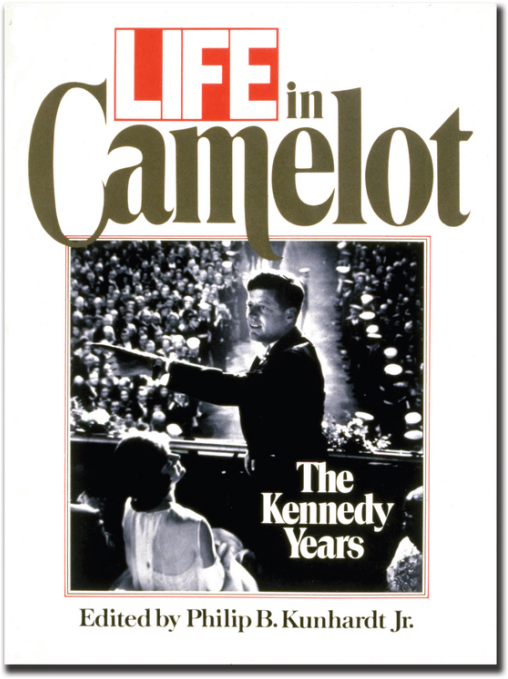
The Age of Camelot

Was John F. Kennedy a great president?

Introduction



As the cover of this *Life* magazine suggests, many Americans associated the Kennedy White House with the mythical kingdom of Camelot. The Broadway musical Camelot premiered in New York City just after Kennedy was elected president. It became an overnight hit when the public learned that the cast album was one of President Kennedy's favorite records.

In 1961, when John F. Kennedy, the youngest man elected to the presidency, replaced Dwight Eisenhower, one of the oldest, the

atmosphere in the White House changed. The handsome, charming young president and his graceful wife, Jacqueline, brightened the house considerably, making it exciting to visit. Some evenings, famous musicians or opera singers performed, noted actors read scenes from plays, or ballet dancers performed classic works. These social events made the White House a showcase for arts and culture.

At Kennedy's inauguration, a new musical called *Camelot* had recently begun its Broadway run. The musical's main character was the legendary King Arthur, who ruled an enchanted kingdom named Camelot. As the play unfolds, Arthur establishes an order of knights called the Knights of the Round Table. Dedicated to doing noble deeds, the order attracts the best and bravest knights in the realm.

At the outset of Kennedy's administration, fans of *Camelot*'s ideals hoped Kennedy would be a similarly gifted leader. Sadly, Kennedy died before most people could determine whether he had lived up to these Arthurian expectations. In an interview after his death, Jacqueline Kennedy recalled the words of her husband's favorite song from the musical, written by Alan Jay Lerner. In that song, Lerner writes about a brief, yet dignified moment in time.

Many Americans believed Kennedy's time in office was a "brief shining moment," while others debated the merit of the young president's actions. In this lesson, you will learn how these differing opinions developed.

President John F. Kennedy and First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy in 1962, during the presidential era later referred to as Camelot.

In the first Kennedy-Nixon debate, Richard Nixon looked tired and uncomfortable to viewers, while Kennedy seemed relaxed and confident. The debate exposed millions of voters to Kennedy's charisma. Afterward, his approval rating soared in the opinion polls.

1. President Kennedy's Domestic Record

On a chilly day in Washington, D.C., a large crowd gathered in front of the Capitol to watch John F. Kennedy be sworn in as the 35th U.S.

president. In his address, President Kennedy outlined his vision of the road ahead:

> Let the word go forth from this time and place . . . 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 . . . Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.
>
> —John F. Kennedy, inaugural address, January 20, 1961

The young president's dedication to the ideal of liberty touched the hearts and minds of many Americans. Kennedy closed his address by appealing to his audience's sense of idealism, urging Americans to personally commit to public service in an often-quoted statement: "And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country."

Kennedy Takes Office with a Narrow Election Victory Kennedy's dazzling inaugural festivities, including the address and inaugural ball, established the tone of elegance and youthful vigor that became known as the "Kennedy style." Even before Kennedy was elected president, people adored his charisma—a combination of charm and personal magnetism that drew fans and supporters. At campaign stops, young people cheered him as if he were a movie star. One senator observed that Kennedy possessed the "best qualities of Elvis Presley and Franklin D. Roosevelt."

