

# THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT



## THE UNFINISHED PRESIDENCY John F. Kennedy, 35<sup>th</sup> President (1961 - 1963)

by Dan Sanders

### IN BRIEF

Charismatic, telegenic and the youngest man ever elected to the presidency, “JFK” captured the idealism of his times for many. The first man in the White House who had come of age during the Depression and the Second World War, he became the vanguard of a generation that would dominate American politics well into the 1980s. Despite being born into a rich, politically connected family, Kennedy strived to make his own way. He wrote a bestselling book while still in college, and when World War II broke out, he volunteered for hazardous combat duty in the Pacific. Shortly after returning home at the great conflict’s end, Kennedy entered politics: first as a Congressman, than a U.S. Senator. In 1960, despite being only forty-three years old, he made his run for the presidency, overcoming misgivings of his Catholic faith to win the Democratic nomination. In a close, dynamic campaign, he narrowly defeated Richard Nixon to win the White House. The postwar world was one fraught with peril, and the young president



*Despite his public image of healthy vigor, Kennedy in fact suffered from a number of serious physical ailments.*

struggled mightily with Communist foes in Cuba, the Soviet Union, and Vietnam. At home, Kennedy found himself confronted with deeply contentious social issues such as civil rights for African Americans. “JFK” took on all this and far more in his ambitious, energetic style. Barely halfway through his term, however, he was assassinated under still-controversial circumstances in Dallas, Texas. Born 1917 in Brookline, Massachusetts, Kennedy died at the age of forty-six in 1963.

## LIFE BEFORE THE PRESIDENCY

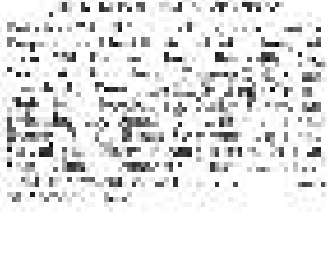
John Fitzgerald Kennedy would be the first president to begin his life in the twentieth century. Both parents were from wealthy Boston families long active in politics. Joseph Kennedy, John’s father, had made a large fortune in the stock market, entertainment, and other businesses. His mother, Rose, was the

daughter of a former Boston mayor. “Jack” and his eight siblings enjoyed a privileged childhood of elite private schools, sailboats, servants and summer homes.

Childhood classmates remember a reed-thin, oft-sickly child, an indifferent student in many subjects but deeply interested in history. President [Franklin Roosevelt](#)

named his father, Joseph, to the key post of

ambassador to Great Britain in 1938. That year, Jack inherited one million dollars from his family, but his ambition remained strong. While in England with his father, he wrote *Why England Slept*, a well-received book on England’s lack of readiness for the [Second World War](#). Jack Kennedy graduated from Harvard University in 1940.



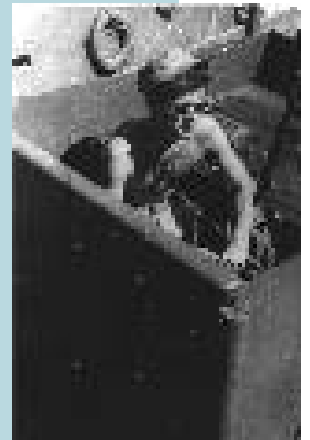
Harvard yearbook photo, 1940.

## **Kennedy In World War II**

A year later, the United States had entered the war, allied with the British

and Soviets against the Germans, Japanese and Italians. Kennedy was originally deemed unfit for military service due to a childhood football injury to his back. But he managed to pass the Navy entrance physical some months later.

Kennedy's wartime service -- against the Japanese in the South Pacific -- was both hazardous and heroic. Given command of a small motor-torpedo boat, Kennedy took part in the war to wrest thousands of islands from a dug-in, capable enemy. These "PT boats" almost always served in a front-line capacity, and malaria rates among their crews ran close to one hundred percent. In August 1943, a Japanese warship rammed Kennedy's boat in two during a night action. Some members of the crew were sleeping during watch, a serious breach of Navy regulations. Kennedy led the crew's survivors on a three mile swim to refuge on a tiny island while towing a badly burned crewmate by a life-jacket strap clenched in his teeth. The crew hid on the island from the enemy for days until Kennedy managed to summon help.



