



Chapter 48

The Age of Camelot

Was John F. Kennedy a great president?

48.1 Introduction

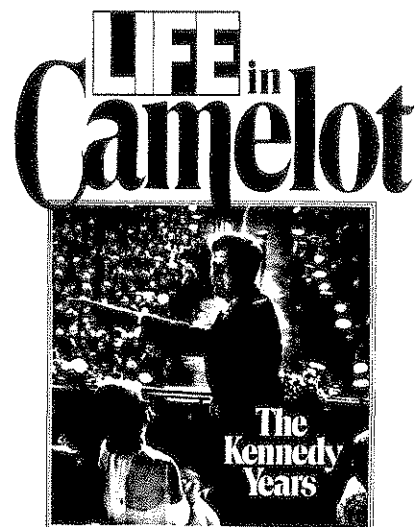
In 1961, when John F. Kennedy, the youngest man elected to the presidency, replaced Dwight Eisenhower, one of the oldest presidents, the atmosphere in the White House changed. The handsome, charming young president and his graceful wife, Jacqueline, made the house inviting and exciting to visit. On some evenings, famous musicians or opera singers performed. On others, 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 the time of Kennedy's inauguration, a new musical called *Camelot* had recently begun its long run on Broadway. Its main character is the legendary King Arthur, who ruled Camelot, an enchanted kingdom. As the play unfolds, Arthur founds 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.

As Kennedy began his administration, fans of the ideals that were portrayed in *Camelot* hoped Kennedy would prove to be an equally gifted leader. Sadly, Kennedy's life ended before most people could decide whether he had lived up to expectations. In an interview after his death, Jacqueline Kennedy recalled the words of her husband's favorite song from the musical, sung by King Arthur:

Don't let it be forgot
That once there was a spot
For one brief shining moment
That was known as Camelot.
— Alan Jay Lerner, *Camelot*, 1961

Many Americans viewed Kennedy's time in office as just such a "brief shining moment." Others felt less sure that the young president had behaved with true greatness. In this chapter, you will learn how such differing opinions developed.



Edited by Philip B. Kunhardt Jr.

As the cover of this *Life* magazine suggests, many Americans associated the White House during the Kennedy years 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.



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

48.2 President Kennedy's Domestic Record

On a chilly day in Washington, D.C., with fresh snow at their feet, a large crowd gathered in front of the Capitol to watch John F. Kennedy be sworn in as the 35th U.S. president. The new leader then laid out 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. He closed with an appeal to his listeners' sense of idealism, urging them to make a personal commitment to public service. "And so, my fellow Americans," he said in words that would often be repeated, "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 inaugural address and the dazzling festivities and balls that followed later that evening set the tone of elegance and youthful vigor that became known as the "Kennedy style." Even before Kennedy had won the race for president, people had started to talk about his charisma—a combination of charm and personal magnetism that caused others to like and support him. At campaign stops, young people had cheered him as if he were a movie star. One senator observed that Kennedy combined the "best qualities of Elvis Presley and Franklin D. Roosevelt."

During the campaign, Kennedy and his opponent, Richard Nixon, had expressed similar views on many issues. Both had vowed to get a sluggish economy moving again and to halt the spread of communism. Kennedy, however, had attacked the Eisenhower-Nixon administration for allowing a "missile gap" to open up between the United States and the Soviet Union. Unless something was done to restore American military superiority, he warned, "the periphery [edges] of the Free World will slowly be nibbled away."

The most obvious difference between the two candidates was their personal style. This contrast became clear on September 26, 1960, when they met in the first live, televised presidential debate in history. More than 70 million viewers tuned in, while others listened on the radio. For many Americans, this was their first close look at the candidates—especially Kennedy, who was less known.

Nixon, weakened by a serious knee injury and a bout of the flu, appeared nervous and uneasy. His face was pale, all the more so because he had refused to wear any stage makeup. Kennedy, in contrast, appeared relaxed and confident. Most of the people who watched the debate on television thought Kennedy had won. But those who listened on the radio thought Nixon was the winner.

