On November 25, 1963, after attending the four-hour funeral for John F. Kennedy, whose assassination in Dallas two days earlier hung over the nation, the newly sworn-in President Lyndon Johnson tended to a full schedule that led deep into the night. After an evening meeting with President Charles de Gaulle of France, Prime Minister Hayato Ikeda of Japan, and Prime Minister Lester Pearson of Canada, followed by another meeting with the governors of thirty-six states, Johnson repaired to his vice president’s office in the Old Executive Office Building adjacent to the White House before a next round of meetings. At 9:16 p.m., he telephoned Martin Luther King Jr. at his home in Atlanta.

Johnson began the four-minute call by thanking King for a statement the thirty-four-year-old civil rights leader had made on television supporting Johnson in his new role as president, stating, “I hope to be worthy of your hopes.”

“Well, this is mighty fine, and I knew that you had just that great spirit,” King intoned with a mellifluous Georgia lilt. “I think one of the ways of honoring President Kennedy’s memory is to support some of the progressive policies he sought to initiate.”

“Well, I’m gonna support ’em all and you can count on that,” Johnson
responded in his Texas Hill Country drawl, “and I’m gonna ask other men to do likewise and I’m gonna need y’all’s help; I never needed it more’n I do now.”

But could King count on Johnson’s support, especially on the civil rights bill that Kennedy had proposed the previous summer? Two days into Johnson’s presidency that much wasn’t clear—to King or to nearly anyone else.

Since he began his career in politics as a congressman from Texas’s Tenth District in 1937, Johnson’s record on civil rights was a mixed bag. Though the issue of civil rights garnered little legislative attention during Johnson’s years in the House of Representatives, it became more prominent in the postwar years. After becoming a senator in 1948, Johnson devoted his first speech on the body’s floor the following year to his opposition to cloture, a Senate rule that would limit debate and call for an immediate vote on the bill, which would have prevented Southern Democrats from employing the successful tactic of crushing civil rights measures through filibuster.

There is little doubt that Johnson’s ostensible opposition to civil rights had less to do with what was in his heart than it did with his political viability in Texas, where, among the preponderance of voters—nearly all of whom were white—entertaining the notion of civil rights was anathema. The stance also put him in the good graces of powerful Southern Democrats, who helped the ambitious Johnson climb the ranks of the Senate, which he did with alacrity,
becoming majority whip in 1951, minority leader in 1953, and majority leader in 1955. As his stature grew, so did his ability to be his own man on the issue of civil rights. His majority leader status was sufficiently prominent that he could refuse to sign the “Southern Manifesto,” a 1956 declaration of opposition to racial integration endorsed by most Southern members of Congress, without fear of retribution. He would then go on to champion the Civil Rights Act of 1957 and the Civil Rights Act of 1960—forerunners to the Civil Rights Act of 1964—overcoming the sectional rivalries that divided his party. Though the early acts had been rendered largely toothless in committee, as Johnson had expected, their symbolism—the first civil rights legislation in nearly a hundred years—made them significant even if their effects were not.

As president, though, Johnson knew he had a chance to make a real difference on civil rights and to right wrongs he had seen firsthand. In a 1965 nationally televised speech, Johnson told of a formative experience that would remain seared in his consciousness.

My first job after college was as a teacher in Cotulla, Texas, in a small Mexican-American school. Few of them could speak English, and I couldn’t speak much Spanish. My students were poor and they often came to class without breakfast, hungry. They knew even in their youth the pain of prejudice. They never seemed to know why people disliked them. But they knew it was so, because I saw it in their eyes. I often walked home late in the afternoon, after the classes were finished, wishing there was more that I could do. But all I knew was to teach them the little that I knew, hoping that it might help them against the hardships that lay ahead.

Somehow you never forget what poverty and hatred can do when you see its scars on the hopeful face of a young child.

I never thought then, in 1928, that I would be standing here in 1965. It never even occurred to me in my fondest dreams that I might have the chance to help the sons and daughters of those students and to help people like them all over this country.

