THE 1960's AND THE KENNEDYS

A full decade has passed since that crisp, frosty day in January, 1961, when "the word went forth that the torch has been passed to a new generation." The Kennedy years had begun—two years, ten months, and two days during which the nation was witness to a rare combination of vigor, vision, grace, and eloquence. The country seemed vibrant, youthful, alive—exhibiting a spirit and style which captured the attention of the whole world. Then, suddenly, it was gone.

Assessments of John F. Kennedy's record have varied widely because he started so many things and completed so few. One very perceptive analysis was offered by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., when he referred to the Kennedy years as a "transitional presidency." The Kennedy administration served as a bridge between political generations, between a government largely oblivious to the struggle for human rights and a government determined to do something about it, between the "silent generation" and the "now generation," between an American society holding fast to traditional values and an American society in which those values were seriously challenged.[1] According to another historian, John Roche, Kennedy "turned on a whole

[1]Quoted in Kenneth Auchincloss, "The Kennedy Years," *Newsweek*, 1 February 1971, p. 21.

The Kennedys, photographed in the family home at Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, during the 1960 presidential campaign. Seated, from left, are Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Rose Kennedy, Joseph P. Kennedy, Jacqueline (Mrs. John) Kennedy, and Edward Kennedy. Standing, from left, are Ethel (Mrs. Robert) Kennedy, Stephen Smith, Jean Kennedy Smith, John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Patricia Kennedy Lawford, Sargent Shriver, Joan (Mrs. Edward) Kennedy, and Peter Lawford.

series of forces in American politics that had been latent. . . . He was responsible for bringing these forces front and center. . . ."[2]

Kennedy kindled within the nation a sense of hope and possibility. Some critics have suggested that he aroused too many unrealistic hopes, and that the inevitable disillusionment accounted for much of the frustration and violence that were widespread in the years following his assassination. Richard Goodwin, a more sympathetic analyst of the New Frontier, believed that Kennedy did not create this sense of optimism by promising gifts. He did it by "raising people's confidence about their own capacities and the country's." That kind of confidence, Goodwin said, "is a prerequisite to any achievement."[3]

"A prerequisite to achievement"—looking back at the early 1960's in the waning light of the twentieth century, we may yet find this to be one of the most accurate characterizations of the presidency of John F. Kennedy. It is a president's job to set the direction in which Americans should move, and to raise their vision. More has been written about Kennedy's style than his substance, but this is not altogether wrong. Style is a crucial element in the United States presidency. Without the ability to lead, to inspire, to release potential energies and create a sense of hope, a president lacks something vital to the office. The very incompleteness of the Kennedy era has cast the effectiveness of his style and the strength of his ideals into bold relief. He will be remembered more for what he championed than what he achieved.

The Kennedy Years

When John F. Kennedy was inaugurated in 1961, a new generation, molded by depression and World War II, came to power. But that generation was destined to walk a difficult road, one strewn with assassinations, disorders, and disastrous foreign adventures.

[2] Quoted in ibid.
[3] Quoted in ibid., p. 22.

John F. Kennedy on July 13, 1960, accepting the Democratic National Convention's first-ballot nomination.

The election of 1960 ranks among the closest in American history. The results were not final until the morning after election day, when returns from California were complete. Kennedy won over the Republican nominee, Richard M. Nixon, who had been Eisenhower's vice-president for two terms, by slightly more than 100,000 votes. The electoral vote stood at 303 for Kennedy and 219 for Nixon. At forty-three, Kennedy became not only the youngest president ever elected, but also the first Catholic ever to hold the nation's highest office.

Presidential campaigns and administrations frequently are characterized by slogans, most of them snatched from an isolated speech of a candidate, all of them defying definition yet all evoking some response, warm or cool. At the turn of the century William McKinley stressed the "Full Dinner Pail." Theodore Roosevelt in 1912 campaigned for the "Square Deal." Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration during the 1930's was tagged the "New Deal." Roosevelt's successor in 1944, Harry S. Truman, called for a "Fair

Deal." By 1960 all reference to "deals" had been dropped. John F. Kennedy promised a "New Frontier." The phrase came from a speech he made to a crowd of 80,000 in the Los Angeles Coliseum following his nomination. "For I stand here tonight," said Kennedy,

> facing west on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretch 3,000 miles behind me, the pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comfort, and sometimes their lives to build a new world here in the West. . . . Their motto was not "Every man for himself," but "All for the common cause. . . ."
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> Today some would say that those struggles are all over, that all the horizons have been explored, that all the battles have been won, that there is no longer an American frontier. But . . . the problems are not all solved and the battles are not all won, and we stand today on the edge of a new frontier—the frontier of the 1960's, a frontier of unknown opportunities and paths, a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats. . . .
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> The new frontier of which I speak is not a set of promises—it is a set of challenges. It sums up not what I intend to *offer* the American people, but what I intend to *ask* of them. . . . It holds out the promise of more sacrifice instead of more security. . . . Beyond that frontier are uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus.
>
> It would be easier to shrink back from that frontier, to look to the safe mediocrity of the past. . . . But I believe the times demand invention, innovation, imagination, decision. I am asking each of you to be new pioneers on that new frontier. . . .
>
> For the harsh facts of the matter are that we stand on this frontier at a turning point in history. . . .

In his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, Kennedy carried forward the themes of a new frontier and of sacrifice, hope, and expectation. He challenged Americans to "ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country," and concluded, "My fellow citi-

zens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man."

What problems concerned the American people in 1960 and 1961? The cold war with the Communist bloc of nations led by the Soviet Union: the conflict was not so intense as it had been, but it persisted. Nuclear armament and defense: an arms race with Russia was well underway. Communism in the western hemisphere: the Castro regime in Cuba had declared itself Communist and people worried that communism might spread from Cuba to other Latin American countries. One foreign-affairs problem was still mostly over the horizon, but it would grow in size and importance during the early 1960's: trouble in Southeast Asia—in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Communist China: "containment" of communism was still the principal United States policy in the Far East, just as it was in Europe. Unemployment: the closing Eisenhower years had witnessed a recession, which unfortunately for Republicans had not bottomed out until October, 1960, too late to help them in the elections the following month. Inflation: gradual, but persistent. Civil rights: full equality for blacks and other minority groups was far from an American achievement as the Kennedy administration began. Poverty: the nation was only beginning to realize that millions of families remained poor in the most prosperous country on earth.

Children playing outside a Harlem tenement on a cold January day.

Kennedy had made campaign statements on most of these problems, although he had offered no concrete programs to solve any of them. But then, neither had his opponent. More than anything else, Kennedy seemed to offer the people the opportunity to kindle a new spirit and hope for a brighter future.

Family Background

The Kennedy family as Americans knew it in the 1960's began in Boston with the arrival of Patrick Kennedy from Ireland about a hundred years before. Boston at that time was still the Yankee capital of the nation. There, old-line, tradition-encrusted Protestants ruled supreme, as they had

since Puritan days, gazing with grave distaste down narrow, cultured nostrils at immigrants, especially the Irish who came in hordes during the 1840's and 1850's. As James MacGregor Burns has written:

> Pat Kennedy was in Boston to stay, but many an Irishman took one look at the city and wanted to catch the next Cunarder [ocean liner] back to the old sod. Boston was a forbidding land. If they could find a place to lay their heads at all, the newcomers were crowded in with the old; often they lived in cellars flooded from backed-up drains, or in garrets only three feet high. About the time Pat Kennedy came to Boston, hundreds of basements housed five to fifteen persons each, with at least one holding thirty-nine every night. One sink might serve a house, one privy a neighborhood. Filth spread through courts and alleys, and with it tuberculosis, cholera, and smallpox, which thrived most in the poorest districts where the Irish lived.
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> To be sure, by working on the docks or elevators or freight yards, a man could make a quicker dollar here than back home. But prices were high, too, and families could not keep a pig or cow or garden in tenement Boston. And work was hard—usually fifteen hours a day seven days a week, with no Sabbath and none of the pastoral pleasures of farm life.
>
> The Irish were the lowest of the low, lower than the Germans or Scandinavians or Jews, or even the Negroes, who had come earlier and edged a bit up the economic ladder. Irishmen were lucky if they could find part-time work on the dock or in the ditch; Irish girls hoped at best to get work as maids in hotels or in big houses on Beacon Hill. Around 1850, Irish transient paupers outnumbered the sum of all other nationalities. The people from Ireland were a proletariat without machine skills or capital. Their sections of Boston were the land of the shanty Irish.
>
> The only defense the Irish had was the classic weapon of oppressed people—solidarity. Tighter and tighter they bound themselves with the thongs of their national identity. Thrown back on their families and neighborhoods, on their

> priests and wakes and churches, on their memories of life in Ireland, they grew fiercely independent of the Yankees and the others around them. . . . Everything conspired to make this process easy—the brogue [Irish accent], the church, oppression in Ireland, and shared hardships in the migration and in the congested alleys of Boston.[4]

For many Irishmen, politics offered an upward avenue from the mire of poverty and discrimination. Patrick Kennedy became a saloonkeeper—neither the first nor the last Irish immigrant to do so—and became active in ward politics. The ward remained the extent of his political interest, but within those limits Patrick Kennedy was a power to reckon with. During the course of municipal political maneuvering, slate-making, and electioneering, Kennedy became acquainted with John F. Fitzgerald, a native-born Irishman later known as "Honey Fitz." Both men gradually achieved middle-class respectability, moving from the realm of "pig-in-the-parlor" Irish to that of "lace-curtain" Irish.

