bridge the great divides in American life—between the races, between the poor and the affluent, between young and old.

Robert Francis Kennedy was fatally shot on June 5, 1968, in Los Angeles, shortly after claiming victory in California’s crucial Democratic primary. He was 42 years old. To this day, his legacy carries a message of hope and the unwavering conviction that courage can bring change.

# INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT F. KENNEDY

## EXCERPT FROM RFK'S "DAY OF AFFIRMATION" SPEECH GIVEN AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA, JUNE 6, 1966

Our answer is the world's hope; it is to rely on youth. The cruelties and obstacles of this swiftly changing planet will not yield to obsolete dogmas and outworn slogans. It cannot be moved by those who cling to a present which is already dying, who prefer the illusion of security to the excitement and danger which comes with even the most peaceful progress.

This world demands the qualities of youth; not a time of life but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of the imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the love of ease. It is a revolutionary world we live in, and thus, as I have said in Latin America and Asia, in Europe and in the United States, it is young people who must take the lead. Thus you, and your young compatriots everywhere, have had thrust upon you a greater burden of responsibility than any generation that has ever lived.

"There is," said an Italian philosopher, "nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things." Yet this is the measure of the task of your generation, and the road is strewn with many dangers. First, is the danger of futility: the belief there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world's ills—against misery and ignorance, injustice and violence. Yet many of the world's greatest movements, of thought and action, have flowed from the work of a single man. A young monk began the Protestant Reformation, a young general extended an empire from Macedonia to the borders of the earth, and a young woman reclaimed the territory of France. It was a young Italian explorer who discovered the New World, and the 32-year-old Thomas Jefferson who proclaimed that all men are created equal.

"Give me a place to stand," said Archimedes, "and I will move the world." These men moved the world, and so can we all. Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation. Thousands of Peace Corps volunteers are making a difference in isolated villages and city slums in dozens of countries. Thousands of unknown men and women in Europe resisted the occupation of the Nazis, and many died, but all added to the ultimate strength and freedom of their countries. It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. 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.

"If Athens shall appear great to you," said Pericles, "consider then that her glories were purchased by valiant men, and by men who learned their duty." That is the source of all greatness in all societies, and it is the key to progress in our time.

The second danger is that of expediency; of those who say that hopes and beliefs must bend before immediate necessities. Of course, if we would act effectively we must deal with the world as it is. We must get things done. But if there was one thing President Kennedy stood for that touched the most profound feelings of young people around the world, it was the belief that idealism, high aspirations, and deep convictions are not incompatible with the most practical and efficient of programs—that there is no basic inconsistency between ideals and realistic possibilities, no separation between the deepest desires of heart and of mind and the rational application of human effort



to human problems. It is not realistic or hardheaded to solve problems and take action unguided by ultimate moral aims and values, although we all know some who claim that it is so. In my judgment, it is thoughtless folly. For it ignores the realities of human faith and of passion and of belief in forces ultimately more powerful than all of the calculations of our economists or of our generals. Of course to adhere to standards, to idealism, to vision in the face of immediate dangers takes great courage and takes self confidence. But we also know that only those who dare to fail greatly, can ever achieve greatly.

It is this new idealism which is also, I believe, the common heritage of a generation which has learned that while efficiency can lead to the camps at Auschwitz, or the streets of Budapest, only the ideals of humanity and love can climb the hills of the Acropolis.

A third danger is timidity. Few men are willing to brave the disapproval of their fellows, the censure of their colleagues, the wrath of their society. Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is the one essential, vital quality of those who seek to change a world which

yields most painfully to change. Aristotle tells us that "At the Olympic games it is not the finest and the strongest men who are crowned, but they who enter the lists...So too in the life of the honorable and the good it is they who act rightly who win the prize." I believe that in this generation those with the courage to enter the moral conflict will find themselves with companions in every corner of the world.

For the fortunate among us, the fourth danger is comfort, the temptation to follow the easy and familiar paths of personal ambition and financial success so grandly spread before those who have the privilege of education. But that is not the road history has marked out for us. There is a Chinese curse which says "May he live in interesting times." Like it or not, we live in interesting times. They are times of danger and uncertainty; but they are also more open to the creative energy of men than any other time in history. And everyone here will ultimately be judged—will ultimately judge himself—on the effort he has contributed to building a new world society and the extent to which his ideals and goals have shaped that effort.



# COURAGEOUS IDEAS, WORDS AND ACTIONS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL

## LESSON GRADE LEVELS 9 TO 12

**POVERTY, VOTING RIGHTS, JUSTICE, EDUCATION, EQUAL ACCESS**

### TIME REQUIREMENT

225 minutes (five 45 minute lessons)

### GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What human rights did Robert F. Kennedy defend?
- How did Robert F. Kennedy work to advance human rights?
- How do words and speeches inform and inspire action?

### OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will:

- Understand the power of words and speeches to inform and inspire people.
- Identify different ways to defend human rights using the speeches and work of Robert F. Kennedy.
- Assess the breadth and scope of human rights issues during RFK's life and the status of those human rights today.

### COMMON CORE LEARNING STANDARDS

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.2
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.3
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.4
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.5
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.6
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.8
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.9
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.10

### STUDENT SKILLS

- Public speaking
- Analyzing
- Presentation planning
- Reflecting
- Drawing conclusions

### TECHNOLOGY REQUIRED

- Access to the internet
- Projection system for film clips and PowerPoints

### MATERIALS

- [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)
- [Robert F. Kennedy quotes](#)

### NOTE TO TEACHERS

- For additional in-depth analysis of the issues addressed in this lesson, please have your students visit <https://rfkhumanrights.org/legacy/bio>.

# ANTICIPATORY SET

- Have students review the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).
- Ask students to review [quotes by Robert F. Kennedy](#) in pairs. They should focus on the Ripple of Hope speech as well as speeches that address poverty, justice, and civil rights.
- Have the students look for RFK quotes that relate to specific articles of the UDHR.

## STUDENT ACTIVITIES

### ACTIVITY 1

- Divide students into groups of four.
- Ask each group to select one RFK quote to focus on for this project.
- Have each group research the full speech and respond to the following questions:
  - Where did RFK give the speech?
  - What was the occasion for the speech?
  - Who was the audience?
  - What was his main message? If he had more than one, identify the additional messages.
  - Review the original list of articles from the UDHR that aligned with this speech. Are other articles applicable?
- Ask the groups to prepare a class presentation about their quote and its significance.

### ACTIVITY 2

- In their groups, ask the students to research current information relating to the issues RFK addressed in the speech they researched.
- Has the issue changed? If so, in what ways?
- How is the issue being addressed today?

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### CULMINATING ACTIVITY

- Have each group write a speech about one or more of the issues RFK addressed in the speech they researched.
- Each member of the group will read a part of the speech to the whole class.

# INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK

Since the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations (UN) in 1948, many other international documents—also called treaties, covenants, resolutions, or conventions—have been drafted to develop these rights further. Countries commit to protect the rights recognized in these treaties by ratifying them, and sometimes a specific institution is created within the UN to monitor their compliance.

Here are examples of relevant international documents

## DECLARATION ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

- **ARTICLE 1:** Right to promote and to seek protection of human rights.
- **ARTICLE 2:** Responsibility of governments to protect, promote, and implement all human rights.
- **ARTICLE 5:** Right to assemble peacefully, form nongovernmental organizations, and conduct human rights work individually and in association with others.

- **ARTICLE 8:** Right to make complaints about government policies concerning human rights and to have the complaints reviewed.
- **ARTICLE 9:** Right to benefit from an effective remedy in case these rights are violated.
- **ARTICLE 11:** Right to the lawful occupation or profession of a human rights defender.

## INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS (ICCPR)

## INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS (ICESCR)

*For more information, visit the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' website: [www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org).*

# BECOMING A DEFENDER

- Carry out a school- and community-wide education and advocacy project. Based on what you learned about the life and work of Robert F. Kennedy, design and carry out an education and advocacy campaign. The goals of the campaign should include:

## 1. RAISING AWARENESS

- Make the student body and community aware of the issues you researched and why they are still a concern today. Create posters and fliers, host speakers, or set up a table at area markets.

## 2. TAKING ACTION

- Host a “drive” at your school to assist community members in need; write a letter to your representative drawing attention to a local matter related to poverty, justice, or civil rights; volunteer with an organization working to address issues of poverty, justice, or civil rights.

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## **ROBERT F. KENNEDY HUMAN RIGHTS**

[www.rfkhumanrights.org](http://www.rfkhumanrights.org)

Learn more about the life and vision of Robert F. Kennedy.

## ***MAKE GENTLE THE LIFE OF THE WORLD: THE VISION OF ROBERT F. KENNEDY***

Highlights of RFK's personal journal, which features favorite quotations of great thinkers throughout history, along with moving portions of Robert Kennedy's most memorable speeches.

## ***THIRTEEN DAYS: A MEMOIR OF THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS***

A behind-the-scenes account from Robert F. Kennedy of the 13 days in October 1962 when the United States confronted the Soviet Union over its installation of missiles in Cuba.

## ***ROBERT KENNEDY AND HIS TIMES***

A book by Arthur Schlesinger.