Lyndon B. Johnson's Remarks upon Signing the Civil Rights Act (July 2, 1964)

This landmark piece of legislation was initially submitted during the presidency of John F. Kennedy. After Kennedy’s assassination, the new president, Lyndon B. Johnson, pledged to Congress to continue Kennedy’s efforts to pass a comprehensive civil rights law. The bill eventually passed the Congress and was signed into law as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Public Law 88-352) on July 2, 1964. Among other things, the act outlawed segregation in public accommodations and prohibited employment discrimination.

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 Viet-Nam, 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.

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 there are those who are equal before God shall now also be equal in the polling booths, in the classrooms, in the factories, and in hotels, restaurants, movie theaters, and other places that provide service to the public. …

**Document Analysis**

What historic document does Johnson refer to in justifying his actions? Where does the expression “all men are created equal” come from?

Does Johnson give Kennedy due credit for the legislation?

What are the four points that Johnson refers to as “the purpose of the law”? 