Fitzgerald became mayor of Boston in 1910. Six years later, running on the Democratic ticket, he unsuccessfully challenged Henry Cabot Lodge for a seat in the U.S. Senate. Lodge, a Boston Brahmin—member of the ruling class—and a staunch Republican, represented Massachusetts in the Senate for thirty years, from 1893 to 1924.

Joseph P. Kennedy, eldest son of Patrick, was born in 1881. Graduated from Harvard in 1912, Joseph had early learned the power of money. During summer vacations, with a partner, he took in thousands of dollars from sightseeing bus excursions to Lexington, where embattled farmers had stood in 1775 to begin the American Revolution. Vowing to make a million dollars by the time he was thirty-five, Joseph P. Kennedy made much more much sooner, mainly from investment banking, stock speculation,

[4]James MacGregor Burns, *John Kennedy: A Political Profile* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1961), pp. 6–7. Copyright © 1961 by James MacGregor Burns. Reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

and the movie business. By the 1920's he was a legend in the business world. In 1914 the Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys joined forces. Joseph married Rose Fitzgerald, the daughter of Honey Fitz.

Joseph P. Kennedy.

All his life Joseph P. Kennedy had been fiercely competitive and he had reaped handsome rewards. He brought up his nine children in an intensely competitive atmosphere, encouraging intrafamily struggles for attention and achievement. Kennedy had high ambitions for his children, particularly his four boys, and early planned political careers for them. In the Kennedy family and around the dinner table, public affairs, not money and business, was the subject of conversation. "I can hardly remember a mealtime," Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., quoted Robert Kennedy as saying,

> when the conversation was not dominated by what Franklin D. Roosevelt was doing or what was happening around the world. . . . Since public affairs had dominated so much of our actions and discussions, public life seemed really an extension of family life." The father confronted the children with large questions, encouraged them to have opinions of their own, demanded that their opinions make sense, wrote them endless letters when he was away (which was often), told them they had an obligation to take part in public life and instilled convictions of purpose and possibility. As John Kennedy put it one night at the White House: "My father wasn't around as much as some fathers when I was young; but, whether he was there or not, he made his children feel that they were the most important things in the world to him. He was so terribly interested in everything we were doing. He held up standards for us, and he was very tough when we failed to meet those standards. The toughness was important.[5]

Aside from contributions to the Democratic party, Joseph P. Kennedy himself had little to do with politics. His generosity brought him a seat on the federal Securi-

[5]Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days, John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 79.

ties and Exchange Commission, awarded by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and later in the Roosevelt administration, the ambassadorship to England. As ambassador, Kennedy expressed opinions favorable to Hitler and the facist German government, and opposed U.S. aid to the Allies. He resigned his post after the 1940 elections.

John F. Kennedy, born in 1917, attended a public school for a time in Bronxville, New York, where the family had moved from Boston. Later he went to Canterbury, a Catholic school in Connecticut, and finally to Choate, a prestigious preparatory school, also in Connecticut. From Choate, Kennedy moved on to Harvard, graduating in 1940. In 1941 he joined the navy and served as commander of a PT boat in the Pacific theater, becoming a hero and winning medals for rescuing his crew after his boat was rammed by a Japanese destroyer.

John Kennedy at the age of eight.

Lieutenant John Kennedy in 1945, being awarded a medal for rescuing his crew. Kennedy's back was badly injured in the attack on the PT boat; it gave him considerable pain for the rest of his life, and he had to wear a brace.

Early Political Career

Kennedy first won political office in 1946, at the age of twenty-nine. After hard and careful campaigning he soundly defeated nine other candidates for the Democratic congressional nomination in Boston's 11th District. Since the 11th had consistently gone Democratic for decades, a primary victory was for all purposes a victory in the general election, which Kennedy won in November, 1946, without campaigning strenuously. With no difficulty Kennedy held his seat for two more terms before running for the Senate in 1952. That year he defeated Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, the son of the man who had beaten Kennedy's grandfather in 1916. Kennedy's 70,000-vote victory over Lodge was outstanding in a year in which Massachusetts' electoral votes went to Dwight D. Eisenhower and its governor's chair also went to a Republican.

During his first two years in the Senate, Kennedy devoted much of his time to the problems of New England and Massachusetts. Then in 1954 he ran afoul of the McCarthy issue, which was heading for a showdown in the Senate. Joseph P. Kennedy had been a McCarthy supporter. He had contributed to McCarthy's 1952 campaign and had entertained the Wisconsin senator in his home.

Jacqueline and the two Kennedy children, John, Jr., and Caroline, became a favorite subject of news and magazine photographers. This picture of them was taken in 1961.

During the 1952 campaign, Lodge had come out in favor of McCarthy's re-election; John F. Kennedy, despite urging from his liberal advisors that he at least denounce McCarthyism if not the man himself, evaded the issue. He remained friendly, but not cordial, toward McCarthy. His brother Robert, now a lawyer, worked from January to August, 1953, as counsel on McCarthy's Senate committee, resigning after intense disagreements with McCarthy's close associate Roy Cohn. When the Senate voted to "condemn" McCarthy in December, 1954, Kennedy was in the hospital for surgery to cure a recurrent back ailment.

While recuperating, Kennedy turned to writing. Earlier, just out of Harvard, he had published *Why England Slept,* a reworking of a thesis he had written as a senior. The book, an analysis of England's failure to take action against German aggression before 1939, became a best seller. *Profiles in Courage,* a compilation of essays on how certain American politicians had met crises in their careers, published in 1956, was an even greater success. It sold in the thousands of copies and won its author a Pulitzer prize for biography.

In 1956 Kennedy made his debut as a national politician. The Democrats that year nominated Adlai Stevenson, former governor of Illinois, to run for the second time against Eisenhower. Kennedy fought for the vice-presidential nomination, but lost to Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee. Two years later Kennedy won re-election to the Senate.

Overall, Kennedy's record in the Senate was hardly liberal—especially when matched against the records of such men as Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota, Paul Douglas of Illinois, and Wayne Morse of Oregon. Yet it could not be said that he was conservative either. Kennedy, who disavowed allegiance to "orthodox liberalism," tended to steer a middle course or, as his critics saw it, ride the fence. He enjoyed southern conservative support for legislation he favored in Congress, such as joint construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway by Canada and the United States; he returned the favor by failing to take a firm and consistent stand in support of civil rights legislation. With much of his constituency in Massachusetts supporting McCarthy, Kennedy straddled that issue when he did not evade it entirely. He made some contributions as chairman of the Senate Reorganization Subcommittee, which considered proposals for governmental reorganization and greater efficiency and passed them on to the Government Operations Committee. Kennedy supported measures to reorganize budgeting, accounting, and appropriations procedures, most of them developed by a commission on government reorganization originally appointed by Harry S. Truman and headed by Herbert Hoover.

By now Kennedy was enjoying considerable national attention. *Time* did a cover story on him, and *U.S. News & World Report* featured both him and Robert in one issue. The *Saturday Evening Post* carried a story on the entire Kennedy family. *McCall's* and *Redbook* featured John Kennedy, but more particularly his glamorous wife, Jacqueline Bouvier, whom he had married in 1953. Three years before convention time, Kennedy was clearly organizing a campaign for the 1960 Democratic presidential nomination.

Winning the Presidency

By mid-1959, in all the public opinion polls, Kennedy was leading all other Democratic hopefuls as the likely 1960 nominee. Toward the end of the year, he stepped up his personal campaigning, speaking at Democratic fund-raising dinners and other political gatherings in several states. He acquired a forty-passenger airplane he named *Victura,* after a sailboat he had as a child, and hired a full-time crew. He added to his personal staff and carefully developed plans to enter several presidential primary elections early in 1960, beginning with New Hampshire. His brother Robert became campaign manager.

