

John Fitzgerald Kennedy Frontpage

American President Frontpage

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John F. Kennedy was born into a rich, politically connected Boston family of Irish-Catholics. He and his eight siblings enjoyed a privileged childhood of elite private schools, sailboats, servants, and summer homes. During his childhood and youth, "Jack" Kennedy suffered frequent serious illnesses. Nevertheless, he strove to make his own way, writing a best-selling book while still in college at Harvard and volunteering for hazardous combat duty in the Pacific during World War II. Kennedy's wartime service made him a hero. After a short stint as a journalist, Kennedy entered politics, serving in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1947 to 1953 and the U.S. Senate from 1953 to 1961.

Kennedy was the youngest person elected U.S. President and the first Roman Catholic to serve in that office. For many observers, his presidency came to represent the ascendance of youthful idealism in the aftermath of World War II. The promise of this energetic and telegenic leader was not to be fulfilled, as he was assassinated near the end of his third year in office. For many Americans, the public murder of President Kennedy remains one of the most traumatic events in memory -- countless Americans can remember exactly where they were when they heard that President Kennedy had been shot. His shocking death stood at the forefront of a period of political and social instability in the country and the world.

Born soon after America's entry into the First World War, John Fitzgerald Kennedy was the nation's first President born in the 20th century. Both parents were from wealthy Boston families with long political histories. His maternal grandfather had been mayor of Boston. Kennedy's father, Joseph P. Kennedy, had made a fortune in the stock market, entertainment, and other business, managing to take his money out of the stock market just before the crash of 1929. Though the ensuing Great Depression gripped the nation, "Jack" and his eight siblings enjoyed a privileged childhood of elite private schools, sailboats, servants, and summer homes. Kennedy later claimed that the only experience he had of the Great Depression was what he read in books while attending Harvard University.

For John, this privileged childhood was interrupted repeatedly by chronic bouts of illness. Afflicted with an almost constant stream of ailments, several of which went undiagnosed, Kennedy spent much of his time recuperating.

In 1938, on the eve of the Second World War, President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Joseph P. Kennedy, John's father, to the key post of ambassador to the United Kingdom. The new ambassador was unsympathetic to British preparedness policies and found a cool reception in London. That year, Jack inherited one million dollars from his family, but his ambition remained strong. While in England with his father, he wrote his senior essay for Harvard University on England's lack of readiness for the Second World War. It was published and was well received by critics, becoming a bestseller under the title *Why England Slept*.

World War II Military Service

After Kennedy graduated from Harvard, the United States entered World War II. His efforts to join the U.S. Navy were initially thwarted by his ill-health, but through the intervention of his father, he was eventually admitted and assigned to serve in the South Pacific, commanding a small motor-torpedo boat, or "PT boat." Kennedy and his crew participated in the campaign to wrest thousands of islands from Japanese control. In August 1943, as the sailors were sleeping without posting a watch (in violation of naval regulations), his boat, PT 109, was rammed by a Japanese destroyer. Towing a badly burned crewmate by a life-jacket strap clenched in his teeth, Kennedy led the crew's ten survivors on a three-mile swim to refuge on a tiny island. The crew hid on the island from the enemy for days until Kennedy managed to summon help. Widely credited with the rescue of his crew, Kennedy received the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps Medal for Valor, and a Purple Heart for injuries he sustained. Nevertheless, he returned home to a naval inquiry on the sinking. Although a board found evidence of poor seamanship, the Navy needed heroes more than it needed scapegoats, and Kennedy was cast as the former to build public morale, and recruited to go on speaking tours.

The war ended in 1945, but not without a deep cost to the Kennedy family: the oldest son, Joseph Jr., a pilot, was killed on a bombing mission in Europe. Handsome and outgoing, Joseph had been the one tabbed by his father to become President one day. Upon his death, his father's aspirations fell on John.

The Political Climb

After being discharged from the Navy, John Kennedy worked briefly as a reporter for the Hearst newspapers, and in 1946, the twenty-nine-year-old Kennedy won election to the U.S. Congress representing a working-class Boston district. He served three terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, earning a reputation as a somewhat conservative Democrat. He was re-elected in 1948 and again in 1950. In 1952, he ran for the U.S. Senate and defeated the Republican incumbent from another Massachusetts family with a long political history, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. That same year, he met Jacqueline Bouvier at a dinner party, and, as he later put it, "leaned across the asparagus and asked her for a date." The two were married a year later and had three children, one of whom died in infancy in August 1963.

