

Robert F. Kennedy and the 1968 Indiana Primary

April 4, 1968: Speech as Civic Intervention

Content Focus

- This should NOT simply be about “leadership,” but how impactful words can make big impacts for good.

Historical Connection

- RFK arrived in Indianapolis during his presidential campaign and learned Dr. King had been assassinated. Despite warnings about unrest, he spoke publicly and improvised much of the speech.
- Indianapolis experienced less violence than many cities following King’s assassination, which makes this an important case study in rhetoric, public emotion, and civic response.

Question

- Can public speech redirect grief, anger, fear, or violence during moments of national crisis?

Student Objectives

Compelling Question: How can public speech shape what a community does next?

Teaching: Students annotate RFK’s speech and identify:

- Grief language
- Restraint language

- References to justice
- References to shared suffering
- Calls for civic responsibility
- Appeals to empathy

Students then compare the speech to images of unrest following King's assassination.

Possible Extension: Students write a short public address responding to a modern civic crisis

Primary Sources for Lesson

LOC Sources: RFK speech essay/transcript

https://www.loc.gov/static/programs/national-recording-preservation-board/documents/Robert-Kennedy-Speech-on-the-Death-of-Dr-King_Bohrer.pdf

National Recording Registry page <https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-recording-preservation-board/recording-registry/registry-by-induction-years/2018/>

D.C. riot aftermath photograph <https://www.loc.gov/item/2003688168/>

Additional Civil Rights photographs <https://www.loc.gov/photos/?fa=subject:civil+rights>



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