

JFK

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was the 35th President of the United States, the youngest person ever to be elected President, the first Roman Catholic and the first to be born in the 20th century. Kennedy was assassinated before he completed his third year as President, therefore his achievements were limited. Nevertheless, his influence was worldwide, and his handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis may have prevented the United States from entering into another world war. Kennedy was especially admired by the younger people and he was perhaps the most popular president in history. Kennedy expressed the values of 20th century America and his presidency had an importance beyond its political achievements. John Fitzgerald Kennedy was born in Brookline, Massachusetts where he was one of nine children. The Kennedy family was very wealthy and provided means for the Kennedy children to pursue whatever they chose and John F. Kennedy chose politics.

John F. Kennedy was elected to Congress in 1942 and as a new member Kennedy supported legislation that would serve the interests of his elements. Kennedy usually backed bills sponsored by his party but would sometimes show independence by voting with the Republicans. He also joined with the Republicans in criticizing the Truman administration's handling of China. In China, the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek, which had been supported by the United States, was unable to withstand the advance of Communist forces under Mao Zedong. By the end of 1949 government troops had been overwhelmingly defeated, and Chiang led his forces into exile on Taiwan. The triumphant Mao formed the People's Republic of China. Truman's critics, including Kennedy, charged that the administration had failed to support Chiang Kai-shek against the Communists.

Despite Kennedy's wavering within his own party platform, John F. Kennedy easily won reelection to Congress in 1948 and 1950. In 1952 he decided to run against functioning Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. Kennedy was little known outside his congressional district therefore he began his campaign two years before the election, meeting with hundreds of thousands of people in Massachusetts. "Kennedy defeated Lodge by 70,000"1 votes despite the fact that Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Republican Presidential candidate, carried the state by just over 200,000 votes.

As a candidate for the Senate, Kennedy promised the voters that he would do more for Massachusetts than Lodge had ever done. During his first two years as senator he backed legislation beneficial to the Massachusetts textile, fishing, watch, and transportation industries. In 1953, however, he defied regional interests and supported the Saint Lawrence Seaway project and later in 1955 he was the only New England senator to support renewal of the Reciprocal Trade Agreement Act that gave the President the power to lower U. S. tariffs, or taxes on import goods, in exchange for similar concessions from other countries.

In 1957 Kennedy became a member of the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and he later won a place on the Senate Committee on Improper Activities in the Labor Management Field. In 1958 he spent many of his weekends campaigning for reelection in Massachusetts senatorial contest. Kennedy wanted the 1960 Democratic presidential nomination, and almost as soon as the 1956 election was over, he began working toward it.

Kennedy announced his candidacy early in 1960 and by the time the Democratic National Convention opened in July, he had won seven primary victories. When the convention opened, it appeared that Kennedy's only serious challenge for the nomination would come from the Senate majority leader, Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas. However, Johnson was strong only among Southern delegates and Kennedy won the nomination on the first ballot and then persuaded Johnson to become his running mate.

Two weeks later the Republicans nominated Vice President Richard Nixon for president and Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., for vice president. In the fast-paced campaign that followed, Kennedy made stops in 46 states and 273 cities and towns,

while Nixon visited every state and 170 urban areas. The two candidates faced each other in four nationally televised debates. Kennedy's manner, especially in the first debate, seemed to eliminate the charge that he was too young and inexperienced to serve as president, and many believe these debates gave Kennedy the edge he needed for victory.

The election drew a record 69 million voters to the polls, but Kennedy won by only 113,000 votes which made it the closest popular vote in 72 years. Because Kennedy won most of the larger states in the Northeastern United States, he received 303 electoral votes to Nixon's 219. Kennedy was inaugurated on January 20, 1961. In his inaugural address he emphasized America's revolutionary heritage, "The same beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe,"² Kennedy said. "Let the word go forth from this time and place to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generations of Americans."³ Kennedy called for "a new world of law, where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved."⁴

Kennedy's first year in office brought him considerable success in enacting new legislation. Congress passed a major housing bill, a law increasing minimum wage, and a bill granting federal aid to economically depressed areas of the United States. Kennedy put legislation through Congress which was a bill creating the Peace Corps, an agency that trained American volunteers to perform social and humanitarian service overseas and promote world peace, which was important at the time because of unsettling foreign affairs.

In 1959, after several attempts, a revolution led by Fidel Castro finally overthrew the Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar. During the next two years, Castro would become increasingly hostile to the United States. When Castro began to proclaim his belief in Communism, Cuba became part of the Cold War, or struggle between the U. S. and its allies and the nations led by the USSR that involved intense economic and diplomatic battles.