Kennedy continued to be dogged by poor health. Left thin and sallow by malaria brought home from the war in the Pacific, he also suffered from Addison's disease, which many doctors considered terminal. He relied on a steady stream of painkillers and steroids to treat the symptoms of his many ailments. Constant back pain would prevent him from lifting even his own small children. Ironically, though, Kennedy's public image was one of youth, health, and vigor. And Kennedy put one period of enforced convalescence from back surgery to productive use by writing *Profiles in Courage*, a book about Americans who had taken unpopular but admirable moral stands. The book won the Pulitzer Prize for biography in 1957.

Due to his continuing poor health, Kennedy had one of the worst attendance records in Congress. His real achievements in the Senate were few, but almost immediately after election he began angling for even higher office. In 1956, he mounted a serious quest for the vice presidential spot alongside presidential hopeful Adlai Stevenson. He narrowly lost the spot to Estes Kefauver, a senator from Tennessee. Ultimately, though, this defeat proved a blessing. The Republican incumbents, President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Vice President Richard M. Nixon, soundly beat Stevenson and Kefauver that fall; neither Democrat would ever be a real contender for the office again. Kennedy remained, however, untarnished by Stevenson's defeat and the exposure he got at the 1956 national Democratic convention made him a serious contender for the 1960 Democratic presidential nomination. Reelected to the Senate in 1958, Kennedy became a member of its influential Foreign Relations Committee, which he used as a platform to attack President Eisenhower's diplomatic and military policies, claiming that the United States was on the wrong side of a "missile gap" with the Soviet Union. Kennedy continued to press these themes as he began maneuvering to get the Democratic nomination for the 1960 presidential election.

The Campaign and Election of 1960

The election of 1960 brought to the forefront a generation of politicians born in the twentieth century, pitting the 47-year old Republican vice president Richard Nixon against the 43-year old Democratic challenger John F. Kennedy.

Kennedy's chief rival for the nomination was Hubert Humphrey from Minnesota, whose steadfast liberalism played well with many in the Midwest. The two fought it out in thirteen primaries. Humphrey's best hope rested on winning in his "back yard" of neighboring Wisconsin, and then painting himself as the new favorite. But Kennedy's superior planning, financing, and political instincts won out, and he beat Humphrey in his own region. The nomination's turning point occurred in the West Virginia primary. A working-class, heavily Protestant state, West Virginia was critical for Kennedy to show that a wealthy Catholic was electable there. Humphrey desperately threw all his remaining resources into the fray, even tapping a savings fund for his daughter's upcoming wedding, but the Kennedy machine overwhelmed him with money and savvy. In West Virginia, the only state in which it is legal for a campaign to pay workers and voters money for showing up at the polls, Kennedy's financing gave him a distinct advantage. Dispirited and broke, Humphrey abandoned the race.

At the Democratic National Convention held in Los Angeles in early July, Kennedy defeated his nearest rival, Texas senator Lyndon B. Johnson, the Senate majority leader, on the first ballot. Kennedy then invited Johnson to become his running mate, a controversial move made ostensibly to placate the South, bypassing other party leaders such as senators

Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota and Stuart Symington of Missouri. In his acceptance speech, Kennedy pledged to "get the country moving again." Americans, he said, stood "on the edge of New Frontier -- of the 1960s -- a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils -- a frontier of unfilled hopes and threats." The Republicans, meeting a few weeks later in Chicago, nominated Nixon, making him the first vice president in the history of the modern two-party system to win the presidential nomination in his own right. Nixon chose Henry Cabot Lodge, the chief U.S. delegate to the United Nations as his running mate.

Once he had won the nomination of his party, Kennedy undertook the task of convincing American voters that he would make a better President than his rival. Kennedy cast himself as a liberal in the mold of Franklin D. Roosevelt and promised to lead America out of what he called the "conservative rut" into which he accused Eisenhower, and by implication Nixon, of running the country. It was apparent throughout the campaign that the election would be close. A Gallup poll in late August put Nixon and Kennedy tied at 47 percent each, with 6 percent undecided.