*Wartime, 1943.*

Widely credited with the rescue of his crew, he received a medal for his actions. The war ended in 1945, but not without a deep cost to the Kennedy family: the oldest son, Joseph, was killed on a bombing mission in Europe. Handsome and dynamic, Joseph had been the one tabbed by his father to become president one day, and upon his death the aspiration fell to Jack, who had spent his entire life in his older brother's shadow.

### ***The Political Climb***

In 1946, the twenty-nine-year-old John F. Kennedy won election to the U.S. Congress in a working-class Boston district. He would serve three terms there as a somewhat conservative Democrat. In 1952 he ran for the U.S. Senate and defeated the Republican incumbent, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. That year, while at a dinner party, Kennedy spotted Jacqueline Bouvier, an attractive socialite

dabbling in photojournalism. As he later put it, he “leaned across the asparagus and asked her for a date,” and the two were married in 1953. Not long afterward, Kennedy’s health worsened and he required serious surgery on his spine.

Jack Kennedy had health problems his entire life. Tormented by back trouble, left thin and sallow by malaria brought home from the war, he also suffered from a glandular disease many doctors considered terminal. His days were filled with pills and injections, and at least four times as an adult he was administered Last Rites -- the Catholic prayer for the dying. But Kennedy knew that much of his appeal was based on his image as a youthful and healthy man. Once in politics, he went to considerable lengths to keep his illnesses from the public.

While recovering from the back surgery, the senator wrote a collection of accounts of Americans who had taken unpopular but moral stands entitled *Profiles In Courage*. The book won the Pulitzer Prize, and it made Kennedy a national name.

Kennedy’s real achievements in the Senate were few, but it was really just another stepping-stone: almost immediately after election, he began angling for even higher office. In 1956 he mounted a serious quest for the Vice-Presidential spot on the Adlai Stevenson ticket. He narrowly lost the spot to Estes Kefauver, a senator from Tennessee. But it proved a blessing in disguise. The deeply popular president, Dwight Eisenhower, demolished the Stevenson-Kefauver ticket that fall; neither man would ever be a real contender for the office again.

The exposure of the 1956 near-miss made Kennedy a favorite for the 1960 Democratic presidential nomination. Reelected to the Senate in 1958, he became a member of its influential Foreign Relations Committee. Kennedy made no secret of his 1960 ambitions, but his obstacles to the presidency were formidable.

## THE CAMPAIGN AND ELECTION OF 1960

John Kennedy's candidacy faced two great hurdles: his youth and his religion. Americans were startled by the idea of a president barely forty years of age. Even more unsettling to many was the prospect of a Roman Catholic holding the office; concern bubbled amongst the country's Protestant majority that he would be, in some way, "controlled" by the Church. A series of speeches helped cool misgivings about his faith, but opponents tried to paint him as too young for the Presidency until he was elected to it, and even afterward.

In the years between the 1956 and 1960 elections, the young senator sought a head start on his rivals -- making speeches and television appearances constantly while wooing key Democratic players. The first candidate to use such a long-term strategy, Kennedy's tactics are now used by every serious contender for the Presidency.

Forty years ago, there were far fewer primaries in the nomination process than there are today. Kennedy's chief rival for the nomination was Hubert Humphrey from Minnesota, whose steadfast liberalism played well with many in the Midwest. Humphrey's best hope rested on winning in his "back yard" of neighboring Wisconsin, then painting himself as the new favorite. But Kennedy's superior planning, financing and political instincts won out. The nomination's turning point followed, the West Virginia primary. A working-class, heavily Protestant state, it would be critical for Kennedy to show that a wealthy Catholic was electable there. Humphrey desperately threw all his remaining resources into the fray (he even tapped a savings fund for his daughter's upcoming wedding), but the Kennedy machine simply steamrolled him with money and savvy. Dispirited and broke, Humphrey abandoned the race, and Kennedy's



nomination began to look inevitable.