But now I do have that chance—and I’ll let you in on a secret—I mean to use it.

Johnson seized that chance from the earliest days of his presidency. If Martin Luther King harbored doubt about Johnson’s intentions as chief executive,
Johnson made clear his agenda two days after their phone call. Appearing before a joint session of Congress on November 27, the new president offered his first words to the nation since giving a brief statement at Andrews Air Force Base five hours after Kennedy's death. After declaring, “Let us continue,” an allusion to Kennedy's Inauguration Day urging, “Let us begin,” he said:

> No memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long. We have talked long enough in this country about equal rights. We have talked for one hundred years or more. It is time now to write the next chapter—and to write it in the books of law.

While a supportive Congress had welcomed Johnson into the House chamber with an eruption of applause before he began his remarks, many, particularly those from the South and from Johnson's own party, met those words with a hard silence portending the resistance the bill would meet in the halls of Congress, where Johnson had faced similar challenges in getting the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960 passed.

His first hurdle toward the bill's passage was in the House, where it was hung up in the House Rules Committee, presided over by the openly racist Howard Worth “Judge” Smith, from Virginia's Eighth District. It was Smith's heavy hand that had gutted the earlier civil rights legislation. In an effort to outflank Smith, Johnson implored *Washington Post* publisher Katharine Graham to feature front-page articles every day on those House members who, by virtue of their passivity in not signing a petition to have the bill discharged from Smith's committee, prevented the bill from progressing.

As the *Post* began featuring articles throwing light on the efforts of Smith and others on the Rules Committee to thwart the bill, pressure began to mount. When Smith's position and standing as committee chairman became tenuous, he agreed to hearings on the bill, to be conducted in early January. After three weeks of debate, the committee voted 11 to 4 to clear the bill and send it to the House floor, where it passed by a vote of 290 to 130.

Johnson's hurdle in the Senate hit a little closer to home. Among those sitting silently in the House Chamber on the evening of November 27, 1963, as Johnson made clear his intention to pass civil rights legislation, was the powerful Democratic senator and mentor to Johnson, Richard Russell, who
President Lyndon B. Johnson gives his first address to Congress on November 27, 1963, after becoming president following the assassination of John F. Kennedy.
had represented Georgia in the Senate since the dawn of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal in 1933. Russell had opposed Kennedy’s civil rights efforts, vowing to “resist to the bitter end any measure or any movement which would have a tendency to bring about social equality and intermingling and amalgamation of the races in our [Southern] states.” He would do the same with Johnson’s attempts.

But Russell also knew that his old friend and Senate colleague would not allow a “watered-down, ineffective” bill as in 1957 and 1960; Johnson would accept nothing less than laws that rendered illegal the racial discrimination common in much of the country, particularly the South—and he had the legislative prowess to get it passed. Russell could see it coming. Jack Valenti, an aide to Johnson, recalled a tense White House meeting between Johnson and Russell in which the president made his aims clear:

Johnson leaned toward Russell, as he was apt to do. He said, “Dick, I love you and I owe you. But I’m going to tell you something. I’m going to run over you if you challenge me on this civil-rights bill. I aim to pass this bill, Dick, only this time there is going to be no caviling, no compromising, no holding back. This bill is going to pass. And no one is going to stand in my way. I just want you to know that.”
Russell listened. He was quiet for a minute. Then he said in those familiar, softly rolling tones, “Well, Mr. President, you may do just that. But I’m here today to tell you it’s going to cost you the election, and it’s going to cost you the South.”

Johnson was silent for a moment, listening intently. Then he spoke very, very quietly. “Dick, if that’s the price for this bill, I will gladly pay it.”

Perhaps quixotically, Russell closed ranks, lining up eighteen Southern Democrats to filibuster the bill on the Senate floor, a tactic that had effectively diminished the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960. The Senate’s filibuster began on March 26, 1964, and would last through fifty-seven days of debate.