Kennedy faced two great hurdles in his quest for the White House: his youth and his religion. Polls revealed that many Americans balked at the prospect of such a young man untested on the world stage, leading the nation at a time of threatening Cold War peril, especially after the comforting grandfatherly image projected by Dwight Eisenhower. For Nixon, although he was only four years older than Kennedy, this issue was less acute since he had the advantage of having served as vice president for the duration of Eisenhower's two terms and was therefore a more familiar face. Even more unsettling to many Protestants was the prospect of a Roman Catholic, who might be "controlled" by the Catholic Church, as the nation's President. Kennedy chose to tackle the religious issue openly and directly, giving a series of speeches designed to address any misgivings about his faith and voluntarily subjecting himself to a round of questioning about his views on church-state relations by leading Protestant clergy in Houston. The group's conclusion that they were satisfied with his answers provided a degree of comfort for many non-Catholic voters.

Televised Debates

In order to overcome Nixon's advantage in public recognition, Kennedy challenged Nixon to a series of televised debates. Nixon, an experienced debater, accepted. The series of four debates between the two candidates became the first extensive use of what would thereafter become a staple medium of American political campaigns -- television. Broadcast live on national television in late September and early October, the debates ultimately provided the Kennedy campaign with a huge boost.

The first debate was watched by seventy million people. Nixon, just out of the hospital because of an infection caused by a bad cut, wore a light-colored suit that proved less than ideal under the harsh studio lighting. The Richard Nixon that viewers saw on their black-and-white television sets appeared pallid, tense, and uncomfortable. By contrast, Kennedy appeared relaxed, tanned, and telegenic. Post-debate polls revealed that the visual image had a powerful impact on public perceptions; those who had listened to the debates on the radio thought that Nixon had won, but the larger television audience was generally more impressed with Kennedy.

Both candidates traveled extensively and spent freely. Nixon, however, was hamstrung by an unfortunate early pledge to campaign in every state of the union. The trips to vote-poor states took precious time and money, while Kennedy focused his resources and time on the states with the most electoral college votes.

On Election Day, November 8, Kennedy won the popular vote by the remarkably small margin of 120,000 votes out of a record 68.8 million ballots cast. Kennedy won the electoral college vote more clearly, winning 303 votes to Nixon's 219 (with Virginia's Harry F. Byrd winning 15). The closeness of the election naturally fueled speculation of tampering on both sides. In Chicago, Democratic mayor Richard Daley delivered an unusually good result for Kennedy -- a result that came under scrutiny when Kennedy won Illinois by less than 9,000 votes. Citing voting irregularities, the Republican National Committee unsuccessfully challenged the Illinois vote in Federal Court, although Nixon carefully distanced himself from the various legal challenges presented by his party and his supporters. There were also suspicious results in Texas and elsewhere. Kennedy was initially believed to have won California, but after absentee ballots had been counted, that state's electors declared for Nixon.

Inauguration and Transition

On a cold January 20, 1961, John F. Kennedy took the oath of office. After such a close campaign, Kennedy knew his inaugural address would have to reach out to his opponents. In the days before it was to be delivered, he carefully

studied famous American speeches such as the Gettysburg Address and copied their terse, vivid style. Unlike many inaugural addresses, he pulled few punches, and its content was almost exclusively devoted to matters outside the nation's borders. In addition, he claimed that his election signaled a fundamental generational shift in America:

We observe today not a victory of party, but a celebration of freedom -- symbolizing an end, as well as a beginning -- signifying renewal, as well as change . . . Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans -- born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage -- and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this Nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.

And he recalled the nation's revolutionary origins: "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear in burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty."

In forming his administration, Kennedy surrounded himself with liberal intellectuals and, in light of the close popular vote, moderate conservatives espousing strong executive governance drawing on technology and social planning. An elite group of young, rich, and professionals, dubbed the "New Frontiersmen," poured into Washington, adding to the tone of a White House seeking counsel from the nation's best and brightest.

Kennedy's domestic legislative program, often described by the umbrella term of "New Frontier" legislation taken from his July 1960 acceptance speech to the Democratic National Convention, faced an often difficult passage through Congress. With the Democratic majority in Congress razor-thin and many Southerners in his own party suspicious of the new President and his northeast establishment background, Kennedy was forced time and again to compromise on his legislative program.