John F. Kennedy won the New Hampshire primary, as well as primaries in Wisconsin, West Virginia, Ohio, California, and other states. His principal opponent was Hubert Humphrey, senator from Minnesota. Yet primary victories count for little at a national convention if party chieftains choose to ignore them. At a convention, a tight organization that can keep delegates committed and in line, the blessing of politicians who hold vast power in their states, and promises of rewards to supporters who remain faithful count for much more toward the nomination than winning primaries. Despite his defeats by Kennedy in the primaries, Humphrey was still a contender. Even more formidable was Lyndon B. Johnson, senator from Texas. Through long years as a Senate leader—his tenure dated from Roosevelt's New Deal days—Johnson had accumulated much political power. The convention also contained among its delegates many supporters of Adlai Stevenson. They hoped to see him nominated a third time, although Stevenson himself was not warm to the idea.

Lyndon B. Johnson.

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., has described the convention's climax and Kennedy's nomination on the first ballot:

> On Tuesday evening, the California delegation, in which the Kennedys had invested much energy and hope, split almost evenly. Later that evening, Stevenson met with a group of friendly delegates from New York; the emotions of the day were plunging him, against his intention, into the maelstrom. The next morning Hubert Humphrey

declared for him. At eight-thirty that morning Robert Kennedy convened his meeting at the Biltmore. He ran through the states, one by one, to get the rock-bottom Kennedy tally. He was crisp and detached. "I don't want generalities or guesses," he said. "There's no point in fooling ourselves. I want the cold facts. I want to hear only the votes we are guaranteed on the first ballot." He cross-examined his people as they reported, practically insisting on the name, address and telephone number of every half-vote. The result showed 740 delegates—21 short of a majority. Bobby said that if Jack had 720 votes by the time the roll call reached Washington, enough votes would shift for victory. But the outcome was far from certain. California was falling apart. North Dakota was held by half a vote under the unit rule. Idaho might fall away if the governor felt that anyone else was going to become the candidate for Vice-President. At one point Carmine De Sapio [New York City political boss] had proposed to Bobby that thirty New York votes go to Johnson on the first ballot; they would be definite for Kennedy on the second. Bobby said to hell with that. He concluded his exhortation to the troops: "We can't miss a trick in the next twelve hours. If we don't win tonight, we're dead."

Then on to the Sports Arena, surrounded by lines of men and women chanting for Stevenson. The nominations began: Sam Rayburn for Johnson: Orville Freeman for Kennedy, gallantly improvising when the teleprompter went dead; then Eugene McCarthy, in much the best speech of the convention so far, for Stevenson. The Stevenson demonstration was sustained and riotous. After it had gone on for a long time, Governor Collins of Florida, the permanent chairman, ordered the lights turned off in the auditorium in an effort to bring the clamor to an end. There were a few moments of singular beauty—everything black except for spotlights stabbing into the vast darkness, flashing across the delegates and demonstrators on the floor. This was the last burst of defiance. The balloting began. By Washington, Kennedy had 710 votes; and, as Bobby had forecast, the rush began. In a moment Wyoming made him the nominee.

The hall cheered its choice with enthusiasm. But pools of bitterness remained. Many Stevensonians were unreconciled. The hope of the nation and the labor of a decade, as they saw it, had been crushed by a steamroller operated by tough and ruthless young men. The next morning I started to urge on Robert Kennedy the importance of doing something to conciliate the Stevenson people and to bring them into the campaign. He listened patiently for a moment, then put his hand on my knee and said, "Arthur, human nature requires that you allow us forty-eight hours. Adlai has given us a rough time over the last three days. In forty-eight hours, I will do anything you want, but right now I don't want to hear anything about the Stevensonians. You must allow for human nature.[6]

Next came the choice of a vice-presidential candidate. Recognizing Lyndon B. Johnson's political strength and the fact that he was from Texas, a state with twenty-three electoral votes, Kennedy selected him as his running mate.

Although he was nationally prominent, Kennedy was relatively unknown to voters in comparison to his Republican opponent, Richard M. Nixon. Nixon had been in national politics since the late 1940's, serving in the House, in the Senate, and for eight years as Eisenhower's vice-president. Kennedy needed immediate and vast public exposure, and he got it, thanks to Nixon's agreeing to a series of television "debates" during which the candidates presented their views and answered questions from reporters. This was the first time in history that presidential candidates had met face to face before an audience of millions. To most Americans, Kennedy seemed poised, at ease, self-confident, knowledgeable, and quick-witted. Although he later recovered, during the initial encounters Nixon by contrast seemed ill at ease, humorless, and unsure of himself, and he never succeeded in erasing entirely the image he first projected. Some observers believed that those televised meetings had a greater influence on the election than any other single factor.

[6] Ibid., pp. 38–39.

The religious issue was an important factor in the campaign too, at least in the beginning. Al Smith, former governor of New York, had been the only other Catholic to seek the presidency. Smith, a Democrat, ran in 1928, and if even the religious issue had been removed, it is doubtful that he could have won in a period of prosperity for which Republicans received major credit in the public mind. Yet many people at the time expressed a deep fear of having a Catholic in the White House; some people actually believed that if Smith were elected the pope would have a direct pipeline to Washington and considerable influence on the government. In 1960 Kennedy met the issue head on. He openly discussed his religion and his views concerning church-state relationships—which were no different from any Protestant's—and he went out of his way to meet with Protestant churchmen to explain his position. By not evading the issue, Kennedy in effect put the bigot tag on anyone who voiced the intention of voting against him because of his religion. For many people this was an uncomfortable label in America in 1960.

Despite his hard-working and effective organization, his exposure on television, and his success in turning aside the religious issue, Kennedy won no big and easy victory. The vote was painfully close. He could claim no mandate from the people, no matter what his program might be.

In the opinion of James MacGregor Burns, expressed in his book *John Kennedy: A Political Profile,* the country in 1960 needed two kinds of leadership. One Burns called "creative leadership," which he defined as seeking "positively to change the shape of public opinion," in contrast to "responding to political pressures and gusts of public opinion." The other he termed "charismatic,"

> the capacity to inspire, to lift the hearts, to exalt, to make people lose themselves in a cause they may not fully comprehend. Such leadership calls for magical qualities of heart and spirit, of joy and earnestness, indeed of rhetoric and passion, that are bequeathed to few men. It calls for faith in leadership on the part of the people, and the capacity of the leader to invoke and deserve that faith. . . .

Charismatic leadership can be dangerous, too, for it may demand too much trust, blind faith, and dependence on a father image. But at its best—and assuming always the safeguards of free speech and fair elections—that leadership may be essential to guide a democracy through perilous times.[7]

And "charismatic" was the one word among all others most often used to describe John F. Kennedy during his thirty-four months in the White House.

The Domestic Record

John F. Kennedy was articulate, witty, charming, intelligent, and a strong believer in style, an outstanding member of a family that came close—for a brief time—to being America's first and only royal family. In office he surrounded himself with bright young men as advisors and heads of government agencies and departments. If nothing else, from the beginning the Kennedy administration displayed vigor. Exactly how the administration would get the country moving no one knew, but its members seemed to know a few things they wished to react against. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., summed it up:

> . . . In motion the country was certainly not. The fifties had hardly been a notable season of innovation in our national life. The politics of boredom had produced widespread public apathy. National policy had been complacent and lethargic. Young people had become so circumspect that they were known as the "silent generation." Economic growth had puttered along at an average rate of 2.5 to 3 percent a year. There had been recessions in 1954 and in 1958. In the early spring of 1960, the economy had begun to sink into another recession. Gross national product stagnated. Unemployment increased between February and October. If Kennedy were to start the country moving again, he would have to begin with the economy.[8]

[7] Burns, *John Kennedy*, pp. 279–280.
[8] Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, p. 620.

In messages to Congress dealing with the economy the president called for an extension of unemployment insurance, urban redevelopment funds, an increase in the minimum wage, and more federal money for housing. During the session Congress passed an area redevelopment bill, raised the minimum wage, extended social security benefits, and increased benefits for the unemployed. These measures came too late to have much effect on the last Eisenhower recession, which had hit bottom in October, 1960, and which was already over by the spring of 1961. Business picked up, unemployment dropped, and the Gross National Product began to move upward again.