Johnson used this time to cultivate Illinois Republican senator and minority leader Everett Dirksen, who was key to delivering what Southern members of Johnson’s own party were determined to scotch. The thirty-sixth president worked across the aisle with Dirksen to rally Republican support to invoke cloture and put an end to the filibuster. In a phone call with Dirksen in mid-May in which Johnson and Dirksen talked about a strategy to that end, Johnson said, “We don’t want this to be a Democratic bill, we want it to be an American bill,” before appealing to Dirksen’s ego: “I saw [the Illinois] exhibit at the World’s Fair, and it said, ‘The Land of Lincoln,’ so you’re worthy of the ‘Land of Lincoln.’ And the man from Illinois is going to pass the bill, and I’ll see that you get proper attention and credit.”

As the vote for cloture came to a head on the Senate floor, Dirksen declared, “Victor Hugo wrote in his diary substantially this sentiment: ‘Stronger than all the armies is an idea whose time has come.’ The time has come for equality of opportunity in sharing of government, in education, and in employment. It must not be stayed or denied.” A 71 to 29 vote for cloture compelled Russell to put an end to his filibuster. The act itself was passed by the Senate nine days later, on June 19, by nearly three-quarters of the Senate vote, 73 yeas to 27 nays.

As the bill went to the House, where it was now expected to pass, the question arose as to when Johnson would sign it into law. Newspapers speculated that the signing would occur on July 4, on what would be the country’s 188th birthday. But Johnson was not willing to wait, even to bow to historical symbolism, fearful that passions might mount and detract from the act itself. Instead, he would “sign it the first moment it was available.” Accordingly, after the House passed the bill by a vote of 289 to 126 on the afternoon of July 2, a
signing ceremony was hastily arranged in the East Room of the White House for early the same evening. Given the law’s towering significance—Johnson’s civil rights advisor, Lee White, likened it to “an Emancipation Proclamation”—the White House requested airtime from the television networks at 7:00 p.m. so that the president could address the nation prior to the signing. Concerned about interruption of their prime-time lineups, the networks offered up 6:45 p.m. instead. (Johnson, after hearing that he had been denied the seven o’clock slot, called the network executives “selfish bastards.”)

At 6:00 p.m., invited guests began streaming into the golden splendor of the East Room, where Johnson, seated behind a table before a crop of over seventy fountain-tip White House pens that awaited his attention, spoke to the nation on cue at 6:45. Peering solemnly through black-rimmed glasses, he began, “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 Vietnam, 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.
President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1965 in the Rose Garden at the White House on August 10, 1965.
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.

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 those who are equal before God shall now also be equal
in the polling booths, in the classrooms, in the factories, and in hotels, res-

taurants, movie theaters, and other places that provide service to the public.
I am taking steps to implement the law under my constitutional obliga-
tion 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 common sense.
Second, I shall appoint an advisory committee of distinguished Ameri-
cans to assist Governor Collins in his assignment.
Third, I am sending Congress a request for supplemental appropria-
tions 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 respon-
sibilities 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.

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

After concluding his remarks, Johnson plunged pen after pen into an inkwell, incrementally applying his barbed signature to the Civil Rights Act while handing the used pens to the deserving stakeholders who had amassed behind him, among them Martin Luther King Jr., Hubert Humphrey, Robert Kennedy, and Roy Wilkins.

But the first pen went to Everett Dirksen, as Johnson made good on his promise to give Dirksen proper credit for his bipartisan support of the bill, leading to its passage. Neither Johnson nor Dirksen could have known then that two-score years later, in 2004, the Senate seat once occupied by Dirksen would be won by an aspiring forty-three-year-old African American named Barack Obama, who, five years after that, would become a successor to Johnson in the White House as the first African American president.
President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and others look on in the East Room of the White House on July 2, 1964.
Black voters line up at a general store in rural Greene County, Alabama, to cast ballots for the first time, 1966.
A man reviews a sample ballot at a voting school, 1966.
The audience gives President Lyndon B. Johnson and Lady Bird Johnson a standing ovation after his Civil Rights Symposium keynote speech.