Economic and Legislative Challenges

Kennedy took office in the depths of the fourth major recession since World War II. Business bankruptcies had reached the highest level since the 1930s, farm incomes had decreased 25 percent since 1951, and 5.5 million Americans were looking for work. Kennedy's response was a series of efforts designed to lower taxes, protect the unemployed, increase the minimum wage, and to focus on the business and housing sectors to stimulate the economy. Kennedy believed that such measures would begin an economic boom that would last until the late 1960s. His advisers thought it possible to "fine tune" the economy with a mix of fiscal and monetary measures; Kennedy accepted their advice and was impressed with their expertise, which seemed to work at the time. Partly as a result of the administration's efforts to pump money into domestic and military spending, the recession had faded by the end of Kennedy's first year in office. The President also proposed new social programs. These included federal aid to education, medical care for the elderly, urban mass transit, a Department of Urban Affairs, and regional development in Appalachia.

Lacking deep congressional support, however, Kennedy's programs encountered tough legislative sledding. He did manage an increase in the minimum wage, but a major medical program for the elderly was shot down. Attempts to cut taxes and broaden civil rights were watered down on Capitol Hill. The proposal for a Department of Urban Affairs was killed by southern Democrats who thought Kennedy would appoint an African-American as first secretary. The education bill foundered on the question of aid to parochial schools: Kennedy, as a Catholic, had to oppose such aid to maintain his credibility with the electorate. His successor, a Protestant, was under no such constraints and would pass a bill providing for aid to parochial schools. On the positive side of the ledger, the government undertook regional development in Appalachia, an initiative that would have a major impact over the next three decades in reducing poverty in the region.

Civil Rights

But by far the most volatile -- and divisive -- domestic issue of the day was civil rights. African-Americans were striving to reverse centuries of social and economic hardship, and activism against legalized racism was growing. This activism was troubling to many whites, particularly in the South. Kennedy's role -- or lack of it -- in this great crusade

remains controversial. In short, he concentrated more on enforcing existing civil rights laws than on passing new ones. Moreover, he had to bow to the custom of "senatorial courtesy" and appoint federal judges in the South who were acceptable to southern Democratic senators. These judges were opposed to civil rights enforcement, and their record was much worse than that those judges appointed in the south by Republican President Eisenhower, who was under no such party constraints. On several occasions, Kennedy invoked some of the highest powers of his office to send troops to southern states that were refusing the racial integration of their schools.

In September 1962, a long-running effort by James Meredith, a black Mississippian and veteran of eight years in the U.S. Air Force, to enroll at the traditionally white University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) came to head. When the governor of Mississippi, Ross Barnett, defied federal court rulings allowing Meredith to enroll at the university, Kennedy, through his brother Robert, the attorney general, federalized the Mississippi National Guard and ordered an escort of federal marshals to accompany Meredith to the campus. Meredith finally enrolled on October 1, 1962, but not without a violent riot that took thousands of guardsmen and armed soldiers fifteen hours to quell. Hundreds were injured and two died.

During 1963, the civil rights struggle grew increasingly vocal and faced increasing violence. Led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., African-American activists had proclaimed their impatience with "tokenism and gradualism . . . We can't wait any longer." The persistence of the Freedom Riders seeking to desegregate buses in the South -- in the face of personal peril -- and a huge "March on Washington" in June 1963 at which King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech to an audience of a quarter of a million people, provided potent indications that the civil rights movement was not going to fade away and was, in fact, galvanizing. And when four children were killed that September in a racially motivated bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, Kennedy once again chose to intervene.

Kennedy's political strategy was to delay sending a civil rights bill to Congress until his second term, when he could afford to split his party and pick up the backing of moderate Republicans to pass the measure. He felt that if he did this in his first term, the rest of his program would suffer. However, African-Americans remained unconvinced of the political maneuvering and insisted on immediate action to protect their rights. Toward the end of 1963, Kennedy finally submitted a civil rights bill, which became law after his death. In a televised speech announcing his decision, he observed that the grandchildren of the slaves freed by Lincoln "are not yet freed from the bonds of injustice."

Once in office, it was clear that Kennedy would likely face several international challenges that could come from any number of directions. Recurring flare-ups in Berlin, periodical crises with Communist China, and an increasingly difficult situation in Southeast Asia, all threatened to erupt.