Requests for economic legislation represented only a few flakes of a virtual snowstorm of special messages the Kennedy administration loosed on Congress during its first few months in office. The messages John F. Kennedy sent to Capitol Hill dealt with federal aid for health research and hospital care, aid to education, housing and community development, reforms in the system of federal aid to agriculture, transportation, civil rights, public welfare, consumer protection, and federal aid for highway construction. Although Kennedy had a Democratic Congress, it was not one with which he enjoyed smooth relations, and he proved reluctant to put his administration on the line to fight with Congress over bills he requested. No strong civil rights bill was passed, for example, nor were any bills reducing taxes, which Kennedy favored but did not push hard for. Nor were there any large federal outlays for education or for urban renewal or to combat poverty. Congress did vote funds for highway construction, and for agricultural price supports and payments to farmers for not growing crops.

Kennedy took direct, personal measures against inflation. In the spring of 1962, steel workers negotiated a new contract that called for wage increases. The contract was regarded by many economists as noninflationary. Since labor had exercised restraint in its demands, most people assumed that the steel industry had also accepted limitations and would forego price increases. But this assumption proved wrong, as Kennedy learned when Roger Blough, chairman of the board of United States Steel, called on

him with the news that U.S. Steel would boost prices by $6 a ton. Bethlehem Steel announced price increases the next day. Kennedy's reaction was swift and bitter. "My father always told me," he said to an aide, "that all businessmen were sons-of-bitches, but I never believed it till now." Later he explained that his father had referred particularly to steel executives. Quickly reported in the press, the remark as well as Kennedy's subsequent actions did nothing to improve relations between the administration and the business community, which had been none too good since the inauguration. Kennedy forced a roll-back in steel prices by ordering that government purchases be made from companies which had not raised prices and by beginning an investigation of possible collusive price-fixing among steel companies. He also talked personally with heads of companies which had not put through price increases and persuaded them to hold the line.

Many people applauded Kennedy's action. But to businessmen, it simply confirmed their suspicions that the administration was strongly antibusiness. It was not. Kennedy and his administration did nothing to harm business. His fiscal and monetary policies were quite conservative and restrained, and while businessmen did not enjoy the influence they had in Washington under the Eisenhower administration, their profits did not suffer. The 1960's proved to be a decade of unprecedented prosperity.

Foreign Affairs

Fidel Castro in 1961.

In 1959 the United States government and people had applauded Fidel Castro's successful revolution against the right-wing Cuban dictator, Fulgencio Batista. But as the Castro government became increasingly anti-United States, particularly as it expropriated American property in Cuba, enthusiasm had waned and diplomatic relations were finally severed. The Eisenhower administration had agreed to a plan to aid and train an anti-Castro army whose goal was the overthrow of the Castro government. The army had been recruited from the thousands of Cubans who had fled the island, and a training program

conducted by U.S. military officers was well underway when Kennedy took office. He allowed the training to continue and finally approved a plan to invade Cuba in the spring of 1961, although he specified that no U.S. forces be involved.

The invasion, launched from Guatemala, was a complete disaster. Well aware of the plans, Castro met the invaders with strong forces at the Bay of Pigs, the landing point. The small invading army was badly cut up and many of its members were captured. Unable to keep its deep involvement in the fiasco a secret, the United States government suffered a severe diplomatic setback. The Kennedy administration needed many months to recover.

Little more than a year later, in the fall of 1962, Cuba again became the focal point of world attention, this time as the center of confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. American photoreconnaissance planes brought home evidence of missile sites under construction in Cuba, and it was quickly apparent that technicians and equipment to build the sites had come from Russia. Kennedy reacted by alerting several units of the air force and the army, by instituting a naval blockade of Cuba, and by demanding that Russia dismantle the sites and remove the missiles. The possibility of nuclear war bore down heavily on the people of the entire world during those few October days. It was not at all certain that Russia would withdraw, and Kennedy had left no room for diplomatic maneuvering. Russia finally turned back ships bound for Cuba and removed the missiles.

Later, critics of Kennedy's actions in the Cuban missile crisis concluded that his massive response was unnecessary. Some said that his actions were prompted at least in part by a desire to make his administration look good in the upcoming congressional elections. Others pointed out that, because relations with Russia had not been good, Kennedy felt compelled to show the Soviets that he too could be cool and tough in a crisis. Observers also pointed out that Nikita Khrushchev, the Russian premier, offered to pull the missiles out of Cuba in exchange for the dismantling of U.S. missiles in Turkey, missiles which were aimed at

Nikita Khrushchev speaking at the United Nations.

the Soviet Union. Actually, Kennedy had ordered the Turkish missile sites eliminated before the Cuban crisis because they were obsolete. This decision was not made public and Kennedy refused to bargain. The idea of a tough, young president grimly but courageously facing the possibility of nuclear war to protect his country's sovereignty and vigorously meeting a Communist threat thrilled many Americans. In retrospect, it seemed altogether possible that Kennedy played with fire unnecessarily.

Kennedy and Khrushchev leaving the Soviet embassy in Vienna on June 4, 1961, after their final talk.

In the spring of 1961, soon after the Bay of Pigs fiasco and before the missile crisis, John F. Kennedy had traveled to Vienna to confer with Nikita Khrushchev. The president and the premier had discussed, among other things, problems about Berlin, space exploration, and nationalism in Southeast Asia. The talks resolved no problems nor did they do much to improve Soviet-American relations. Later in 1961, to stem the flow of thousands of refugees from East Germany through Berlin to West Germany, the Soviets divided the city east and west by a wall that was heavily guarded day and night. In building the wall, the Soviets had broken all prior agreements to preserve free access through the partitioned city, but there was nothing the United States could do about it without risking all-out war. However, when Khrushchev next declared that Russia would sign a separate peace treaty with Germany, threatening to eliminate U.S. control and influence there, Kennedy responded by ordering troops mobilized. The situation became a standoff and no treaty was signed.

In June, 1963, Kennedy visited West Berlin, where he was wildly received by huge crowds and where he made a strong speech, saying, in part:

> There are many people in the world who really don't understand, or say they don't, what is the greatest issue between the free world and the communist world.
>
> Let them come to Berlin!
>
> There are some who say that communism is the wave of the future.
>
> Let them come to Berlin!

> And there are some who say in Europe and elsewhere we can work with the communists.
>
> Let them come to Berlin!
>
> And there are even a few who say that it is true that communism is an evil system, but it permits us to make economic progress.
>
> *Lass sie nach Berlin kommen!* Let them come to Berlin!

And Kennedy concluded:

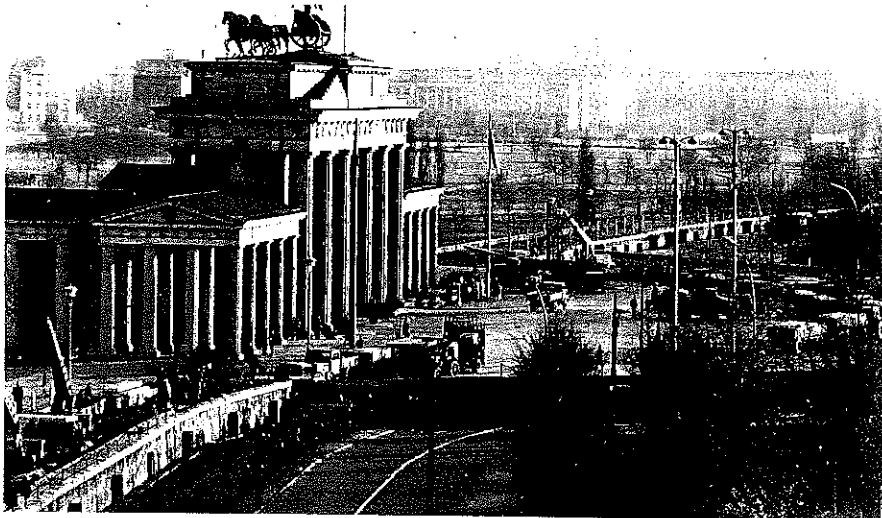
> All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and, therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words *"Ich bin ein Berliner."*

Kennedy did achieve one important goal with respect to Soviet-American relations. In 1963 the two countries signed a limited treaty banning the testing of nuclear weapons in the atmosphere.

