

John F. Kennedy

On November 22, 1963, when he was hardly past his first thousand days in office, John Fitzgerald Kennedy was killed by an assassin's bullets as his motorcade wound through Dallas, Texas. Kennedy was the youngest man elected President; he was the youngest to die.

Of Irish descent, he was born in Brookline, Massachusetts, on May 29, 1917. Graduating from Harvard in 1940, he entered the Navy. In 1943, when his PT boat was rammed and sunk by a Japanese destroyer, Kennedy, despite grave injuries, led the survivors through perilous waters to safety.

Back from the war, he became a Democratic Congressman from the Boston area, advancing in 1953 to the Senate. He married Jacqueline Bouvier on September 12, 1953. In 1955, while recuperating from a back operation, he wrote *Profiles in Courage*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in history.

In 1956 Kennedy almost gained the Democratic nomination for Vice President, and four years later was a first-ballot nominee for President. Millions watched his television debates with the Republican candidate, Richard M. Nixon. Winning by a narrow margin in the popular vote, Kennedy became the first Roman Catholic President.

His Inaugural Address offered the memorable injunction: "Ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country." As President, he set out to redeem his campaign pledge to get America moving again. His economic programs launched the country on its longest sustained expansion since World War II; before his death, he laid plans for a massive assault on persisting pockets of privation and poverty.

Responding to ever more urgent demands, he took vigorous action in the cause of equal rights, calling for new civil rights legislation. His vision of America extended to the quality of the national culture and the central role of the arts in a vital society.

He wished America to resume its old mission as the first nation dedicated to the revolution of human rights. With the Alliance for Progress and the Peace Corps, he brought American idealism to the aid of developing nations. But the hard reality of the Communist challenge remained.

Shortly after his inauguration, Kennedy permitted a band of Cuban exiles, already armed and trained, to invade their homeland. The attempt to overthrow the regime of Fidel Castro was a failure. Soon thereafter, the Soviet Union renewed its campaign against West Berlin. Kennedy replied by reinforcing the Berlin garrison and increasing the Nation's military strength, including new efforts in outer space. Confronted by this reaction, Moscow, after the erection of the Berlin Wall, relaxed its pressure in central Europe.

Instead, the Russians now sought to install nuclear missiles in Cuba. When this was discovered by air reconnaissance in October 1962, Kennedy imposed a quarantine on all offensive weapons bound for Cuba. While the world trembled on the brink of nuclear war, the Russians backed

down and agreed to take the missiles away. The American response to the Cuban crisis evidently persuaded Moscow of the futility of nuclear blackmail.

Kennedy now contended that both sides had a vital interest in stopping the spread of nuclear weapons and slowing the arms race--a contention which led to the test ban treaty of 1963. The months after the Cuban crisis showed significant progress toward his goal of "a world of law and free choice, banishing the world of war and coercion." His administration thus saw the beginning of new hope for both the equal rights of Americans and the peace of the world.

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Domestic Affairs

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

Economic and Legislative Challenges

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

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

the positive side of the ledger, the government undertook regional development in Appalachia, an initiative that would have a major impact over the next three decades in reducing poverty in the region.

Civil Rights

But by far the most volatile—and divisive—domestic issue of the day was civil rights. African-Americans were striving to reverse centuries of social and economic hardship, and activism against legalized racism was growing. This activism was troubling to many whites, particularly in the South. Kennedy's role—or lack of it—in this great crusade remains controversial. In short, he concentrated more on enforcing existing civil rights laws than on passing new ones.

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

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

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

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

Foreign Affairs

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

The Bay of Pigs

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

Vienna and Berlin

The misadventure cost Kennedy dearly. Still recovering from this humiliating political defeat,

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

Missiles in Cuba

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

Kennedy consulted with his top advisers over a period of several days. These meetings were conducted in utmost secrecy in order to maximize the range of responses available. This group, came to be known as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, or ExComm,

examined the options available to respond to the Soviet threat. Among those options were air strikes on the missile bases, a full-scale invasion of Cuba, or a naval blockade of the island. Kennedy eventually chose a blockade, or quarantine, of Cuba backed up by the threat of imminent military action. In announcing his decision on national television on October 22, 1962—breaking the extraordinary secrecy surrounding the crisis to that point—Kennedy warned that the purpose of the Soviet missiles in Cuba could be "none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere" and that he would protect the United States from such a threat no matter what the cost. The lines, suddenly, were drawn very firmly indeed, and the world held its breath.

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

To the Moon

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

The Developing World

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

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

Southeast Asia

The later stages of Kennedy's presidency saw him tested by the growing conflict in Vietnam.

America had been sending military advisers there since the mid-1950s to help prevent a Communist takeover of the Southeast Asian nation. In 1961, Kennedy increased this allotment and ordered in the Special Forces, an elite army unit, to train the South Vietnamese in counter-insurgency warfare. But war continued to spread, and by the end of Kennedy's presidency, 16,000 American military advisers were serving in Vietnam.

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

Limiting Nuclear Testing

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