



Visions of Change: Robert F. Kennedy and the “Ripple of Hope”

Teacher’s Guide

Introduction:

In June of 1966, Senator Robert Kennedy visited South Africa at a time when that nation was experiencing major unrest over the system of racial segregation known as apartheid. Kennedy decided to visit upon the invitation of NUSAS, the anti-Apartheid National Union of South African Students. Senator Kennedy arrived with a delegation from the U.S. to deliver the Annual Day of Affirmation Speech at the University of Cape Town. Many leaders of the anti-Apartheid movement had dedicated their lives to challenging the system of racial segregation and discrimination at the heart of the South African political and social system. As the result of these activities, Nelson Mandela and other anti-Apartheid leaders were imprisoned on South African’s Robben Island.

Senator Kennedy’s journey to South Africa was enormously important both symbolically and practically. As the Civil Rights Movement continued to gain momentum in the United States, Senator Kennedy drew powerful parallels between the systems of racial inequality in both nations. Yet he also urged the possibility of transformation, and took note of the many strides taken by communities in both nations intent upon building a more just society.

During his five day visit to South Africa, Senator Kennedy made a total of five speeches. His most well-known speech from the visit was delivered at the University of Cape Town on June 6th, 1966. In this speech, Kennedy outlined the essential human rights and freedoms he believed all citizens should be granted. Although it was a very trying time in South Africa’s history, he encouraged South Africans to keep struggling to create a more equitable society and to serve as a beacon of hope for all people. Kennedy’s memorable and inspiring words have been excerpted and quoted many times. Known as the “Ripple of Hope” speech, this address is remembered as one of the most significant and powerful speeches of the 20th century.

Primary Source Analysis:

Below is an excerpt from Kennedy's "Ripple of Hope" speech. Ask students to read this speech and respond to the questions below. The extended activities that follow provide educators with additional avenues to explore the speech and its ramifications.

"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." –Senator Robert F. Kennedy, June 6th, 1966

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think Robert F. Kennedy decided to visit South Africa in 1966? Why do you think his journey was important at the time?
2. What do you think Kennedy meant when he suggest that "human history is shaped" by acts of courage? Can you think of an example that illustrates this point?
3. Kennedy suggests that even if people go unrecognized in the grand scheme for the changes they make, their actions have an effect. Do you agree with this idea, and can you think of an example?
4. What do you think Kennedy means when he uses the phrase "ripple of hope"? Why do you think this phrase and idea have proven to be so powerful?

Extended Activities:

1. During his visit to South Africa, Senator Kennedy delivered a total of five speeches. At the library or using the internet, ask students to locate the text of one of his other speeches from this trip. Ask them to write a short 1-2 page synopsis of this speech, and explain its importance in the context of his visit.
2. Many of those who heard Senator Kennedy's "Ripple of Hope" speech knew they were witnessing an historic event even as he spoke. Ask students to imagine they were a reporter on the scene during Kennedy's speech. Then, ask them to write a short newspaper article from the perspective of the reporter describing the speech and its significance.
3. The anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa was an important inspiration to many Americans in the Civil Rights Movement, and vice versa. Ask students to break up into groups of three or four. Then, ask them to create

- visual presentations on some aspect of the anti-Apartheid movement. These presentations could be a general introduction to the movement and the system of apartheid in South Africa, or they could choose to focus on leaders of the movement. Students can compare and contrast the tactics, mottos, and leaders of the anti-Apartheid and Civil Rights Movements as part of these projects. These presentations could be in Powerpoint format, on poster-board, or presented out loud to the larger class or group.
4. The concept of the “Ripple of Hope” has been a very powerful idea since the speech was delivered. Ask students to think an example of a person who exemplifies the “ripple of hope.” Then, students should write an essay about this individual and why they are an example of the ideas Kennedy expressed. Students can share their projects with the larger class or group in a short oral presentation.

Web sites:

The Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights:

<http://www.rfkcenter.org/>

Speak Truth to Power, a core program of The Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights:

<http://www.speaktruth.org/>

The New York State United Teachers Curriculum on RFK:

<http://www.nysut.org/cps/rde/xchg/nysut/hs.xsl/rfk.htm>