Kennedy and Latin America

John F. Kennedy gave particular attention to Latin America. He visited Venezuela and Colombia in December, 1961, where he was heartily welcomed, and Mexico in June, 1962. His administration pinned a great deal of hope on a program of economic aid called the Alliance for Progress. The program was designed to help Latin American countries industrialize and overcome problems of social inequality and poverty. The intentions behind it were excellent. As Victor Alba has written:

> What made President Kennedy different from his predecessors in the White House was his new interpretation of the American national interest in Latin America. Before Kennedy, this interest had been seen as that of maintaining order in Latin America; it therefore coincided with the interests of the oligarchic groups. Kennedy believed that the interests of the United States coincided with the interests of the populist movements and with the social changes that were tending to make Latin America a society similar—in principle—to that of the United States. For in the twentieth century, the only revolutionary society in the



The Brandenburg Gate between East and West Berlin on November 20, 1961. The wall flanking the gate was built during the previous night by the Communists.

world has been the American; this society has exerted an influence for social change independently of the official policy of the government and even, perhaps, of the wishes of the people of the United States. The traditional U.S. diplomacy in Latin America has tended to counterbalance the influence of American society. Kennedy wanted to turn that influence to advantage.

The result of this new way of looking at the national interest—which was less clear and sharp than suggested here, and subject to many contradictory influences—was the Alliance for Progress. The Alliance gathered up the aspirations of Latin American populism and tried to inject them with American techniques. The Alliance—as it was conceived—had for its object the financing of social change; that is, it sought to fill the gaps that are produced in every economy as a consequence of structural changes: a transitory drop in agricultural production resulting from agrarian reform, withdrawal of investments and flight of capital because of fiscal reforms, and so forth. In short, the Alliance was entrusted with the task of financing a peaceful revolution in Latin America.

But, Alba went on, the Alliance for Progress was based on faulty premises, and as an instrument of social change it was doomed to failure:

> The concept of the Alliance for Progress was based on the assumption that the oligarchic forces would accept change, for three reasons: fear of Castroism, pressure from the United States, and pressure from the populist movements. Events proved this to be a bad calculation. Castroism, to the extent that American diplomacy contained and isolated it, especially after October, 1962, ceased to be a threat; American pressure was of no avail in an epoch in which any small country could defy the United States (or the Soviet Union) with impunity; and the populist movements were unable to arouse the middle sectors from their passivity. The only thing left to sustain the Alliance was the possibility of exerting pressure from below, of awaking and organizing the submerged masses. But American diplomacy either did not dare desire this or, having desired it, could do nothing without the collaboration of elements in Latin America that were capable of working among the submerged masses. And at the time, these elements did not exist.

Funds to carry out Alliance programs had to be channelled through the bureaucracies of both the United States and the Latin American countries. And Latin American governments, most of them, were in the hands of wealthy, aristocratic oligarchies that had ruled for decades. The Alliance, wrote Alba, was "expected to bring about the suicide of a social system, something that has never happened." Within a short time Latin American governments converted the Alliance into just another plan for aid. Concluded Alba:

> The result of all this has been that the Alliance, although its machinery and phraseology have survived, has been changed into a plan for economic and technical aid but not for social change. The oligarchic system, after incorporating into itself the middle sectors of society, also incorporated the Alliance. This was not done through any

government conspiracy or conscious plan. It was the result of the spontaneous action of the oligarchic governments, the inability of the experts to understand the social possibilities of the Alliance, the passivity of the forces that favored social change, and the tendency of every bureaucracy to perpetuate itself and to bureaucratize whatever is put in its charge.[9]

The Peace Corps, which Kennedy established by executive order and later sought legislation for in Congress, fared much better than the Alliance for Progress. The idea of serving for little more than expenses among the poor of foreign countries appealed to many young Americans. Thousands volunteered to work abroad, teaching and helping provide health care and other services in countries in Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere.

Kennedy and Vietnam

United States interest in Vietnam dated from the Truman administration. Thrown out of Indochina by the Japanese in 1941, the French fought for nearly a decade after World War II to make the area once again a colony. Yet even with considerable aid from the United States—by 1954 American dollars were paying about eighty percent of the war's cost—the French could not overcome nationalist resistance in Vietnam. President Eisenhower refused to send American troops or aircraft to support the French, who finally accepted defeat and withdrew in 1954.

In July, 1954, representatives from the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, Communist China, Cambodia, Laos, and the two Vietnamese governments—the French-supported Bao Dai government in the south and the nationalist Vietminh government in the north—met in Geneva, Switzerland, to determine the fate of Vietnam. Although only France and the Vietminh government signed the resulting agreement, it was supported by all the other participants, with two exceptions, the United States and the Bao Dai government.

[9] Victor Alba, *The Latin Americans* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969), pp. 293–295.

In accordance with the agreement, Vietnam was split along the seventeenth parallel. Ho Chi Minh, the Communist leader of the Vietminh government, became president of North Vietnam. With the help of the United States, Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic nationalist, became president of South Vietnam. The Geneva agreement had provided that free elections were to be held by July, 1956, to decide under which of the two governments Vietnam would be reunited. The elections never took place, however, because both the United States and Diem realized that probably he would not win. Ho Chi Minh was still very popular in the south as well as the north, while Diem's often brutal tactics for consolidating his control of the south had made him many enemies, especially among the numerous and powerful Buddhists. With his refusal to hold elections, Diem became in effect a dictator, and opposition to his regime sharply increased. In 1960, several insurgent groups combined to form the National Liberation Front, a well-organized political and military movement which set about to overthrow the Diem government. With the help of arms and other supplies from North Vietnam, the NLF's military wing, the Vietcong—a highly dedicated, highly disciplined army of guerrilla fighters—soon gained control of substantial portions of the South Vietnamese countryside. When Kennedy took office in 1961, it seemed entirely possible that the NLF would achieve its goal before too long and that Vietnam would be reunited under a Communist government.

Ho Chi Minh. The name is a pseudonym meaning "Ho the Enlightener"; his real name is unknown. Ho traveled to Europe as a merchant seaman about 1914. He worked as a cook in London and as a photographer in Paris before becoming a Communist in 1920. From then on, he worked full time to organize nationalist revolutionary groups in Thailand, India, and China as well as Vietnam.

The policy of containing communism in the Far East had been inaugurated during the Truman administration with American aid to the French in Vietnam and the direct involvement of American troops in Korea, and the policy had remained in force throughout the eight years of the Eisenhower administration. The "domino theory," which held that if one nation fell to communism its neighbors would inevitably follow, was also accepted by most of Kennedy's advisors. The question that concerned Kennedy in 1961, then, was not so much whether communism should be contained in Vietnam, but rather how the United States could best help to do it.

In 1971, the *New York Times*—without government authorization—published what came to be known as the "Pentagon Papers," a collection of reports on the Vietnam war prepared by members of the Pentagon staff. According to the *New York Times,*

> The Pentagon study shows President Kennedy facing three main questions on Vietnam during his term in office: whether to make an irrevocable commitment to prevent a Communist victory; whether to commit ground combat units to achieve his ends; whether to give top priority to the military battle against the Vietcong or to the political reforms necessary for winning popular support.
>
> President Kennedy's response during 34 months in office, as the Pentagon account tells it, was to increase American [military] advisors from the internationally accepted level of 685 to roughly 16,000, to put Americans into combat situations—resulting in a tenfold increase in American combat casualties in one year—and eventually to inject the United States into the internal South Vietnamese maneuvering that finally toppled the Diem regime.
>
> The judgment of the Pentagon study is that while President Kennedy's actions stopped short of the fundamental decision to commit ground troops, nonetheless, "the limited-risk gamble undertaken by Eisenhower had been transformed into an unlimited commitment under Kennedy." Later, more cautiously, the study says that Mr. Kennedy's policies produced a "broad commitment" to Vietnam's defense, giving priority to the military aspects of the war over political reforms.[10]

Ngo Dinh Diem at his summer home in Pleiku in August, 1963.

The limited suggestions for political reform that American advisors did offer made little headway with the autocratic Diem, whose government had become increasingly corrupt. On November 1, 1963, Diem was overthrown in a military coup led by General Duong Van Minh. Diem

[10] Neil Sheehan, Hedrick Smith, E. W. Kenworthy, and Fox Butterfield, *The Pentagon Papers* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), pp. 83–84. Copyright © 1971 by The New York Times Company. By permission of Bantam Books, Inc.

and his brother were later murdered. Although it has never been proved that the United States government actively assisted the South Vietnamese army officers who engineered the coup—as Diem's sister-in-law, Madame Nu, and others have charged—it is clear that President Kennedy and the members of his cabinet knew of the plot and did not attempt to stop it. In January, 1964, Duong Van Minh was overthrown by another general, Nguyen Khanh, and after that leadership changed a number of times until June, 1965, when Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky established a military regime that lasted and was later sanctioned by general elections.