Many Cubans began to flee to the United States and during the Eisenhower administration the CIA had begun to train Cuban exiles secretly for an invasion of Cuba. In April 1961 more than "1000 Cuban exiles made an amphibious landing"⁵ in Cuba at a place called the Bay of Pigs. Their plan was to move inland and join with anti-Castro forces to stage a revolt simultaneously, but instead Castro's forces were there to meet the invaders. The revolt in the interior did not materialize, and air support, promised by the CIA, never came. The exiles were defeated and the survivors were taken prisoner. Castro began to demand money for their release but Kennedy refused to negotiate with Castro. Kennedy did take steps to encourage both businesses and private citizens to reach an agreement with Castro and to contribute to the ransom. On December 25, 1962, "1113 prisoners were released in exchange for food and medical supplies valued at a total of approximately \$53 million."⁶

On June 3, 1961, in Vienna, Austria, Kennedy and USSR leader Nikita Khrushchev met and reviewed relationships between the U. S. and the USSR, as well as other questions of interest to the two states. Two incidents contributed to hostility at the meeting, first being the shooting down of a U. S. spy plane in Soviet air space, and the second was the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in early 1961. The results of the conference made it clear that Khrushchev had construed Kennedy's failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion as a sign of weakness. No agreements were reached on any important issues and the Soviet premier made it clear that the Soviet Union intended to pursue an even more aggressive policy toward the United States.

Amongst other problems President Kennedy faced, none was more serious than the Cuban Missile Crisis. In 1960 Soviet Premier Khrushchev supplied Cuba with nuclear missiles that would put the eastern United States within range of nuclear missile attack. During the summer of 1962 U. S. spy planes flying over Cuba photographed Soviet-managed construction work and spotted the first missile on October 14. For seven days Kennedy consulted with advisors, discussing the possible responses. On October 22, Kennedy told the nation about the discovery of the missiles, demanded that the Soviet Union remove the missiles, and declared the

waters around Cuba a quarantine zone.

For several tense days Soviet vessels en route to Cuba avoided the quarantine zone, while Khrushchev and Kennedy discussed the issue through diplomatic channels. Khrushchev, realizing his weak military position, sent one of two messages to Kennedy in which he agreed to remove the missiles. The following day, before the United States could respond to the first note a second was sent by Khrushchev to try and negotiate terms. Kennedy responded to the first message and an agreement was met for the Soviet missiles to be dismantled and removed from Cuba. In return Kennedy secretly promised not to invade Cuba and to remove older missiles from Turkey. This was perhaps Kennedy's greatest moment as president. Many feel that because of Kennedy's aggression that perhaps WWII was avoided.

On November 22, 1963, President and Mrs. Kennedy were in Dallas, Texas, trying to win support in a state that Kennedy had barely carried in 1960. On his way to a luncheon in Dallas, Kennedy and his wife sat in an open convertible at the head of a motorcade. Lyndon Johnson was two cars behind the president, and Texas Governor John B. Connally and his wife were sitting with the Kennedy's. As the motorcade approached an underpass, two shots were fired, one bullet passed through the president's neck and struck Governor Connally in the back, with the other bullet striking the president in the head. The car sped to nearby Parkland Hospital where at 1:00 PM Kennedy was pronounced dead.

Less than two hours after the shooting, aboard the presidential plane at the Dallas airport, Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in as the 36th president of the United States. The bullets that killed Kennedy were fired from a sixth-story window of a nearby warehouse. That afternoon, Lee Harvey Oswald, was arrested in a Dallas movie theater and charged with murder. Two days later, as the suspect was being transferred from one jail to another, Jack Ruby sprang out from a group of reporters and as millions watched on television, fired a revolver into Oswald's left side. Oswald died in the same hospital to which the President had been taken.

On November 24, the body of President Kennedy was carried on a horse-drawn carriage from the White House to the Rotunda of the Capitol. Hundreds of thousands of people filed past the coffin of the slain president. A state funeral was held the next day where "representatives of 92 nations attended."⁷ It has been estimated that as many as "1 million people"⁸ lined the streets of Washington as the funeral procession made its way slowly to Arlington National Cemetery. The grave was marked by an eternal flame lighted by his wife and brothers. Five days after the funeral, President Johnson appointed Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Earl Warren chairman of a committee to investigate Kennedy's death. The findings of the commission were announced on September 27, 1964, which stated that investigators had found "no evidence of conspiracy in the assassination."⁹ Their report concluded that "the shots which killed President Kennedy were fired by Lee Harvey Oswald."¹⁰