The Bay of Pigs

It was Cuba, however, that became an immediate embarrassment largely of the administration's own making. Kennedy had only been in office two months when he ordered the implementation of a watered-down plan inherited from the Eisenhower administration to topple Cuban leader Fidel Castro. An invasion of Cuba was to be sponsored covertly and carried out by CIA-trained anti-Castro refugees. Assured by military advisers and the CIA that the prospects for success were good, Kennedy gave the green light. In the early hours of April 17, 1961, approximately 1,500 Cuban refugees landed at Bahia de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs) on Cuba's southern coast. A series of crucial assumptions built into the plan proved false and Castro's forces quickly overwhelmed the refugee force. Moreover, the Kennedy administration's cover story collapsed immediately. It soon became clear that despite the President's denial of U.S. involvement in the attempted coup, Washington was indeed behind it.

Vienna and Berlin

The misadventure cost Kennedy dearly. Still recovering from this humiliating political defeat, Kennedy met with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna in June 1961. Khrushchev renewed his threat to "solve" the long-running Berlin problem unilaterally, an announcement that in turn forced Kennedy to renew his pledge to respond such a move with every means at his disposal, including nuclear weapons. In a surprise move two months later, in mid-August 1961, the Soviets and East Germans constructed a wall separating East and West Berlin, providing the Cold War with a tangible incarnation of the Iron Curtain.

Missiles in Cuba

By the fall of 1962, Cuba again took center-stage in the Cold War. In an effort to neutralize the massive American advantage in nuclear weapons, Khrushchev ordered a secret deployment of long-range nuclear missiles to Cuba along with a force of 42,000 Soviet troops and other associated weaponry. For months, despite close American scrutiny, the Soviets managed to keep hidden the full extent of the buildup. But in mid-October, U.S. aerial reconnaissance detected the deployment of Soviet ballistic nuclear missiles in Cuba which could reach most of the continental United States within a matter of minutes.

Kennedy consulted with his top advisers over a period of several days. These meetings were conducted in utmost secrecy in order to maximize the range of responses available. This group, came to be known as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, or ExComm, examined the options available to respond to the Soviet threat. Among those options were air strikes on the missile bases, a full-scale invasion of Cuba, or a naval blockade of the island. Kennedy eventually chose a blockade, or quarantine, of Cuba backed up by the threat of imminent military action. In announcing his decision on national television on October 22, 1962 -- breaking the extraordinary secrecy surrounding the crisis to that point -- Kennedy warned that the purpose of the Soviet missiles in Cuba could be "none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere" and that he would protect the United States from such a threat no matter what the cost. The lines, suddenly, were drawn very firmly indeed, and the world held its breath.

After several days of action and reaction, each seeming to bring the world closer to the brink of nuclear war, the two sides reached a deal. Khrushchev would order the withdrawal of offensive missiles and Kennedy would promise not to invade Cuba; Kennedy also promised to withdraw American ballistic nuclear missiles based in Turkey targeting the Soviet Union. Difficult negotiations aimed at finalizing the deal dragged on for several weeks but, on November 20, 1962, Kennedy finally ordered the lifting of the naval blockade of Cuba.

To the Moon

Kennedy was also instrumental in the success of his country's space program. An enthusiastic proponent of it, he vowed to have Americans on the moon by the end of the decade. His vice president, Lyndon Johnson, was from Texas, and was the head of the subcommittee in the House of Representatives in charge of funding the space program. Kennedy agreed that although the rockets would be launched from Cape Canaveral in Florida, the headquarters of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) would be located in Houston, Texas. Kennedy would not live to see the manned lunar landing in which took place in July 1969.

The Developing World

By an executive order in 1961, President Kennedy created the Peace Corps, a reaction to the growing spirit of activism evident throughout the Western world. Through social and humanitarian services, Peace Corps volunteers sought to improve the social and economic conditions throughout the world. In September 1961, shortly after Congress formally endorsed the Peace Corps by making it a permanent program, the first volunteers left to teach English in Ghana. Contingents of volunteers soon followed to Tanzania and India. The program proved enduring; by the end of the twentieth century, the Peace Corps had sent over 170,000 American volunteers to over 135 nations.