By the end of 1963, the United States not only had 16,000 men in Vietnam but considerable equipment as well. The nation was firmly committed to a policy of saving South Vietnam from the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese who supported them with arms and, it was believed, with guerrillas infiltrated across the border. In August, 1964, following two incidents in the Gulf of Tonkin in which American ships were reportedly attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats, President Johnson sent planes to bomb naval installations in North Vietnam. From that point on, the war escalated rapidly. North Vietnam sent regular ground combat troops into the south; the United States sent more and more men and equipment. By the end of 1965, there were 175,000 U.S. servicemen in South Vietnam, not counting 40,000 sailors stationed on U.S. naval vessels off the coast.

At home, criticism of American policy in Vietnam grew and eventually reached a peak in the late 1960's. Many of those who wrote about Vietnam blamed Kennedy for involving the United States so deeply. In *The New York Review of Books,* Ronald Steele wrote:

> Like the Wall Street financiers whose advice he sought and whom he beseeched to join his Cabinet, John F. Kennedy was firmly committed to the imperial foreign policy evolved by [Dean] Acheson [Truman's secretary of state] and [John Foster] Dulles [Eisenhower's secretary of state] in the late Forties and early Fifties. He drew his

advisers from the great universities, foundations, and corporate offices and gave them powerful positions in the national security bureaucracy. There they provided him with scenarios for nuclear warfare, "revolutionary development" programs to combat communism, and green beret shock troops to subdue peasant revolutionaries. These advisers considered themselves to be liberals, which indeed they were, as we use that word in the United States. They believed that world peace rested on an ideological balance of power between communists and anti-communists, that economic development would bring political democracy to feudal societies, and that the preservation of an informal empire of client states and dependencies was a vital principle of American foreign policy.

Scarred by the Depression and Munich [where Allied leaders, meeting in 1938, attempted to appease Hitler by allowing him to take Czechoslovakia unopposed], honed on the cold war, and eager to demonstrate their pragmatism, they flocked to Washington to answer the summoning trumpet of the New Frontier. Whether they were Republicans or Democrats, lawyers or professors, they shared one quality: they were fascinated by power. . . .

For the cold war liberals, power was the fatal temptation. Equating revolution with communism, they were inherently counterrevolutionary because they feared that changes in the status quo would alter the world power balance. They did not shrink from armed intervention, but they recognized that the old doctrine of massive retaliation had become too dangerous. Instead, they evolved a strategy of "flexible response" that was based upon a huge increase in conventional and nuclear arms. . . .

Vietnam was a liberal's war. Not a general's war, as professional radicals would like to believe, not the bureaucracy's war, as [John Kenneth] Galbraith concludes. Not entirely Kennedy's war, as [Louis] Heren [in *No Hail, No Farewell*], sometimes implies, nor LBJ's war, as [Theodore] Sorensen [in *The Kennedy Legacy*] would have it. It was a war conceived, promoted, and directed by intellectuals fascinated with power and eager to prove their toughness and resolve. These liberal intellectuals served

Kennedy, as they later served Johnson, with single-minded passion, often despite objections from the military. It was no less than General MacArthur . . . who told Kennedy to avoid a military buildup in Vietnam, that the domino theory was ridiculous, and that domestic problems should have first priority. Kennedy was reportedly "stunned" by this advice, which was so contrary to that given him by advisers eager to try their counterinsurgency shock troops against the Viet Cong.

But Kennedy was not stunned enough to take MacArthur's advice. He sent American troops to Vietnam and embraced the theories of his hawkish advisers because they corresponded to his own ideas of toughness. It was he who boned up on the manuals of Mao [Tse-tung] and Che [Guevara], then ordered the expansion of the Special Forces, and, over the army's objection, reinstated the green beret as the symbol of the elite counterguerrilla units. Instead of Eisenhower's small aid program to Vietnam, he increased it, and behaved as though the preservation of the Saigon regime was essential to American survival. . . .[11]

Averell Harriman—ambassador to Russia under FDR, assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs under JFK, and Vietnam peace negotiator under LBJ—testifying before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in 1970. At that time, he said, "The simple truth is that there is no way of achieving our political objectives in Vietnam through military action."

The bombing of North Vietnam and the really massive buildup of U.S. troops in South Vietnam occurred under Lyndon B. Johnson, not John F. Kennedy. It has been reliably reported that Kennedy, in the last two months of his life, had decided that the entire question of American involvement in Vietnam needed re-examination. In fact, in October, 1963, he authorized members of his staff to prepare a plan for the total withdrawal of American troops by 1965, a course of action favored by only a small minority of his advisors, among them Robert Kennedy and Averell Harriman. Whether or not he would have chosen to follow such a plan we can never know. Influential members of Kennedy's cabinet remained to advise Johnson—Robert McNamara continued as secretary of defense, Dean Rusk as secretary of state—and they certainly did not

[11]Ronald Steele, "The Kennedy Fantasy," *The New York Review of Books,* 19 November 1970, pp. 7,8. Reprinted with permission from *The New York Review of Books.* Copyright © 1970, NYREV, Inc.

advise withdrawal. By 1968 there were half a million U.S. soldiers in Vietnam and nearly 50,000 Americans had been killed. In 1971, a decade after the Kennedy administration decided to commit the United States to the defense of South Vietnam, Americans were still fighting and dying there. The issues were unresolved, the war not yet over.

The Kennedy administration had promised much, but it was denied the opportunity to deliver on its promises or to rectify its mistakes. Might Kennedy have found a way to guide U.S. policy away from the support of right-wing dictators and oligarchies in Latin America and bring about meaningful social change? Might he have found a means of rapprochement with the Soviet Union and ended the arms race? Might he have turned U.S. policy on China around and opened communications with the Communist regime which rules that vast country? Might he have found a way to extricate the United States from Vietnam? In Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963, an assassin's bullets closed out the possibility of answers to those questions.

The Great Society Sickens

The nation's immediate response to the murder of its young president was one in which fear, grief, and anger combined in roughly equal measure. There was fear of conspiracies—either internal or foreign—and fear that the nation would fall into chaos. There was grief of almost Sophoclean proportions. And there was anger that someone could so easily reach out and destroy the man who embodied the power, the prestige, and possibly the spirit of the United States of America. Perhaps the journalist James Reston best summed it up when he said that people felt that somehow "the worst in the nation had triumphed over the best in the nation."

Despite widespread fears of national disintegration or further violence to the system, Kennedy's assassination had the opposite effect. The funeral proceedings were televised, and vast numbers of Americans watched them. The result was a tide of suprapersonal mourning that seemed to leave the nation in an almost penitential or even guilty mood.

On November 25, 1963, a horse-drawn caisson carried the president's flag-draped casket from St. Matthew's Cathedral in Washington, D.C., to Arlington National Cemetery.

The assassination also brought to the presidency a man whom history may judge to be one of the authentic geniuses of American domestic politics—Lyndon Baines Johnson. The new president's appeal for action on Kennedy's program, which had been largely stalled in an indifferent Congress, was strikingly successful. Major bills on civil rights, tax reduction, and aid for the poor were soon passed.

In November, 1964, Johnson crushed the Republican candidate, Barry Goldwater, by a twenty-million-vote margin. Johnson's "Great Society" program, containing many bills introduced by the Kennedy administration, made the Eighty-ninth Congress (1965–1966) one of the most productive in American history. Among the major measures passed were the historic Medicare law; expanded civil rights, antipoverty, and aid-to-education programs; liberalized immigration laws; and the creation of two new cabinet-level departments—Housing and Urban Development, and Transportation.

Johnson's efforts in the realm of foreign policy did not,

however, meet with comparable success. Johnson's vigorous application of the bankrupt Truman Doctrine—a twenty-five-year-old set of assumptions about Communist motives and aims that history may judge to have been tragically mistaken—led to a damaging military intervention in the affairs of the Dominican Republic and to a huge escalation of the war in Vietnam. Unease about the Vietnam conflict gradually percolated through all levels of American society. Many Americans began to feel that they had been committed by their government to a role in world affairs that had neither honor, truth, fairness, nor common sense on its side. Responsible, fair-minded citizens on all levels of society found it increasingly difficult to support—or even believe—what their government was saying and doing in their name. Johnson's "consensus"—another term for the broad-based, generalized approval and trust that any elected government must get from its citizenry to survive—began to fall apart. Existing social tensions were exacerbated, then rubbed raw. Tensions between those who were prosperous and those who were not, between those who belonged to racial or cultural minorities and those who did not, between those who possessed institutional authority and those who did not, all grew into conflicts that became more intense, more embittered, and inevitably more violent. As social confrontation increased, another Kennedy was drawn into the fragmenting political arena, and ultimately became another of its victims.