It was. At the party's convention in Los Angeles, John Kennedy clinched the nomination on the first ballot. He named Lyndon Johnson, the tall and boisterous Texan who reigned as Senate Majority Leader, as his running mate -- both to woo the more conservative south and to have a congressional insider on the ticket.

Two weeks later, the Republicans selected [Richard Nixon](http://www.nixonfoundation.org/) to oppose Kennedy. In political terms, Nixon was also a young man (forty-seven to Kennedy's forty-three), but he had been the nation's Vice President for eight years. This gave him much more familiarity and prestige with the public than the comparative unknown the Democrats were offering. Kennedy discerned this as a serious barrier to his election chances, and to raise his public profile he challenged Nixon to a series of televised debates. Nixon, justifiably proud of his skill as a debater, took the bait.

**Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace**  
<http://www.nixonfoundation.org/>

### ***The Turning Point: Television***



*Kennedy and Nixon after one of the debates.*

The debates were a profoundly historic chapter in the history of the American presidency. They were the first advanced use of what would thereafter be the essential force in our politics -- television. One candidate mastered the new medium, the other did not; and the candidate who did eventually won.

The first debate was watched by a huge nationwide audience. Nixon, just out of the hospital because of an infection caused by a bad cut, wore a light-colored suit; the combination of illness and wardrobe made him look pale

and uncomfortable. But Kennedy had rested quietly in the California sun for days beforehand -- and rented a television studio to practice his on-camera technique. Polls taken afterward showed that those who had listened to the debates on the *radio* thought Nixon had won. But the larger *television* audience gave a decided edge to Kennedy -- and it would live in history as the campaign's turning point.



Working the crowds in Montana, Fall 1960.

It is difficult to overstate the impact of Kennedy's success with television on American politics. In doing so, he mastered the period's dominant media -- as Lincoln had done with photography, as Franklin Roosevelt had done with radio, and as a future president will, one day, do with the Internet. From 1960 onward, a presidency won without a strong television presence would be utterly unthinkable.

The debates had leveled the playing field, leading to an intelligent, wonderfully spirited campaign between two gifted, qualified men. Both Nixon and Kennedy drove themselves to exhaustion seeking an edge over his rival. Nixon, however, was hamstrung by an unfortunate early pledge to campaign in every state of the union; the trips to vote-poor states took precious time and money.

The election was the closest of the century, too close to call all night. Today, Americans who avoid voting because they do not think their vote matters should keep in mind that the final margin of victory in 1960 averaged *one vote per precinct* nationwide. The campaigning that had begun so many years before for John Kennedy was just enough.

On a bitterly cold Friday in January 1961, Kennedy took the oath of office. After such a close campaign, Kennedy knew his inaugural address would have to reach out to many. In the days before it was to be delivered, he carefully studied landmark American oratory such as the [Gettysburg Address](#) and emulated its

terse, vivid style. Unlike many inaugural addresses, he pulled few punches, and its content was almost exclusively devoted to matters outside the nation's borders. In addition, he knew his election signaled a fundamental, generational sea-change in America:

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

## THE KENNEDY PRESIDENCY: DOMESTIC AFFAIRS

By far the most volatile domestic issue of the day was Civil Rights. African Americans were striving to reverse centuries of social and economic hardship, and activism against institutionalized racism was growing. This activism was troubling to many whites, particularly in the South. Kennedy's role -- or, rather, his lack of it -- in this great crusade remains controversial. His Democratic majority in Congress was razor-thin, and many Southerners in his party were suspicious of Kennedy. In short, he concentrated more on enforcing *existing* civil rights laws than passing new ones. On several occasions, Kennedy invoked some of the highest powers of his office to send troops to Southern states refusing to racially integrate their schools. Even this limited strategy, however, caused his poll numbers to drop with Americans. He told advisers privately that real civil rights legislation would have to wait until his reelection.