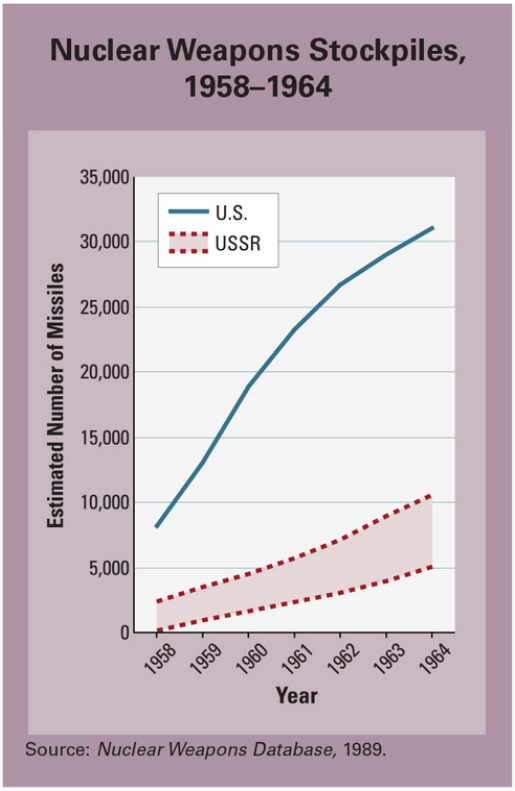
During the campaign, Kennedy and his opponent, Richard Nixon, expressed similar views on many issues. For example, both vowed to reinvigorate the sluggish economy and halt the spread of communism. However, Kennedy was unique in criticizing the Eisenhower-Nixon administration for allowing a "missile gap" to open between the United States and the Soviet Union. Unless something was done to restore American military superiority, Kennedy warned, "the periphery [edges] of the Free World will slowly be nibbled away."

The most obvious difference between the two presidential candidates was their personal style. This contrast became clear on September 26, 1960, when they met in history's first live, televised presidential debate. More than 70 million viewers tuned in, while others listened on the radio. For many Americans, the debate was their first opportunity to

closely study the candidates—especially Kennedy, who was less known.

Weakened by a serious knee injury and a bout of the flu, Nixon appeared nervous and uneasy. His face was pale, made worse by his refusal to wear any stage makeup. In contrast, Kennedy appeared relaxed and confident. For this reason, most of the people watching the debate on television believed Kennedy won. Those who listened on the radio thought Nixon was the winner.

In the closest election since 1888, Kennedy barely defeated Nixon. As a result, Kennedy took office without a clear electoral mandate. This lack of voter support would severely disadvantage him in his dealings with Congress.



President Kennedy's effective campaign rhetoric focused in part on what he called the "missile gap." This gap referred to the supposed U.S. dearth of nuclear missiles compared to the Soviet Union. In reality, the United States had a larger nuclear defense arsenal than the USSR.

An Administration of "the Best and the Brightest" Like the legendary King Arthur, Kennedy wanted to surround himself with "the best and the brightest" advisers he could find. Some, like National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, had attended elite universities. Others, such as Secretary of Defense and former president of Ford Motor Company Robert McNamara, were top executives. To the surprise of many people, Kennedy selected his 35-year-old brother Robert to be attorney general. When people criticized Robert as too young for the position, the president joked, "I see nothing wrong with giving Robert some legal experience . . . before he goes out to practice law."

Kennedy's inaugural call to public service attracted many talented young people from around the country to Washington. Those who joined his administration found public service to be exciting, even glamorous. Like the president, the administration worked hard and played hard. Fueled with fresh idealism, they hoped to change the world.

Kennedy's "New Frontier" Challenges the Nation While campaigning for president, Kennedy began to outline his vision for changing the world. In his speech accepting the Democratic presidential nomination, he told Americans,

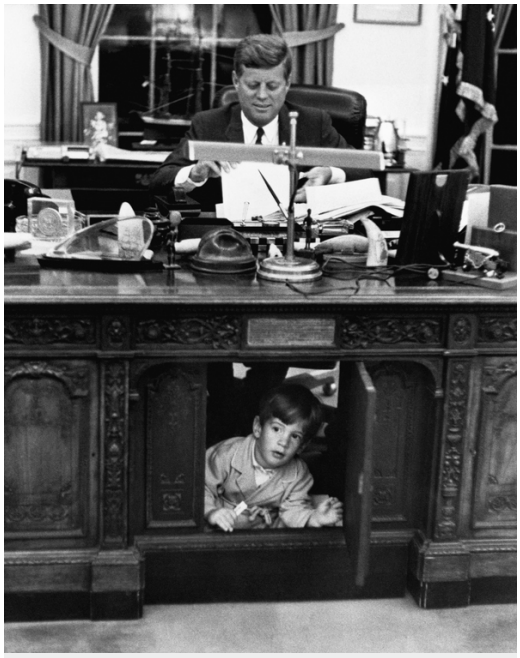
> We stand today on the edge of a New Frontier—the frontier of the 1960s—a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils—a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats . . . Beyond that frontier are the uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus.
>
> —John F. Kennedy, July 15, 1960

Once in office, Kennedy worked to transform his **New Frontier** rhetoric into a list of concrete goals. To expand opportunity, he called for an increase in educational aid, new programs to end poverty, and a tax cut to stimulate economic growth. To promote equality, he sought to raise the minimum wage, fund medical care for the elderly, and make cities more livable. To guarantee civil rights, he hoped to enact legislation banning racial discrimination. Finally, to protect liberty and democracy, he called for a large increase in defense spending.