Concerns abounded that communism would take root in other impoverished countries in Latin America. To counteract this, Kennedy instituted the Alliance for Progress, a plan to improve the region's social and economic fortunes. This charter -- and the U.S. financial aid that came with it -- improved America's standing in the region, though few Latin nations agreed with the U.S. embargo on Cuba or cooperated with it.

Southeast Asia

The later stages of Kennedy's presidency saw him tested by the growing conflict in Vietnam. America had been sending military advisers there since the mid-1950s to help prevent a Communist takeover of the Southeast Asian

nation. In 1961, Kennedy increased this allotment and ordered in the Special Forces, an elite army unit, to train the South Vietnamese in counter-insurgency warfare. But war continued to spread, and by the end of Kennedy's presidency, 16,000 American military advisers were serving in Vietnam.

As with other aspects of his administration, it is not clear how Kennedy would have handled America's growing commitment to Vietnam had he lived out his term in office. Kennedy had announced plans, in the summer of 1963, to reduce the number of advisers, but this did not necessarily mean a reduction in the American commitment. The announcement was designed to put pressure on the South Vietnamese government to institute reforms. Instead, the regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem continued its repression of political opponents. Diem was assassinated in November 1963 in a military coup, an act that failed to heighten the nation's political stability.

Limiting Nuclear Testing

Just weeks before his death, Kennedy secured an agreement, with Great Britain and the Soviet Union to limit the testing of nuclear weapons in the earth's atmosphere. Not only did it mean the reduction of hazardous nuclear "fallout," it also signaled the success of Kennedy's efforts to engage the Soviet Union in constructive negotiations and reduce Cold War tensions. In the wake of the close call over Cuba, Kennedy considered this agreement his greatest accomplishment as President.

On November 22, 1963, the President and the First Lady journeyed to Dallas on a campaign trip. Accompanying the Kennedys in the motorcade through the city were Governor John Connally and his wife, Nellie. As it moved through Dealey Plaza, the presidential limousine was fired upon. Governor Connally was wounded; President Kennedy who was hit twice, was killed. Kennedy was rushed to Parkland Memorial Hospital, where he died soon thereafter.

The shots had been fired from a nearby warehouse and some hours after the assassination, police arrested warehouse employee Lee Harvey Oswald. Oswald was a mysterious former Marine who had defected to the Soviet Union, had recently been in Cuba -- he had championed Cuban causes -- and then returned to the United States. Two days after the arrest, while being transferred to another jail, the suspect was himself slain by Jack Ruby, a Dallas nightclub owner. Ruby was tried and convicted of murder in Oswald's death. He died of cancer in January 1967, while awaiting a retrial in prison.

The dramatic course of events led many to wonder whether a conspiracy was afoot. A commission to investigate the assassination, established by President Lyndon B. Johnson and headed by Supreme Court chief justice Earl Warren, determined that Oswald had acted alone. In 1979, the House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded that there were at least three shots fired, not two as the Warren Commission had claimed, though it drew no other firm conclusions. It did affirm, though, that Oswald had fired all three shots, two of which hit Kennedy. A plethora of conspiracy theories about Kennedy's assassination have proved, nevertheless, an enduring phenomenon.

On November 24, 1963, hundreds of thousands of people filed pass Kennedy's coffin in the rotunda of the Capitol. Kennedy was buried the next day, in a state funeral at Arlington Cemetery. Representatives from ninety-two nations attended the services and an estimated one million people lined the streets of Washington, D.C., to observe the funeral procession. For many Americans, the murder of John F. Kennedy would remain one of the most wrenching public events of their lifetimes.

The Kennedys had their first child, Caroline, in 1957; John Jr. was born a few days after his father won the presidency. A third child, Patrick, died two days after his birth in 1963. After a long succession of elderly Presidents, it was refreshing for many to see the Kennedy family's youth and vitality. One image in particular stood out: that of John Jr. playing under the President's desk in the Oval Office. When JFK died there was another image: Jacqueline Kennedy whispering to John Jr. to be sure to give a military salute as the casket carrying the President passed by.

The President's extended family was large, wealthy, and powerful. President Kennedy named his brother Robert attorney general so, as he put it, his brother could "get some legal experience" before getting a job. Congress was not amused by the joke, and although Robert served ably, it later passed a law forbidding the President to make

appointments of close relatives to federal office. President Lyndon Johnson, seeing Robert as a rival, maneuvered to keep him off the Democratic ticket in 1964 by stating that no cabinet secretary would be considered. Robert responded wryly that he was sorry to take so many capable officeholders down with him.

