

SHIFT IN CIVIL RIGHTS POLICY
July 21, 1963

With his news conference comment this week on Negro rights demonstrations in the streets, Mr. Kennedy completed a turnaround in dealing with the problem from the position he took in his 1960 campaign for the Presidency. In the meantime, he had tried for two years to "make the problem go away" by means other than Federal compulsory legislation. And as recently as May 21, 1963, the President expressed reservations as to the need and wisdom of the street demonstrations for objectives that he said were on their way to attainment.

But last Wednesday Mr. Kennedy spoke in warm approval of street demonstrations as within "a great American tradition" so long as they are not of the character that leads to "riots and bloodshed." As an example, he cited the plan of Negro organizations to assemble many thousands of their members and supporters to march through the streets of Washington on Aug. 28. This, he said, has "developed into a peaceful assembly" through the cooperation of its organizers with police officials; and he personally looked forward to being in town, since he is one who wants citizens to come to Washington if they feel their rights are not being expressed. Because the President is pressing two programs—one by compulsory Federal legislation, the other by pressure for voluntary community desegregation—for the establishment of his wide concept of what these "rights" are, it was clear he had Congress in mind as a proper target of a street demonstration. And this, despite the feeling among strong supporters of his legislative program that marchers may hurt their cause in Congress instead of helping it.

The reasons for this apprehension are the product of Congressional mail and of published accounts of brutal incidents in the steadily swelling wave of Negro demonstrations. A sampling of the mail received by members of Congress who as yet have neither endorsed nor opposed the controversial sections of the Administration's equal rights bill have disclosed growing public indignation against the street protest policies of the more belligerent Negro organizations. The special causes of this adverse sentiment are the public office sit-ins that blockade education and the transaction of the business of government; also the nationwide spread of rioting that, it was obvious in advance, would be the result of some of the demonstrations.

Nevertheless, the President has now approved the march in Washing-

ton, which, since he has thrown all his power and prestige behind compulsory law against discrimination, he well knows is designed as pressure on Congress for total and early concurrence. Only a few extracts from his public statements are needed to illustrate the fundamental change in his position on the means a President and a minority group should employ to end discrimination in all public facilities, including those which are privately owned.

At Los Angeles, in September, 1960, Mr. Kennedy said:

He [the President] must exert the great moral and educational force of his office to bring about equal access to public facilities, from churches to lunch-counters, and support the rights of every American to stand up for his rights, even if he must sit down for them.

It is significant of Mr. Kennedy's much more moderate attitude at the time that he omitted any reference to "legislation," including the compulsory, although he had recently been nominated in the same city on a party platform that pledged him and a Democratic Congress to enact this in its most mandatory forms. These included a Federal Fair Practices commission with sweeping powers to enforce its finding of job discriminations. And it is also significant of his former attitude that, as afore-mentioned, he refrained for two years from sending to the Capitol a program redeeming these pledges of compulsions.

By May 22, 1963, the date of a White House news conference, the violent incidents of the street demonstrations and sit-ins had occurred in Birmingham, Ala. But asked for comment, Mr. Kennedy said:

I think there may be other things we can do which will provide a legal outlet for a desire for a remedy other than having to engage in demonstrations which bring them [the Negroes] into conflict with the forces of law and order in the community. . . . As it is today, in many cases they do not have a remedy, and therefore they take to the streets, and have the kind of incidents that we had in Birmingham.

In these remarks there is something to be noted with approval by street demonstrators, private owners of segregated facilities and the police authorities responsible for the enforcement of local ordinances. And, though the reference to a "legal outlet" had materialized in the Administration's compulsory equal rights bill by June 9, when the President spoke at the Mayors' Conference at Honolulu, he still had reservations on the necessity or wisdom of even peaceful street demonstrations, not yet implying a close relationship between their provocations and those listed against George III in the Declaration of Independence. But last Wednesday he went the full distance:

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