Kennedy had difficulty passing his **legislative agenda**, or list of programs to enact, in Congress—despite Democrats' legislative majority. He did succeed in raising the minimum wage and enacting some urban development programs, but a coalition of conservative southern Democrats and Republicans, who voted to block reform, stalled much of Kennedy's agenda. After several failures, Kennedy gave up on some of his programs. "There is no sense raising hell," he claimed, "and then not being successful."

Reviving the Economy Kennedy had mixed success in his stated aim to "get the economy moving again." When Kennedy took office, the nation was experiencing a mild recession, which he hoped to solve by laying out a two part approach to promoting economic recovery. The first part of his plan was to increase spending on defense. By this time,

Kennedy was aware that the “missile gap” he had mentioned in his campaign was not real. In fact, the United States possessed far more weaponry than the Soviet Union.



To the Kennedy children, Caroline and her younger brother, John Jr., the White House was not the seat of U.S. government, but their home. The first family, with the young presidential couple and their two playful children, became media favorites. In this photograph, young John Kennedy Jr. plays under his father’s desk in the Oval Office.

Nonetheless, Kennedy convinced Congress to boost defense spending by nearly 20 percent in 1961. Over the next few years, the government pumped billions of dollars into the economy to increase the nation’s stockpile of missiles and other high-tech weapons, like nuclear submarines.

The second part of Kennedy’s plan was to institute a major tax cut to

put more money in people's pockets and stimulate economic growth. This strategy was less successful as conservatives in Congress opposed any tax cut that would lead to an unbalanced federal budget. Even some liberal Democrats opposed cutting taxes when so many of the nation's needs were still unmet. As the liberal economist John Kenneth Galbraith observed,

> "I am not quite sure I see what the advantage is in having a few more dollars to spend if the air is too dirty to breathe, the water too polluted to drink, the streets are filthy, and the schools so bad that the young, perhaps wisely, stay away."
>
> —in James T. Patterson, *America in the Twentieth Century*, 1976

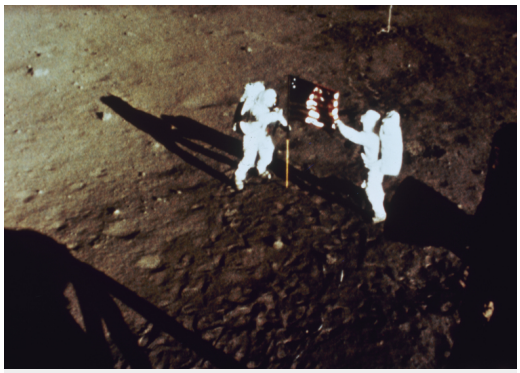
Even without Kennedy's proposed tax cuts, the recession came to an end. By the close of 1961, the economy entered a period of growth that would last through the decade.

A Cautious Approach to Civil Rights Kennedy had even less success passing civil rights legislation in Congress. During his campaign, Kennedy called for an end to racial discrimination. He responded to Atlanta authorities jailing Martin Luther King Jr. by asking his brother Robert to arrange King's release. Widely reported in the press, news of the brothers' efforts on King's behalf helped Kennedy secure the African American vote.

Once in office, Kennedy became more cautious, fearing that bold action on civil rights would split the Democratic Party between the North and South. Although he ordered his administration to vigorously enforce existing civil rights laws, he did not propose any new civil rights legislation during his first two years in office.

After the March on Washington on August 28, 1963, Kennedy invited civil rights leaders to meet with him at the White House. Martin Luther King Jr. and Roy Wilkins were among the key civil rights leaders present. Kennedy strongly supported civil rights legislation before his election but became more cautious after assuming presidential office.

In the spring of 1963, televised violence against peaceful protesters in Birmingham, Alabama, horrified much of the nation. Sickened by the incident, President Kennedy addressed the nation on the issue of civil rights:



The spaceflight from Florida's Cape Kennedy Space Center to the moon took approximately 102 hours and 45 minutes. On July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong and Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin Jr. erected a U.S. flag on the lunar surface. The two astronauts also collected soil and rock samples and left behind scientific instruments.

> We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution. The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated. If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public school available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who will represent him, if, in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would . . . be content with the counsels of patience and delay?

A week later, the president submitted a broad civil rights bill to Congress. Once again, a coalition of Republican and conservative southern Democratic lawmakers blocked Kennedy's proposed legislation.

Kennedy Proposes Landing a Man on the Moon Kennedy's most

exciting New Frontier challenge—space exploration—developed from a Cold War embarrassment. In 1957, the Soviet Union surprised the world by launching the first artificial satellite into orbit. Called Sputnik, or "Little Traveler" in Russian, the unmanned satellite traveled at 18,000 miles per hour. The USSR launched Sputnik II a month later, with a dog onboard.

Meanwhile, delays and failed launches plagued American efforts to send rockets into space. Around the world, newspapers ridiculed U.S. rockets as "flopniks" and "kaputniks." When asked what Americans would find if they ever reached the moon, nuclear physicist Edward Teller quipped, "Russians."