Kennedy was much more instrumental in the success of his country's space program. An enthusiastic proponent of it, he vowed to have Americans striding the moon by the end of the decade. His support of the enterprise was essential and some credit for our species' greatest scientific achievement must go to him.

A little-known fact is that Kennedy was the first president to set up a commission on women's issues. This policy was reflective of the desire of many women to be accepted in non-traditional roles in American life, and foreshadowed the [Women's Movement](#) that began in earnest shortly after Kennedy's death.

Lacking deep congressional support, 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. One novel bit of legislation was the formation of the [Peace Corps](#), a group of volunteers sent to impoverished countries to work as farmhands, teachers, medical assistants, and other skills in short supply.

## THE KENNEDY PRESIDENCY: FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Kennedy inherited a full plate of foreign intrigue. In his inaugural he pointed out to Americans that the rules of the global game had changed: "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."

The most troublesome foreign crisis lay just ninety miles from American shores -- Cuba. A communist dictator, [Fidel Castro](#), had seized power there two years before, aligning himself with the Soviet Union and seizing U.S.-owned assets on the island. With Dwight Eisenhower's blessing at the end of his

presidency, the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) (CIA) had been training expatriated Cubans to invade their native country and overthrow Castro. Kennedy sanctioned the attack three months into his term, and utter disaster ensued. At the [Bay of Pigs](#) southeast of Havana, the Cuban expatriates were pinned down and captured on the invasion beach, expected air cover never materialized, and the insurgent's countrymen failed to rise up against Castro as expected. It was a humiliating setback for Kennedy, and he sought to make use of its lessons.

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 there.



*Kennedy at his desk during the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962.*

But the Cuba-USSR alliance remained a sore point with Kennedy, and in June of 1961 he met in Vienna with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev, a thoroughly tough, combative little man of peasant origin. Khrushchev was openly hostile to Kennedy at the summit. At summer's end the premier ordered the building of the [Berlin Wall](#) -- a giant barricade that kept East Germans from escaping to the democratic West.

### **Missiles In Cuba**

In the wake of the altercations at the Bay of Pigs and Berlin, Khrushchev considered Kennedy a weak leader, and he began steps to exploit this supposed advantage. The Soviet premier began to secretly send nuclear missiles to Castro's Cuba -- missiles that made most of the United States vulnerable to attack. In mid-October, U.S. spy aircraft flying over the island discovered the weapons, and the Cuban Missile Crisis had begun. It would be the planet's

closest brush with nuclear Armageddon, and Kennedy's greatest work in office.

Kennedy's military advisors wanted to conduct air strikes against the missiles but he overruled them. It would not look right to answer one warlike act with another. Instead, he imposed a *naval blockade* on Cuba -- American warships surrounding the island to prevent more Soviet ships from reaching it. The lines, suddenly, were drawn very firmly indeed, and the world held its breath.

Khrushchev, surprised by his young adversary's hard resolve, quickly saw that he stood at a distinct disadvantage to the United States. If he escalated the conflict any further, he would have to supply an army on the other side of the globe -- and sell a war to a Soviet Union that had lost fifty million of its citizens in one just twenty years before. For his part, Kennedy sensed that the key to defusing the crisis lay in giving Khrushchev an out that would let him save face on the world stage. He took extreme care not to publically humiliate the Soviet premier. Kennedy promised Khrushchev not to invade Cuba, and the Russians removed the missiles. The crisis was over.

### **Later Foreign Policy**

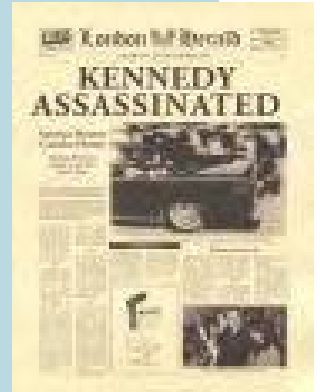
The later stages of Kennedy's presidency saw him tested by the growing conflict in [Vietnam](#). America had been sending troops there since the mid-fifties to help prevent a Communist takeover of the Southeast Asian nation. In 1961 he increased this allotment and ordered them to directly engage Communist forces. But the war continued to spread, and by the end of Kennedy's presidency, 10,000 Americans were serving in Vietnam. Like many aspects of his administration, how Kennedy would have handled later events is not clear. A veteran of jungle warfare and student of world history, he remained deeply wary of the dangers of American involvement there. He told advisers that, ultimately, the Vietnamese would have to determine their nation's destiny themselves.