In the November 1962 mid-term elections, John Kennedy's younger brother Edward (Teddy) successfully ran for a Senate seat in Massachusetts. After the President's death, Robert Kennedy would become a senator from New York state and a frontrunner for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1968. This second Kennedy run for the White House was cut short by another assassin's bullet. After winning the California Democratic primary, Robert Kennedy was gunned down by Sirhan Sirhan. Of the Kennedy brothers, Edward Kennedy would make the final run for the Oval Office in 1980 when he unsuccessfully challenged President Jimmy Carter's renomination. Despite this defeat, Edward Kennedy remains an active and senior member of the U.S. Senate.

During the Kennedy years, some groups that had formerly been discriminated against made great breakthroughs in realizing the American Dream. For others, the early 1960s proved to be another disappointing era.

President Kennedy initiated the planning for a "War on Poverty" in 1963, after reading an article by noted social commentator Michael Harrington entitled, "The Other America." Harrington detailed the plight of the poor and Kennedy ordered his economic advisers to consider new measures to deal with the one-fifth of the nation that had incomes below the poverty line. After Kennedy's death, President Lyndon B. Johnson moved to pick up Kennedy's poverty program, but also to massively expand it and elevate it in the priorities of his administration's domestic agenda.

In targeting poverty in America, Kennedy was motivated by more than a sense of "right" or responsibility (although those motivations arguably were important). In improving the lot of poor, southern whites -- particularly in Appalachia and the rural South -- Kennedy hoped to win support of southern members of Congress. By bringing these people into the mainstream, Kennedy also hoped to increase the Democratic electorate in the southern and border states and stave off a Republican challenge to the party allegiance of white voters.

Changing Attitudes toward Religion

The 1960 election had thrust religion once again into the political debate. As a Catholic -- the first ever to win the presidency -- Kennedy implicitly challenged the religious status quo in American political life.

The Kennedy years marked the advancement of Jews into high positions in government. Kennedy appointed Jews to his cabinet and to the federal courts, including the Supreme Court; some became close White House advisers. These years also signaled the beginning of the end of the routine exclusion of Jews from high corporate positions, country-club memberships, and exclusive residential neighborhoods, as well as the end of quotas on Jewish admissions to selective colleges and universities. It was no coincidence that many of Kennedy's most fervent backers were liberal Jewish intellectuals, particularly in the universities, and they flocked to be part of the Kennedy administration or serve as outside policy advisers.

Kennedy also gained much political support from his Roman Catholic co-religionists. Catholic votes for the Democratic ticket jumped with Kennedy running for office. But some of this vote was a natural "rebound" after Catholic defections to Eisenhower; had Kennedy not been Catholic, it is arguable that he still would have won much of this vote. Kennedy's election effectively removed the taint of "dual loyalty" which falsely claimed that Catholics owed an allegiance -- and at times a primary allegiance -- to the Pope in Rome. His family's good looks and culture broke stereotypes about Catholic ethnic groups consisting of uncultured and ignorant peasants. Like the Jews, Catholics in the second, third, and fourth generations were rapidly moving up in American society, and moving out from urban areas to the more affluent suburbs.

Status of African-Americans

African-Americans were "the people left behind": crowded into poorer neighborhoods, discriminated against, and actively prevented from obtaining good educations or jobs, victimized by criminals on the streets (and by unscrupulous merchants in stores), unprotected by the law or government. Kennedy had made many promises during the 1960 that he

would improve the lot of African-Americans.

As President, however, he moved slowly in this area. By distancing himself from civil rights leaders and only grudgingly pushing the federal government to protect civil rights workers, the Kennedy administration sent a signal to Southern segregationists that they could effectively defy the laws of the land. Kennedy promised during his election campaign to wipe out "with the stroke of a pen" discrimination in public housing by issuing executive orders. After two years of delay, civil rights activists began sending pens to the White House to prod Kennedy to act. He eventually signed an order banning racial discrimination in wages by federal contractors, but many observers remained disappointed in Kennedy's failure to act with more vigor to redress Civil Rights injustices.