In 1958, President Eisenhower responded to the Soviet challenge by creating the **National Aeronautics and Space Administration** (NASA). When Kennedy took office, NASA had successfully launched its first communication and weather satellites into space. But on April 12, 1961, the Soviet Union stunned the world again by sending the first human, astronaut Yuri Gagarin, into space. Six weeks later, Kennedy made a dramatic announcement:

> I believe that this nation should commit itself to . . . landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth. No single space project in this period will be more impressive to mankind, or more important for the long-range exploration of space; and none will be so difficult or expensive to accomplish.
>
> —Speech to a Joint Session of Congress, May 25, 1961

NASA worked rapidly to achieve this goal. In 1961, astronaut Alan Shepard completed a short spaceflight, and a year later, John Glenn became the first American to orbit Earth. On July 20, 1969, eight years after Kennedy declared the moon landing goal, Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins, and Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin Jr. of the Apollo space program landed on the moon. The world watched in awe as Armstrong stepped onto the moon's surface, declaring, "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind."

2. President Kennedy's Record in Foreign Affairs

As president, Kennedy's greatest triumphs and worst mistakes were in

foreign affairs. U.S. relations with Cuba proved to be especially troublesome for the president, and a crisis over Soviet missile sites in Cuba brought the United States and the Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear war.

In 1963, Cuban leader Fidel Castro visited the Soviet Union to strengthen ties with Cuba's communist ally. He is pictured here with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, who once told Western diplomats, "Whether you like it or not, history is on our side. We will bury you." Khrushchev provided aid and guidance to Castro in hopes of achieving this very goal.

Fidel Castro Establishes a Communist Regime in Cuba In 1959, communist revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro ousted Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. The United States suddenly had a communist **regime**, or government, for a neighbor, just 90 miles off the Florida coast.

Once in power, Castro established strong ties with the Soviet Union, and the USSR sent advisers, weapons, and financial aid. With Soviet aid, Castro transformed Cuba into a communist country with a **planned economy**. Government planners began to control almost all economic decisions. The government overtook U.S. oil refineries and farms on the island and seized private businesses and properties from wealthy Cubans.

Averse to living under a communist regime, many Cubans fled the island. Most of these **exiles**, or people who live outside their home country, settled in southern Florida. Shortly after taking office, Kennedy learned that the CIA was training some of these Cuban exiles in Florida and Guatemala as guerrilla fighters. Their covert mission was to return to Cuba and lead a popular uprising that would topple Castro and his regime.

The Bay of Pigs Fiasco Fails to Dislodge Castro The CIA officials who briefed Kennedy on the Cuban invasion plan assured the new president that their invasion would inspire Cubans to rise up and rebel against Castro. CIA director Allen Dulles informed Kennedy that if he wanted to halt Castro's growing influence in Latin America, the time to act was "now or never." Eager to demonstrate his strength as a Cold War president, Kennedy approved the invasion plan.

On April 17, 1961, a small army of Cuban exiles sailed into the Bay of Pigs in southern Cuba. Their landing was a disaster. CIA trainers told the exiles they would come ashore on an empty beach, but their boats ran aground on a coral reef. And once the exiles reached land, Cuban troops quickly killed or captured them. Meanwhile, the expected public uprising never occurred. A few officials tried to persuade Kennedy to send U.S. warplanes to support the exile forces, but Kennedy did not want to involve the United States further in this poorly executed fiasco.

After the **Bay of Pigs invasion**, people throughout Latin America criticized Kennedy for interfering in another country's affairs. Shouldering the blame, Kennedy remarked, "Victory has a thousand

fathers, but defeat is an orphan."

Escalating Cold War Tensions in Berlin In June 1961, Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev organized a **summit meeting** in Vienna, Austria. Summit meetings are held by heads of state to discuss important topics. The discussion in this particular meeting included the future of Berlin.

From the end of World War II, Berlin had been a divided city. East Berlin served as the capital of communist East Germany, while West Berlin, although surrounded by East Germany, remained under the control of the wartime Allies.

The border between Eastern and Western Europe was eventually closed everywhere except in Berlin. As a result, Berlin became the only escape route for hundreds of thousands of East Germans trapped behind the Iron Curtain to flee their country. By 1961, approximately 25,000 East German refugees were crossing into West Berlin each day. At that rate, East Germany would soon lose much of its workforce.

In 1963, a huge crowd in West Berlin assembled to hear Kennedy speak at the Berlin Wall. Before the wall's construction, 2.5 million East Germans had escaped into West Germany. This population loss put severe strains on the East German economy and embarrassed the Soviets by exposing communism's unpopularity.