Just weeks before his death, Kennedy presided over the signing of a

limited ban on the testing of nuclear weapons. Great Britain and the Soviet Union also signed the agreement. In the wake of the close call over Cuba, Kennedy considered it his greatest feat as president.

### **Dark November**

In late November 1963, the Kennedys journeyed to Dallas, Texas to prop up uncertain support in the South. While riding in an open convertible through the city gunshots were fired. One struck the president in the head, fatally wounding him. Some hours later police arrested Lee Harvey Oswald, a mysterious former Marine who had defected to the Soviet Union -- then returned to the United States and championed pro-Cuba causes. Two days later the suspect was himself slain by a Dallas nightclub owner while being transferred to another jail. For many Americans, the murder of John F. Kennedy would remain burned in their memory one of the most wrenching single events of



#### **Kennedy Assassination Home Page**

*Collection of web links to sites discussing the assassination.*  
<http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/index.htm>

#### **The President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection**

*The records held by the National Archives.*  
<http://www.nara.gov/nara/jfk/jfk.html>

the century. To many, the country would never seem quite as moral, hopeful or functional again.

### **FAMILY LIFE**

The Kennedys had their first child, Caroline, in 1957. John Jr. was born a few days after his father won the presidency. A third child, Patrick, died two days after his birth in 1963. After a long succession



*Kennedy with his children, John Jr. and Caroline.*

of elderly presidents, much of the nation was charmed by the images of small children running about the White House. The president's large extended family was a constant presence there (brother Robert had been named Attorney General), and the public image of the Kennedys was of a boisterous, energetic clan.

## THE FIRST LADY: JACQUELINE BOUVIER KENNEDY

Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy disliked the term "First Lady," telling friends it sounded like something you'd call a horse. But by the time she moved into the White House, she had become a decided political asset to her husband. She spoke several languages and enjoyed great popularity with audiences on trips overseas. Soft-spoken and uncommonly beautiful, she had a knack for charming hard-edged people.



Jacqueline Bouvier was born in 1929. Her mother, deeply ambitious, struggled to penetrate the Northeastern, old-money social scene. Her father, like Kennedy's, made much of his living in the stock market, but with considerably less success, and Jacqueline's parents divorced during her childhood. Her mother remarried a wealthy man, and Jacqueline attended elite private schools and colleges. Out of college, she got a job producing a newspaper column, which was called "Inquiring Photographer." She married Kennedy in 1953, and was only thirty-one years old when she took up residence at the White House.

As First Lady, "Jackie" had a deep interest in the lore of the presidency, as well as a terrific passion for the arts. She carefully oversaw restorations throughout the White House -- then invited the planet's premier musicians and writers to appear there.

**Jacqueline Kennedy Biography**  
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/WH/glimpse/firstladies/html/jk35-plain.html>

She became as one biographer put it, her country's Minister of Culture -- opening the White House to a parade of artistic luminaries.

Her grace was tremendous. Just hours after the assassination of her husband, Ms. Kennedy sent aides to the National Archives. She then modeled the president's funeral after Lincoln's, and drew great praise for her poise there. Her dignified mourning did a great deal to calm a stunned, frightened nation.

Five years after leaving the White House, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy married Greek shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis. When Onassis died in 1975, she took a job as a book editor with a prestigious publishing firm. Though living in New York, she insisted on privacy for herself and was largely reclusive. From the day she became First Lady, public interest in her was immense, and remained so until her death from cancer in May 1994.