Robert Kennedy

As the 1960's progressed, memories of one Kennedy faded as another member of the family caught more and more public attention. Running for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1968, Robert Kennedy was not the same man who had managed his brother's 1960 campaign and served as attorney general. He was older, but he had also developed new ideas.

Seventh of the nine children, eight years younger than John, Robert Kennedy was born in 1925. After attending parochial grammar schools and private preparatory schools, he spent some time in the navy before going on

to Harvard. Following graduation he enrolled in the University of Virginia Law School.

Robert Kennedy had his first taste of politics in 1946, when he worked for his brother's election in the 11th congressional district in Boston. Graduated from law school in 1951, the following year Kennedy again became involved in politics, this time in his brother's successful campaign for the Senate. He spent most of 1953 working as a counsel on the Government Operations Committee, then chaired by Joseph R. McCarthy. Kennedy left the committee on July 31, 1953, because he could no longer abide Roy Cohn.

Kennedy next went to work for the Hoover Commission, formally known as the Commission on the Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government. Finding work on the commission exceedingly dull, Kennedy remained only five months before returning to work for McCarthy, this time on his Subcommittee on Investigations. He became the subcommittee's chief counsel after Democrats won control of the Senate in 1954 and John McClellan of Arkansas became chairman. In 1956 Kennedy was active again on his brother's behalf during John's unsuccessful bid for the vice-presidential nomination.

James R. Hoffa.

Robert Kennedy first achieved real national attention as counsel for a select Senate committee—popularly known as the Senate Rackets Committee—chaired by McClellan. The committee was established to investigate alleged malpractices and underworld influence in labor unions, particularly in the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, then headed by Dave Beck. Beck was later convicted of misappropriating union funds and sent to prison. Jimmy Hoffa, who succeeded Beck as Teamster president, was indicted for the attempted bribery of a committee investigator. Hoffa was acquitted.

As the committee's chief counsel, Kennedy had been instrumental in gathering evidence against Hoffa and setting him up for arrest on bribery charges, and he and the union leader developed a strong distaste for each other. After his election as Teamster president, Hoffa appeared before the Rackets Committee, where Kennedy grilled him

Senator John McClellan, chairman of the Rackets Committee, and Robert Kennedy at a hearing in March, 1957.

mercilessly, using many of the harassing, badgering tactics that had been associated with McCarthy. Some observers characterized Kennedy's relentless pursuit of Jimmy Hoffa as a "personal vendetta." Later, as attorney general, Kennedy succeeded in having the labor leader convicted of jury tampering, which netted Hoffa a prison sentence and eventually cost him the Teamster presidency.

Unlike his brother John, who tended to view causes and extreme positions with skepticism, even distaste, Robert Kennedy was a passionate man. Throughout his life he remained intensely moralistic, single-minded, and quick to judge issues on a black-and-white basis. Communists were evil; all efforts must be made to root them out, expose them, and eliminate them. Labor leaders who associated with mobsters and allegedly stole from their union members were evil; they deserved long jail sentences. Those who opposed his brother's nomination as presidential candidate were, if not evil, at least seriously misguided; if they would not understand and agree that John F. Kennedy was

the best candidate, they deserved to be flattened. Jack Newfield, a friendly but not uncritical Kennedy biographer, traced much of Kennedy's moralism and conservatism to his Catholicism:

> Robert was the most devout of the nine Kennedy children. He attended church regularly as a child, and served occasionally as an altar boy. When his family sent him to St. Paul's school, an Episcopal prep school in New Hampshire, he wrote his mother a letter to complain that he had to attend Protestant services in the chapel. His family quickly transferred him to Portsmouth Priory, a Catholic prep school in Rhode Island, run by Benedictine monks. There Robert Kennedy attended morning and evening prayers every day, and Mass three times a week, as part of a demanding discipline. It was during his three years in the Priory that he considered entering the priesthood.
>
> Kennedy's strong self-image as a Catholic stayed with him the rest of his life. He went to church every Sunday and said his rosaries often. He married Ethel Shakel, who was even more religious, and had eleven children by her. . . .
>
> Kennedy's Catholicism reinforced other parts of his personality. His sense of service, sacrifice, and responsibility. His loyalty to his family, with its hierarchical structure. His strong sense of Good and Evil. His tendency toward quick, moralistic judgments. Even after his politics began to change, his Boston-bred Catholicism retained enclaves of influence. Kennedy, for example, was always emotionally more sympathetic to policemen than to the American Civil Liberties Union; and to old-style Irish political leaders like Charles Buckley, Bronx party leader, and Peter Crotty, chairman of the Erie County, than to middle-class reformers, who had small social vision, but just wanted to "beat the bosses."
>
> In large part, it was Kennedy's cultural conditioning as a Boston Catholic that made it so easy for him to make a mistake of the magnitude of working for—and admiring—Joe McCarthy. For Kennedy to drift into the

atavistic subculture of McCarthyism was as logical as for a proletarian Jew at City College [in New York] in the 1930's to become a Marxist. . . .[12]

Ruthlessness often accompanies passionate and moralistic attitudes. And Robert Kennedy's work on the Rackets Committee and his activities during his brother's campaign for the presidency earned him a reputation for ruthlessness. Yet, at the same time, as Ronald Steele has noted:

> There was never any doubt of his tenacity and physical courage, for he drove himself compulsively to feats of endurance, such as his fifty-mile hike, his ascent of Mt. Kennedy, and his grueling sailing trips. . . . He never stopped talking about moral courage, declaring that "only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly." . . .[13]

Robert and Ethel Kennedy on a ski holiday.

Growth Toward Liberalism

Following his brother's murder in 1963, Robert Kennedy continued as attorney general for several months before resigning. Still mourning his brother, he went through a period of relative seclusion. Searching for a new stability, for a reason to his life, he gradually became aware of the millions of Americans—blacks, chicanos (Mexican-Americans), and others—who lived in city slums and on the edges of society, discriminated against, held down, and denied basic American rights. With these people Kennedy had never been remotely associated. But he began to see more of them and he began to adopt liberalism. His, however, was a liberalism much different from that of the 1930's and 1940's, which held that society and people could be "engineered," that social ills could be overcome simply by altering the environment, and that all the nation's problems could be solved by increasing the power of the federal

[12] Jack Newfield, *Robert Kennedy: A Memoir* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1969), pp. 48–49. Copyright © 1969 by Jack Newfield. Used with permission of E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.

[13] Steele, "Kennedy Fantasy," p. 4.

government. Kennedy's liberalism was more personal, and more impassioned, and he stressed local and individual control and action. Wrote Jack Newfield:

> Since his decentralist position was so badly misunderstood, it must be emphasized again that Kennedy's ideas in this area had nothing in common with either the states' rights notions of George Wallace, or Barry Goldwater's fiscal conservatism. Kennedy favored more—not less—Federal activity against social injustice. He favored Federal minimum wage laws, Federal guidelines for desegregation, vigorous Federal intervention to prevent price-fixing, and Federal tax incentives and tax credits to help rebuild the slums. He did not want power passing on to local elites and local bureaucracies, which he knew were even more conservative than the Federal bureaucracies. Kennedy was speaking *for the creation of new institutions* that ensured greater participation for those trapped at the bottom of the society. He wanted to create "self-sufficiency and self-determination within the communities of poverty. . . . What we must seek is not just greater programs, but greater participation," he often said.[14]

Kennedy himself, in his book *To Seek a Newer World,* published in 1967, said,

> Today's young people appear to have chosen for their concern the dignity of the individual human being. They demand a limitation on excessive power. They demand a political system that preserves the sense of community among men. . . . Too often in the past we have been enmeshed in the traditional debate between liberals and conservatives over whether we should or should not spend more government funds on programs. What we have failed to examine with any thoroughness is the impact of those programs on those we have sought to assist, indeed whether they have had any impact at all. . . . To rely exclusively, even primarily, on governmental efforts is to ignore the shaping traditions of American life and politics.

[14] Newfield, *Robert Kennedy,* p. 81.

... The development of new institutions could place some responsibility for the control of many new services—not just education—but also welfare and recreation, health and sanitation—back in the hands of the people they are supposed to serve.[15]

The family of a migrant farm worker in Texas, in a house provided by the grower for whom he is working.