Race Relations

The early 1960s political landscape was overwhelmingly white and middle class, a demographic that did not reflect accurately the breadth of American society. Race remained the great social, cultural, and economic divide. Puerto Ricans had moved into New York, Cuban exiles were flooding Miami, and Mexicans had been arriving in San Diego and Los Angeles for decades. But in absolute numbers and percentage, Hispanic-Americans formed a negligible part of the population (perhaps 2 percent). They were an even smaller portion of the electorate and commanded little or no attention from national policymakers.

The "model minority" group was Asian: the Japanese-Americans on the West Coast and the Chinese-Americans on both coasts. The claim that there was "no juvenile delinquency" in their close-knit communities was a myth, but it symbolized a belief in stereotypes, shared by most Americans, that any racial and ethnic group could "make it" with hard work and the right attitude. The implicit contrast, of course, was with African-Americans, particularly the "underclass" in the large cities. Lost in the contrast was the fact that there were poor Asian families, as well as black "strivers" who had succeeded in making it into the middle class -- and higher. These different stereotypes would later create racial tensions between Asian ethnic groups and African-Americans. During the Kennedy years, there was essentially no national focus on issues involving Asian-Americans, in part because these communities sought little government assistance or interference.

Advancement of Women

Reflecting the gender imbalance so notable in the Arthurian legend of Camelot with which it was later often associated (for different reasons), the Kennedy presidency failed to provide equal opportunity for women. During the Kennedy years, women continued to marry early, have children early, and defer to the career demands of the men in their lives. This seemed particularly true for the circle of high officials in the Kennedy administration. Kennedy's "New Frontiersmen" were just that -- for the most part men -- and women made few gains in federal office during his years in office. Most women who worked in politics in the New Frontier were on the fringes and in subordinate roles. The unmarried women took these roles as a prelude to their later careers as wives; the wives for the most part took on the roles of mothers and hostesses. Even though birth control pills, a factor usually identified as a prime catalyst for the gains of the women's movement, were introduced in the early 1960s, serious challenges to the subordinate status of women did not come until later in the decade.

John F. Kennedy had promised much but never had the opportunity to follow through. It was, in the words of one notable biographer, "an unfinished life." For that reason, assessments of the policies of the Kennedy presidency remain mixed.

Kennedy played a role in revolutionizing American politics. Television began to have a real impact on voters and long, drawn-out election campaigns became the norm. Style became an essential complement to substance.

Before winning the presidency, Kennedy had lived a life of privilege and comfort, and his relatively short congressional career had been unremarkable. Many voters yearned for the dynamism Kennedy's youth and politics implied, but others worried that Kennedy's inexperience made him a poor choice to lead the nation during such a challenging time.

Early errors in judgment, particularly in the Bay of Pigs fiasco, seemingly confirmed these fears. By the summer of 1962, the administration was in trouble. A particularly difficult Cold War climate abroad, an antagonistic Congress at home, increasingly bold activist groups agitating for change, and a discouraging economic outlook all contributed to an increasingly negative view of the Kennedy White House. That impression began to change in the fall of 1962. Skillful statesmanship -- and some luck -- led to some notable American success in the showdown over Cuba. The economic situation improved. Long-running, difficult negotiations finally resulted in a partial nuclear test ban treaty. And the power of Southern segregationists was slowly, but nevertheless steadily, being worn down by the work of Civil Rights activists and occasional limited intervention by the federal government.

But serious issues remained. Throughout the summer and fall of 1963 the situation in South Vietnam deteriorated; by the end of Kennedy's presidency, 16,000 U.S. military "advisers" had been dispatched to the country. More importantly, the administration apparently had no realistic plan to resolve the conflict. In the area of Civil Rights, some progress had been achieved, but these successes had come mostly in spite of -- not because of -- the White House. Bloody conflict was becoming more prevalent on America's streets and racial injustice remained rampant.

Assessments of Kennedy's presidency have spanned a wide spectrum. Early studies, the most influential of which were written by New Frontiersmen close to Kennedy, were openly admiring. They built upon on the collective grief from Kennedy's public slaying -- the quintessential national trauma. Later, many historians focused on the seedier side of Kennedy family dealings and John Kennedy's questionable personal morals. More recent works have tried to find a middle ground.

In nation's popular memory, Kennedy still commands fascination as a compelling, charismatic leader during a period of immense challenge to the American body politic.

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