At the Vienna summit, Khrushchev informed Kennedy that he would not allow the flow of refugees into West Berlin to continue. Kennedy responded that he was prepared to defend West Berlin, even at the risk of war. Khrushchev decided that East Germany's only remaining option was to wall itself off from West Berlin. On August 13, 1961, East German workers began to construct a barbed wire fence between East and West Berlin. Later, the government replaced the fence with tall concrete walls. The **Berlin Wall** made it all but impossible for East Germans to escape to freedom in West Berlin. The United States and other Western European nations were outraged by the building of the Berlin Wall. To show American support for the people of West Berlin, Kennedy spoke to an audience in front of the wall:

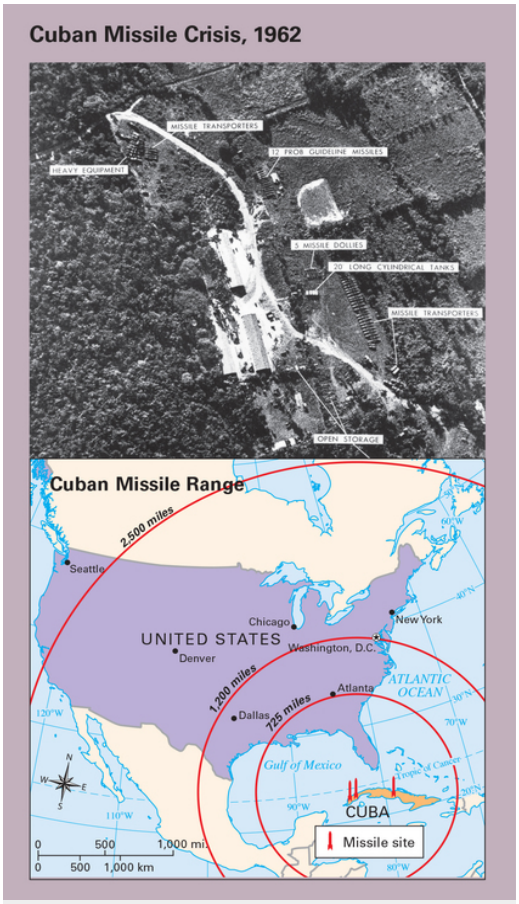
> There are many people in the world who really don't understand, or say they don't, what is the great issue between the free world and the Communist world. Let them

> come to Berlin. There are some who say that communism is the wave of the future. Let them come to Berlin . . . Freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect, but we have never had to put a wall up to keep our people in . . . 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.”
>
> —John F. Kennedy, June 26, 1963

Despite this, Kennedy was not willing to risk war to tear down the wall. Privately, he said, “A wall is a hell of a lot better than a war.”

The Cuban Missile Crisis: 13 Days on the Brink of Nuclear War

Just over a year after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, President Kennedy focused his attention once again on Cuba. In October 1962, a U-2 spy plane flying over Cuba discovered that the Soviets were building missile-launching sites on the island. From these sites, missiles carrying nuclear warheads could easily reach most major cities in the United States.



A U-2 spy plane took this aerial photograph of Cuba, revealing storage areas and launchpads for Soviet nuclear weapons. The information revealed in photographs like this one helped trigger the Cuban missile crisis. The map shows the range of Soviet missiles that could be fired from bases in Cuba. Only states in the far western United States were at a safe distance.

To discuss U.S. response strategies, Kennedy assembled a group of his 12 most trusted advisers. Called the Executive Committee for National Security (later known as ExCom), its members agreed that the United States must halt construction of the Soviet missile sites. Failure to

remove this threat would endanger American cities and make the United States seem weak to European allies and anti-Castro forces in Latin America.

The ExCom could not agree on how to handle the **Cuban missile crisis**. Some advisers urged the president to bomb the missile sites before construction could be completed. Others suggested blockading Cuban ports to prevent Soviet ships from bringing missiles to the island. This blockade was referred to as a "quarantine," because international law technically stipulated that a naval blockade was an act of war. Faced with both strategies, Kennedy chose the quarantine plan.

On October 22, Kennedy publicly revealed the discovery of the missile sites and his decision to quarantine Cuba. He warned that the United States would view any nuclear missile launched from Cuba as a Soviet Union attack on the United States. He also demanded that the Soviets remove all offensive weapons from the island.

For the next two days, Soviet ships continued to move toward Cuba. Fearing that the United States could be on the brink of nuclear war, Kennedy put the U.S. military on high alert. "I guess this is the week I earn my salary," he nervously joked. On October 24, Khrushchev ordered Soviet ships approaching Cuba to either slow down or turn around. Secretary of State Dean Rusk commented, "We're eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked."

A few days later, Khrushchev sent a note to Kennedy agreeing to remove Soviet missiles from Cuba, if Kennedy agreed to end the Cuban blockade and promised not to invade Cuba. The next day, Khrushchev sent a second note. In it, he proposed removing the Cuban missiles if the United States removed its missiles in Turkey, which bordered the USSR.

Believing the U.S. missiles in Turkey were outdated, Kennedy had already decided to remove them. However, he did not want Khrushchev to think the United States was yielding to Soviet demands. So, the ExCom advised Kennedy to pretend he did not receive the second note. Publicly, Kennedy accepted the first deal. Privately, he sent Robert Kennedy to the Soviet embassy to mediate the second deal. On October 28, Khrushchev agreed to remove all Soviet missiles from Cuba. About three months later, the United States removed its missiles from Turkey.

