Civic Activism and Politics Came Together in the 60s

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"He was a giant of a man," Kathleen Kennedy Townsend said of Martin Luther King, Jr. during her lecture Friday night at St. Mary's College of Maryland (SMCM). Her lecture, titled "Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy: Remembering the Advocate and the Politician 40 Years Later," focused on the accomplishments of King and her father, Bobby Kennedy, in the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s, and how they contributed to the movement from their unique positions of leadership.

The talk marked Townsend's fourth and final appearance at SMCM as this year's Paul H. Nitze Senior Fellow. Her prior talks primarily focused on current political and social issues, from the problems of religion mingling with political debates, to the difficulties faced by women in leadership roles and the campaigns of Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama.

In this last talk, taking place on the 40th anniversary of Martin Luther King's assassination (Kennedy was killed in June of the same year), she chose to reflect on that tumultuous period in America's history, including its high points and its lows.

Talking about the "glorious day" when protestors assembled in Washington D.C. to hear King's famous "I have a dream" speech, Townsend described how the success of that day was due to efforts of both men: "My father in the [Administration] and King in the streets." She talked about how Bobby Kennedy had worked hard to make sure that the protest was well-organized and remained peaceful. With Washington's police force all white at the time, Kennedy helped bring in black officers from New York just for that day; prohibited the sale of alcohol near the demonstration; and made sure that all of the cameras and microphones were fully functional.

If this day marks one of the shining moments of the Civil Rights Movement, it contrasted sharply with the day featured in the next segment of Townsend's presentation, during which she stepped aside to let her father's solemn words fill the room. She brought with her a recording of Bobby Kennedy's speech in Indianapolis on the evening of King's assassination.

Distraught cries and angry shouts could be heard from the crowd, hearing the news for the first time. Bobby Kennedy went on to talk that night of empathizing with the people's emotions, calling for them to pray for King's family and to respond to his murder with peace and love, rather than hatred or violence.

Short as his speech was, Townsend noted that while more than 300 U.S. cities erupted with riots, in Indianapolis people went peacefully back to their homes for the night.

It is likely that events such as this inspired one of Townsend's closing remarks, in which she said, "I think those who will succeed in the 21st century will be those who can empathize with others, grasp their experiences, and know how they'd feel in their position."