## KENNEDY'S IMPACT AND LEGACY

It is never easy to assess an unfinished presidency, for much of it must rely on speculation. What would he have done, given more time?

Because Kennedy's days in office were so short and his Congress so contentious, it is safe to say that he had a far greater impact on his nation's presidential *election process* than on the office itself. His aggressive, long-term campaign strategy, the televised debate with the other major candidate, his masterful use of television -- all are mainstays of major-office politics to this day.

John F. Kennedy genuinely liked the press, perhaps the last president to do so. The avalanche of social turmoil that followed his death completely changed the genetic makeup of the American media.

**John F. Kennedy Library & Museum**  
<http://www.cs.umb.edu/jfklibrary/index.htm>  
*Excellent collection of photos and audio clips from the official JFK library.*

Many contemporaries, including his Soviet counterpart, saw him as an immature lightweight. Indeed, Kennedy made some mistakes an older man might have avoided. But he handled the prime domestic and foreign crises of his presidency -- civil rights and Cuba -- with considerable skill after some early bad missteps. Some in American politics were unsettled by his youth and wealth; it seemed it had all come to him too early and easy.

Of Kennedy's personal courage there is no question. Initially rejected for military service, he persevered until he gained assignment to extremely hazardous wartime duty. PT boats operated almost exclusively in forward combat areas. In the showdown over Castro's missiles, Kennedy displayed extraordinary calm and negotiating shrewdness, and in the process bested a much more experienced Soviet leader.

Kennedy's greatest changes to America came after his death. His successor, Lyndon Johnson, took up and passed many of Kennedy's programs. The need became apparent to further insulate the man holding the office from the public. The number of White House workers increased exponentially. The young, magnetic, martyred president proved a difficult act to follow. Many have tried to emulate his energy and vision with little success.

Modern assessments of Kennedy have become a virtual industry. They cover a wide spectrum of opinion, much of it colored by his considerable charm and by the murky circumstances surrounding his death. Recent years have seen widespread allegations of recklessness in his private life, and debate rages as to whether his murder was the work of one or many. Dead men do not file libel suits, and because of this Kennedy's personal character has taken considerable pummeling in the media. Those close to him (including his widow, to the day of her own death) have remained largely silent on the topic. Nor are there many definitive answers to be found regarding his assassination. It is certainly *possible* for a head of state to be shot by a lone, deranged man while riding in an

automobile – that is exactly First World War started. But polls show that few Americans believe Kennedy met his death that way. With each passing year, hope for the precise truth about Kennedy’s life -- and death -- seems more remote.

Any analysis of John Fitzgerald Kennedy’s presidency must end with What Might Have Been, because his time in office was too brief to provide a picture of his presidency’s true quality. But he remains the most compelling, charismatic leader of his century’s second half.



*Kennedy's gravesite, at Arlington National Cemetery just outside Washington, DC.*

## ISSUES TO PONDER

- 1.) In light of the recent allegations about Kennedy’s illnesses and about his private life, do you think he would be electable today? Why or why not?
- 2.) Kennedy recreated the way we elect presidents. What are positive and negative qualities of these changes?
- 3.) There are far more books, news articles and films written about Kennedy than most presidents. What are some of the reasons for this?
- 4.) How do you think some of the following affected how Kennedy conducted his presidency: (a) his wartime service; (b) his health problems; (c) his family background; (d) his age?
- 5.) What do you think would have been some of Kennedy’s accomplishments and shortcomings, had he served longer in office?

## READING MORE

*Conversations With Kennedy*, by Benjamin C. Bradlee, W.W. Norton and Company, 1975. An informal profile by a journalist who covered the Kennedy presidency.

*Kennedy*, by Theodore C. Sorensen, Harper and Row, 1965. A detailed memoir by Kennedy's closest aide.

*The Making of the President, 1960*, by Theodore H. White, Atheneum Publishers, 1961. An exemplary book about the workings of a national campaign.

*President Kennedy: Profile of Power* by Richard Reeves, Simon and Schuster, 1993. An in-depth analysis of the presidency from a more recent perspective.