President Kennedy often conferred with his younger brother, Attorney General Robert “Bobby” Kennedy. In order to reduce tensions during the Cuban missile crisis, Bobby conferred secretly with Soviet diplomats. Many criticized Robert Kennedy’s youth when his brother initially appointed him Attorney General.

Easing Cold War Tensions The Cuban missile crisis led Kennedy and his advisers to reconsider the “massive retaliation” doctrine of the Eisenhower years. Kennedy began to discuss the need for milder responses to local Cold War conflicts. When communists seemed poised to overtake Vietnam, a small country in Southeast Asia, Kennedy tested this new approach. He sent money and military advisers to Vietnam to build noncommunist forces in the country. By the end of 1962, more than 9,000 American military advisers were helping defend Vietnam from communist takeover.

The missile crisis frightened both Kennedy and Khrushchev in how close their countries had come to nuclear war. As a result, both men devised ways to ease tensions between the superpowers. The two leaders first established their own **hotline**, or a line of communication between them that would be kept open at all times, so that they could contact each other instantly during a crisis. This hotline still exists and has been tested once every hour since 1963.

Later the same year, the superpowers took another step to establish more amicable relations. Along with Great Britain, they signed the **Test Ban Treaty**. This agreement banned aboveground nuclear testing,

while allowing underground nuclear weapons tests to continue. By signing, the United States and Soviet Union demonstrated that they could cooperate on important issues.

Like the volunteer in this commemorative stamp, Peace Corps workers have sought to improve life for the poor in developing countries since 1961. Volunteers are of all ages and from a variety of backgrounds. Most share a strong commitment to helping create a free and peaceful world.

Aiding Development in Foreign Countries President Kennedy was deeply concerned about communism spreading to **developing countries**, or countries that were poorer and less industrialized than the wealthy **developed countries** of North America, Western Europe, and parts of Asia. In a San Francisco campaign speech, Kennedy spoke about his vision for aiding the developing world. “There is not enough money in all America to relieve the misery of the underdeveloped world in a giant . . . soup kitchen,” he said. “But there is enough know-how . . . to help those nations help themselves.”

To spread this “know-how,” Kennedy issued an executive order that created the **Peace Corps**. This new government agency sent thousands of men and women to developing nations to support local

communities in areas like education, farming, and health care. Before traveling overseas, Peace Corps volunteers learned languages and skills necessary to build and help operate schools and health clinics, teach farming methods, and plant crops.

Kennedy also launched a Latin American aid program, called the Alliance for Progress, to provide economic and technical aid to Latin American nations while encouraging democratic reform. Unfortunately, the program had little impact since wealthy elites in Latin American nations resisted reform efforts. Most Alliance for Progress funds eventually ended up in the pockets of anti-communist dictators, who used the money to fight communist rebels and others who opposed their rule.

3. The Tragic and Controversial End to Camelot

In late November 1963, President Kennedy and the first lady traveled to Texas to build support for Kennedy’s upcoming reelection campaign. Just before noon on November 22, the Kennedys joined Texas governor John Connally and his wife in a motorcade through downtown Dallas. It was a sunny day, and people crowded the streets, eager to catch a glimpse of the presidential couple. Watching the cheering crowd, Mrs. Connally leaned over and told the president, “You can’t say that Dallas isn’t friendly to you today.” Moments later, gunshots rang out.

Inside a crowded Air Force One—the presidential airplane—U.S. district judge Sarah Hughes swore in Lyndon B. Johnson as president two hours after Kennedy was shot. A somber Jacqueline Kennedy stood at Johnson's side as he took the oath of office. After he was sworn in, Johnson and Jacqueline Kennedy flew from Dallas back to Washington, D.C.

A National Tragedy Unfolds in Dallas The motorcade took the president's car past the Texas School Book Depository, where Lee Harvey Oswald, a worker in the building, waited on the sixth floor. As the cars came within range, Oswald fired three shots. One bullet missed the motorcade. Two bullets hit Kennedy in the neck and head. One of the bullets struck Governor Connally. The driver rushed both men to the hospital, and Connally survived. Doctors frantically worked to revive Kennedy, but at l:00 p.m., he was declared dead.

Two hours after the shooting, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson met Jacqueline Kennedy with the president's coffin at the Dallas airport. They would return to Washington together. Before the plane took flight, a local Texas judge swore Johnson in as the nation's 36th president. Jacqueline Kennedy stood beside Johnson as he took the oath of office.

Dallas police quickly captured Oswald, charging him with the president's murder. Authorities were aware that Oswald strongly

supported Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolution and had lived in the Soviet Union for three years. Before they could learn of Oswald's motives for assassinating Kennedy, Oswald was killed as police attempted to move him to a more secure jail. With scores of newspaper and television reporters as witness, a local nightclub owner named Jack Ruby jumped out of the crowd and shot Oswald in the abdomen. Television viewers watched in horror as live news cameras broadcasted Oswald's murder into their homes.