Although relations between the two men had become severely strained, Kennedy hoped to be President Lyndon B. Johnson's running mate in 1964. Long before November of that year this illusion was punctured, and Kennedy moved to New York and ran successfully for the Senate seat held by Republican Kenneth Keating. As a senator, Kennedy pursued his new-found interest in the downtrodden. He participated in investigations of discrimination against blacks in the building trades—finding it abundant—and he toured wretched migrant labor camps in the West, the condition of which shocked him deeply.

Early in 1966, Kennedy visited Bedford-Stuyvesant, a Brooklyn ghetto littered with garbage and infested with cockroaches and rats. There eighty percent of the teenagers were school dropouts, a third of the families were headed by women, a quarter of the families were living on incomes of $3,000 or less per year, and an unknown percentage of people, young and old, were on drugs. Bedford-Stuyvesant had come to national attention in the summer of 1964 when it was swept by a destructive three-day riot. Kennedy's visit led to the creation of two nonprofit corporations which, operating largely with foundation funds, began rehabilitation projects in the ghetto. Later, Kennedy introduced two bills in Congress that reflected his interest and activities in the Brooklyn slum. One offered tax credits as an incentive to private industry to provide jobs for ghetto residents. The other provided for the construction or rehabilitation of 300,000 to 400,000 low-cost housing units, holding out the carrot of federal loan and insurance guarantees to private enterprise. Kennedy's ideas on how

[15]Robert Kennedy, *To Seek a Newer World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 2–3. Copyright © 1967, 1968 by Robert F. Kennedy.

private industry and the federal government might cooperate to bring about social change were ahead of his time. Neither bill passed. It was not until 1970 that Kennedy's ideas became well accepted, and even then the acceptance remained largely verbal—no massive programs to clean up slums materialized.

Robert Kennedy and Vietnam

The Vietnam war changed the course of Robert Kennedy's life. Although he had long been an ardent supporter of United States involvement in Southeast Asia, by the end of 1967, like many other Americans, he was beginning to change his mind. He hesitated, however, to attack the Johnson administration's war policies, thus earning the label "opportunist" when he finally did. Eugene McCarthy, Democratic senator from Minnesota, dared challenge the president when everyone took it for granted that Johnson would be renominated in 1968. McCarthy announced late in 1967 that he would seek the presidential nomination, and early in March of the following year he defeated Johnson in the New Hampshire primary. On March 31, owing mainly to mounting criticism of his conduct of the war, Johnson announced that he would neither seek nor accept the nomination.

Kennedy made a strong Senate speech against the escalation of the Vietnam war in February. Although he had decided to enter the presidential race before the New Hampshire primary—according to Jack Newfield—he did not announce his decision until after the primary, on March 16. The next day, St. Patrick's Day, Robert Kennedy began a whirlwind campaign that was to last three months. He spoke on college campuses and in black ghettos, visited Indian reservations and chicano labor camps, swung through parts of the South, and addressed crowds in several California cities. His main themes were the war, poverty, and discrimination, and his main appeal was to youth. He had no support from regular politicians, labor union leaders, or the business community. He set out simply to present a new image to the people, hoping to

take primary victories to the Democratic convention in Chicago that summer.

Initially the rigorous campaigning was not rewarding. Kennedy found a great deal of hostility toward him. Eugene McCarthy's supporters called him opportunistic. Vice-president Hubert Humphrey, who hoped for the nomination himself, was hardly friendly. Conservatives, of course, had little use for him, and eastern liberals gave him no help. "One night in Indiana," Jack Newfield recalled,

Eugene McCarthy reacts to a point made by Robert Kennedy during a televised debate on June 1, 1968.

> I finally got Kennedy to talk about the wave of hostility breaking against him.
>
> "Frankly," he began, "I don't understand it. I see people out there call me names, and say they want actually to hit me, and I just don't know what to say about it. The other day some fellow grabbed my hand in a motorcade and tried to squeeze it with all his might. . . . Another person showed up at a lot of different places holding up a sign that just said, 'You Punk.'
>
> "I can understand how the student activists feel about it. They wanted me to run because of how they felt about the war. So when I didn't, it was natural that they should turn to McCarthy. I feel now that I made a mistake in not going into New Hampshire, but that's past. I admire those students who go out and work for McCarthy very much, and I respect their loyalty to him. But what I can't respect are those lazy liberals in New York who say all those things about me now. They said them about President Kennedy in 1960, and they said them about me in 1964, and now they still say them. It's as if I had never made a speech about Vietnam, or poverty, or anything. I can't help it, but I resent it.
>
> "I just feel that those New York liberals are sick. They're not doing any work. They spend their time worrying about not being invited to the important parties, or seeing psychiatrists, or they are bored with their affluence. I personally prefer many of the poor white people I've met here in Indiana. They are tough, and honest, and if you help them, they remember it, like the people who live in the poorer sections of West Virginia.

They're not fickle. Do you know there are people in New York who pleaded with me to come out against the war three years ago, and today they're for Hubert? [Humphrey had supported the Johnson war record.] I think I just like the Poles in Gary better than those New York reformers, who are so filled up with hate and envy."[16]

Kennedy won the Indiana primary, taking forty-two percent of the vote, with twenty-seven percent going to McCarthy and thirty-one percent to Governor Roger Bradigan, who ran as a favorite son. Much of Kennedy's support came from black ghettos and the poorer immigrant sections of the cities, although he ran well in many rural counties too. Kennedy also won the Nebraska primary, from which McCarthy withdrew, taking fifty-one percent of the total vote. He was defeated in Oregon. The next important primary was California, in June.

Robert Kennedy explains his position on an issue to Eugene McCarthy during their debate on June 1, 1968.

In California fourteen out of every fifteen chicanos who voted cast their ballots for Kennedy. He carried the vast majority of the black vote. He picked up enough support from other factions to win the primary. But nothing followed. The campaign ended the night of June 5 in a serving pantry of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. After victory speeches in the Ambassador ballroom, Kennedy and his group walked through the pantry on the way out. There Sirhan Sirhan, a Syrian immigrant, shot him. Robert Kennedy died the next day.

John F. Kennedy's body had been buried in Arlington National Cemetery following an awe-inspiring state funeral attended by heads of government from all over the world. Robert Kennedy's body lay in state in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City and was then taken by slow train to Washington for burial near John. And all the way from New York to Washington people lined the tracks, straining for one last glimpse, to say goodbye. "The last journey of Robert Kennedy," wrote Ronald Steele,

marked more than the death of a leader; it was the end of a whole era of American politics—one in which it was

[16]Newfield, *Robert Kennedy,* pp. 283–284.

Sirhan B. Sirhan. His motives for assassinating Senator Kennedy never became entirely clear, but he was known to resent Kennedy's support of Israel.

possible to believe that good government could come from good style, that society could be changed if only the right rhetoric could be found, that a single man could correct everything that was wrong, that things would be all right if we just loved one another. It was not that the Kennedys said it would be easy. They often evoked sacrifice, hard work, and endurance. Rather it was that they nurtured our fantasies. The last fantasy was shattered with the murder of Robert Kennedy. The remarks of those who rode his funeral train—speechwriters, politicians, reporters, advisers, friends, celebrity-hounds—reflected the confusion of people who no longer were sure what they believed in or what the future held. . . .

If the scene inside was a cross between an Irish wake and a Jewish shiva, the scene outside was like the passing of some great feudal chief before his assembled subjects. The other America, the people without style or glamor—housewives in hair curlers, nuns in sunglasses, schoolchildren, blue-shirted workers—came to the tracks for the last journey of Robert Kennedy. "I seen people running all over!" an electrician exclaimed. "They tried to touch the train as it went by." "The tracks were lined with more people than I've ever seen," another trainman said. "Everyone had a rose or a banner. They were throwing roses at the train." Some of them carried signs saying: "Who Will Be The Next One?" and simply "The Gebharts Are Sad." Perhaps these people sensed that they were saying good-bye to more than Robert Kennedy.[17]

Mourners in New Jersey line the tracks as Robert Kennedy's funeral train passes by.

The sense of loss the nation felt at the passing of one Kennedy, and then another, was inexpressible. Long afterward in ghetto storefronts one could see portraits of Martin Luther King Jr., flanked by those of John and Robert Kennedy—three martyred saints. The Kennedys performed no great deeds. They were politicians seeking power, yet John with his unerring sense of style and Robert with his toughness and compassion conveyed the impression that they were much more than that, and millions of people, catching a vision, put faith in them.

[17] Steele, "Kennedy Fantasy," pp. 3–4.