

Robert Kennedy's views on Vietnam, 1967

Introduction

On May 15, 1967, CBS broadcast *Town Meeting of the World*, a program in which Senator Robert F. Kennedy of New York and Governor Ronald Reagan of California answered questions posed by the moderator, Charles Collingwood; students from the United States; and international students in Great Britain (via satellite). Although the subject of the program was “The Image of America and the Youth of the World,” questions focused primarily on the America’s involvement in Vietnam.

After the broadcast, John F. Bayliss, a member of the English Department at Indiana State University and founder and editor of the *African American Review*, wrote to Senator Kennedy to clarify statements Kennedy had made during the broadcast. Kennedy responded with this letter of September 15, 1967. The letter declares his belief that the United States had to provide the resources the American soldiers required in Vietnam as well as support the democratic rights of the South Vietnamese people. He also expressed his conviction that there could be no simple answers to the complex problems facing the nation:

The strength and honor of our country permits and requires us to be forthright – and the complexity of our problems precludes simple answers. . . . The people of our country have a right to expect not easy answers but candid evaluation of our conduct and our position in the world.

A [transcript](http://rfkcenter.org/town-meeting-of-the-world) of the broadcast is available at the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights (<http://rfkcenter.org/town-meeting-of-the-world>).

Questions for Discussion

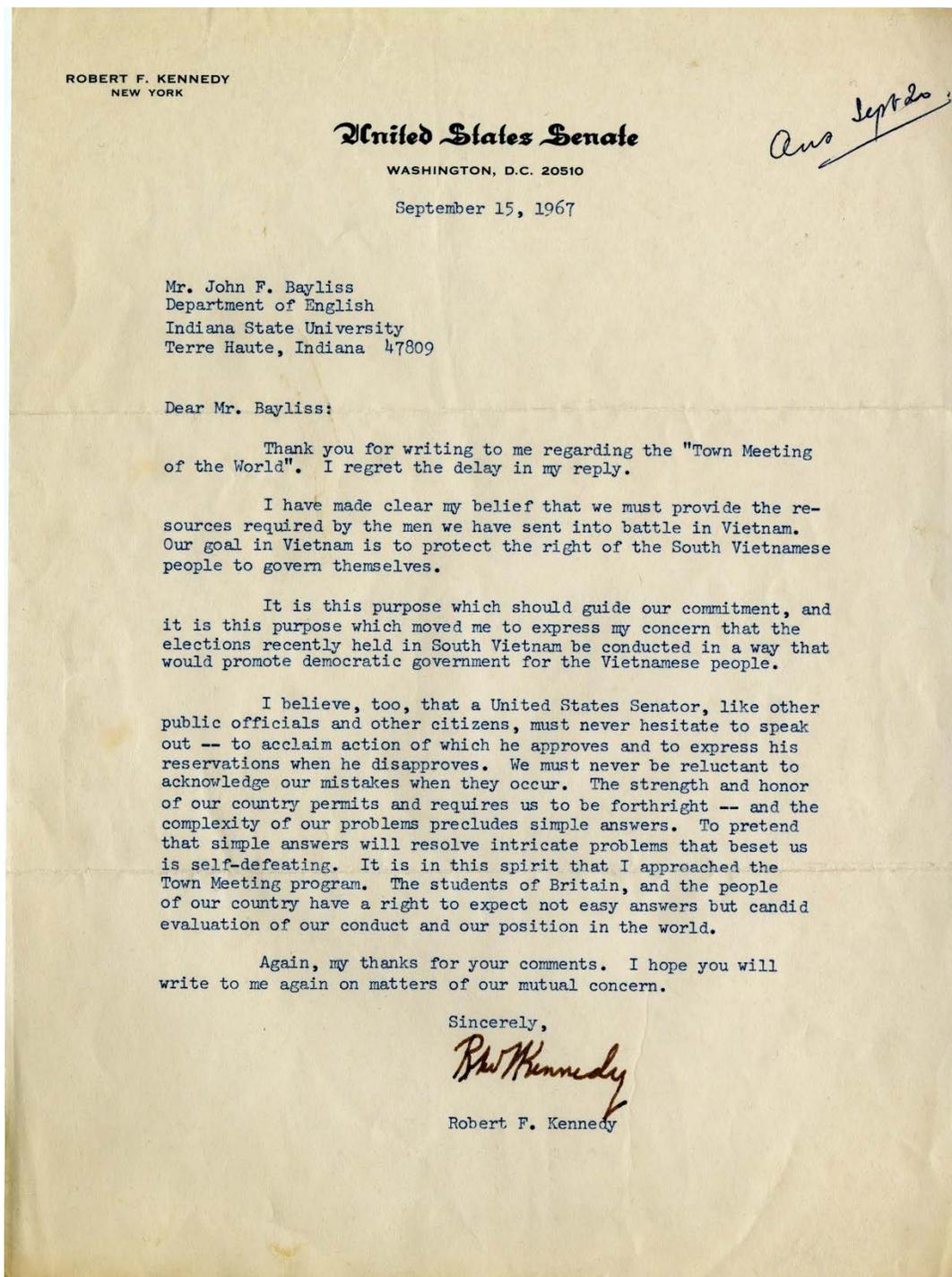
Read the introduction and the text of the letter. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

1. What difficulties faced the United States to lead Robert Kennedy to refer to “intricate problems” where Americans “have a right to expect not easy answers.”?
2. Note the date of the letter. From your knowledge of American history and events taking place in Vietnam and domestically, why was Senator Kennedy invited to take part in a nationally broadcast town-meeting?
3. Explain the opinion Senator Kennedy had regarding the right of US citizens to examine and question the actions of their government.

Extra Assignment: Why did CBS invite Governor Ronald Reagan to also participate in the *Town Meeting of the World* broadcast with Robert Kennedy?

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Image



Robert F. Kennedy to John F. Bayliss, September 15, 1967. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09525)