On November 24, a horse-drawn carriage transported Kennedy's body from the White House to the Capitol building. There, hundreds of thousands of people walked past his casket to pay their final respects. The following day, up to 1 million people lined the streets of Washington as the funeral procession carried the president's casket to Arlington National Cemetery. At the cemetery, Kennedy's wife and brothers lit an "eternal" gas flame on his grave.

People mourned Kennedy's death across the nation and around the world. Most Americans old enough to remember it can recall exactly where they were when they heard the news of Kennedy's assassination. A poll taken at the time reported that about two-thirds of Americans felt the death of the president as "the loss of someone very close and dear."

Questions and Conspiracy Theories Surround the Assassination Kennedy's assassination raised many pressing questions: Had Oswald acted alone, or was he part of a larger conspiracy to murder the president? If he did not act alone, with whom was he working? And why did Ruby murder him?

With Robert and Ted Kennedy at her side, Jacqueline Kennedy and her children, Caroline and John Jr., watched President Kennedy's casket travel to Arlington National Cemetery for burial. An "eternal" flame was lit at Kennedy's funeral, which still marks his grave today. Americans nationwide and people around the world mourned Kennedy's sudden death.

Eager to uncover the truth, President Johnson created a special commission to investigate the assassination. Headed by Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, the commission became known as the Warren Commission. After a year of analyzing thousands of document pages and considering more than 550 witnesses, the Warren Commission concluded the following in its 1964 report:

> On the basis of the evidence before the Commission it concludes that Oswald acted alone. Therefore, to determine the motives for the assassination of President Kennedy, one must look to the assassin himself. Clues to

> Oswald's motives can be found in his family history, his education or lack of it, his acts, his writings, and the recollections of those who had close contacts with him throughout his life.
>
> —*Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy*, 1964

Many Americans were not convinced by the Warren Commission's findings. In the years since Kennedy's death, numerous conspiracy theories and assassination myths have emerged. Some detail plots by the CIA, the FBI, or organized crime groups. Others involve secret agents from Cuba, the Soviet Union, or other countries unfriendly to the United States at Kennedy's death. However, because Oswald was unable to testify, the full story of the Kennedy assassination may never be known.

Summary

During his brief time as president, John F. Kennedy faced many domestic and foreign challenges. His presidency began with great optimism and ended in tragedy, leaving many of his goals unfulfilled.

New Frontier Kennedy's New Frontier focused on reviving the economy, winning the space race, building the nation's defenses, and aiding developing countries.

National Aeronautics and Space Administration In 1961, Kennedy boldly pledged to put an American on the moon by the end of the decade. In 1969, NASA achieved this goal.

Bay of Pigs invasion Kennedy's first foreign policy initiative, the Bay of Pigs invasion, attempted to remove Fidel Castro from power in Cuba. It failed miserably.

Berlin Wall In 1961, a concrete barrier was constructed to divide communist East Berlin from noncommunist West Berlin, becoming a symbol of the deepening Cold War divide.

Cuban missile crisis One of the most frightening confrontations of the Cold War occurred when the United States discovered Soviet nuclear missile sites in Cuba. The crisis ended peacefully, due in part to Kennedy's measured response and his actions to take the nation to the

brink of war.

Test Ban Treaty Kennedy and Khrushchev, both determined to reduce Cold War tensions, signed a treaty banning aboveground nuclear weapons tests.

Peace Corps Kennedy's Peace Corps offered thousands of American volunteers the chance to help improve the lives of people in developing nations.

Differing Viewpoints: What Makes a President Great?

Here, President John F. Kennedy arrives in New York and is accompanied by federal agents. Kennedy was eventually assassinated, a historical event that many Americans still obsess over.

Evaluating a president's place in history is always a challenge. In the case of John F. Kennedy, we can only imagine what he might have achieved if he had lived longer. Here, three historians evaluate the Kennedy presidency.

Ronald Steel: "Somehow Everything Went Wrong"

Writing a few years after the assassination, historian Ronald Steel was critical of the Kennedy presidency.

> *It is sometimes hard to remember what the Kennedy legend is all about . . . It got tarnished somewhere around the Bay of Pigs and never recaptured its former glow. That fiasco was followed by the failure of summit diplomacy at Vienna, the manipulation of public anxiety over Berlin, a dramatic jump in the arms race, the unnecessary trip to the brink [of war] during the Cuban missile crisis, timidity on civil rights, legislative stalemate in Congress, and the decision to send the first American troops to Vietnam.*
>
> *Somehow everything went wrong, and increasingly the crusading knight gave way to the conventional politician who had no answers for us. John F. Kennedy's assassination came almost as a reprieve, forever enshrining him in history as the glamorous, heroic leader he wanted to be, rather than as the politician buffeted by events he could not control.*
>
> —"The Kennedy Fantasy," *New York Review of Books*, 1970

William O'Neill: "His Administration Might Have Been Above Average"

While writing a history of the 1960s, William O'Neill tried to imagine what Kennedy might have accomplished in a second term as president.

> *Few Presidents now considered great would be so regarded had they died in the third year of their first term. If he had gotten a friendly Congress for his second term and somehow escaped disaster in Vietnam, his administration might have been above average. But he was killed before its mediocre record could be redeemed. Few important bills were passed and these accomplished little . . . The less said of his Cuban policy the better . . .*
>
> *Yet one cannot evaluate the Kennedy years solely in these practical terms. No mere bookkeeper's calculation can explain his hold on the world's imagination . . . Critics often complained that his dazzling style obscured the thin substance of his government. But while true, that was beside the point . . . The President's style created its own reality, his dash its own momentum. Little progress was*

> *made, yet the illusion of it persisted. And it was not all illusion. The test ban was real if misleading. So was the government's commitment to civil rights.*
>
> *—Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960s*, 1971

Robert Dallek: "He Conveyed a Kind of Hope, a Kind of Promise"

In a recent biography of Kennedy, historian Robert Dallek analyzed the question of why many Americans still view Kennedy as having been a great president.

> *There seems to be a consistency in the public mind in regarding Kennedy as one of the great presidents in American history. There is something about him that continues to command the loyalty, the approval, of the public. Part of it was the fact that he was martyred, but that's not sufficient to explain it . . . I think television is important here. It's captured him on tape—he's frozen in our minds at the age of 46 . . . what he came across as was so charismatic, charming, witty, engaging, smart—just an extraordinary personality . . . I think he conveyed a kind of hope, a kind of promise to the public, the expectation of a better future. And I don't think that's been lost.*
>
> *—An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917–1963*, 2003

John F. Kennedy's "Inaugural Address"

President John F. Kennedy was sworn in as president on January 20, 1961. In his inaugural speech, Kennedy called for public service in a now famous line: "My fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country." Kennedy envisioned the United States on the world stage, in particular facing the challenges brought about by the Cold War in an effective and peaceful manner.

"Inaugural Address", January 20, 1961

Vice President Johnson, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Chief Justice, President Eisenhower, Vice President Nixon, President Truman, reverend clergy, fellow citizens, 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. For I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago.

The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe—the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God.

We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. 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.

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

This much we pledge—and more.

To those old allies whose cultural and spiritual origins we share, we pledge the loyalty of faithful friends. United, there is little we cannot do in a host of cooperative ventures. Divided, there is little we can do—for we dare not meet a powerful challenge at odds and split asunder.

To those new States whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny. We shall not always expect to find them supporting our view. But we shall always hope to find them

strongly supporting their own freedom—and to remember that, in the past, those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside.

To those peoples in the huts and villages across the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required—not because the Communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

To our sister republics south of our border, we offer a special pledge—to convert our good words into good deeds—in a new alliance for progress—to assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty. But this peaceful revolution of hope cannot become the prey of hostile powers. Let all our neighbors know that we shall join with them to oppose aggression or subversion anywhere in the Americas. And let every other power know that this Hemisphere intends to remain the master of its own house.

To that world assembly of sovereign states, the United Nations, our last best hope in an age where the instruments of war have far outpaced the instruments of peace, we renew our pledge of support—to prevent it from becoming merely a forum for invective—to strengthen its shield of the new and the weak—and to enlarge the area in which its writ may run.

Finally, to those nations who would make themselves our adversary, we offer not a pledge but a request: that both sides begin anew the quest for peace, before the dark powers of destruction unleashed by science engulf all humanity in planned or accidental self-destruction.

We dare not tempt them with weakness. For only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed.

But neither can two great and powerful groups of nations take comfort from our present course—both sides overburdened by the cost of modern weapons, both rightly alarmed by the steady spread of the deadly atom, yet both racing to alter that uncertain balance of terror that stays

the hand of mankind's final war.

So let us begin anew—remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.

Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us

Let both sides, for the first time, formulate serious and precise proposals for the inspection and control of arms—and bring the absolute power to destroy other nations under the absolute control of all nations.

Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors. Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths, and encourage the arts and commerce.

Let both sides unite to heed in all corners of the earth the command of Isaiah--to "undo the heavy burdens ... and to let the oppressed go free."

And if a beachhead of cooperation may push back the jungle of suspicion, let both sides join in creating a new endeavor, not a new balance of power, but a new world of law, where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved.

All this will not be finished in the first 100 days. Nor will it be finished in the first 1,000 days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin.

In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than in mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course. Since this country was founded, each generation of Americans has been summoned to give testimony to its national loyalty. The graves of young Americans who answered the call to service surround the globe.

Now the trumpet summons us again—not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need; not as a call to battle, though embattled we are—but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, "rejoicing in hope,

patient in tribulation"—a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself.

Can we forge against these enemies a grand and global alliance, North and South, East and West, that can assure a more fruitful life for all mankind? Will you join in that historic effort?

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility—I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it—and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.

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

Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, ask of us the same high standards of strength and sacrifice which we ask of you. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.

John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address excerpt from the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

Entire Selection: https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/inaugural-address

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