On election day, Kennedy barely squeaked by Nixon in the closest election since 1888. As a result, Kennedy took office without a clear electoral mandate. This lack of a strong go-ahead from voters would put the new president at a severe disadvantage in his dealings with Congress.

An Administration of “the Best and the Brightest” Like the legendary King Arthur, Kennedy set out 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 brother Robert, only 35 years old, to be attorney general. When people grumbled that Robert was too young for this 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 service attracted many talented young people to Washington. Those who joined his administration found public service to be exciting, even glamorous. Like their boss, they worked hard and played hard. Fueled with fresh idealism, they hoped to change the world.

Kennedy’s “New Frontier” Challenges the Nation While running for president, Kennedy had already begun to lay out his vision for changing the world. In his speech accepting the Democratic presidential nomination, he had told Americans,

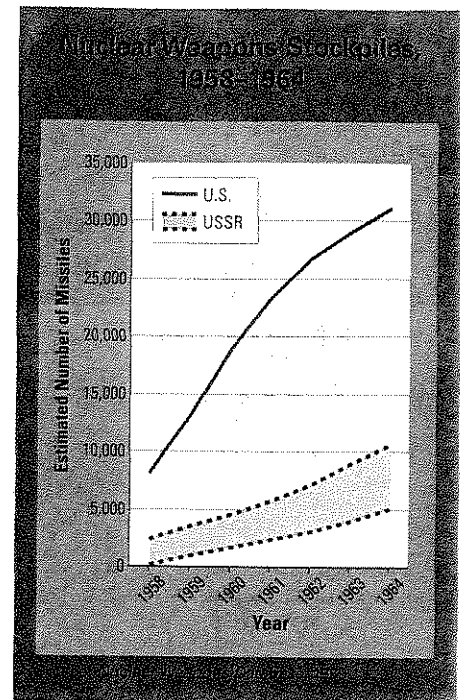
We stand today on the edge of a New Frontier—the frontier of the 1960s—a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils—a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats . . . Beyond that frontier are the uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance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

—John F. Kennedy, July 15, 1960

Once in office, Kennedy worked to translate his *New Frontier* rhetoric into a list of concrete goals. To expand opportunity, he called for an increase in aid to education, 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. To protect liberty and democracy, he called for a large increase in defense spending.

Kennedy had trouble getting his **legislative agenda**, or list of programs to enact, through Congress, even though Democrats held a majority of seats. He did succeed in raising the minimum wage and enacting some urban development programs. However, a coalition of conservative southern Democrats and Republicans, who voted to block change, stalled much of Kennedy’s agenda. After several failures, Kennedy gave up on some of his programs. “There is no sense raising hell,” he observed, “and then not being successful.”

Reviving the Economy Kennedy had mixed success in his effort to, as he put it, “get the economy moving again.” When he took office, the nation was in a mild recession. Kennedy laid 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 knew that the “missile gap” he had referred to in his campaign was not real. In fact, the United States had far more weaponry than the Soviet Union had.



One of President Kennedy’s most effective campaign issues was what he called the “missile gap.” This was a supposed difference in the number of nuclear missiles the United States and the Soviet Union held in their defense arsenals. In actuality, the United States was ahead of, not behind, the USSR in missile strength.



To the Kennedy children, Caroline and her younger brother, John (seen here under his father's desk), the White House was not the seat of government but, rather, their home. The young couple and their two playful children made the family media favorites.

On August 28, 1963, after the massive March on Washington, 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.

Nonetheless, Kennedy convinced Congress to boost the defense budget by nearly 20 percent in 1961. Over the next few years, the government pumped billions of dollars into the economy while increasing the nation's stockpile of missiles and other high-tech weapons, such as nuclear submarines.

The second part of Kennedy's plan was to pass a major tax cut, which he hoped would put more money in people's pockets and stimulate economic growth. Here he was less successful. 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 the tax cuts, the recession did end. By the close of 1961, the economy had begun a period of growth that would last throughout the decade.

A Cautious Approach to Civil Rights On civil rights legislation, Kennedy had even less success with Congress. While campaigning, Kennedy had called for an end to racial discrimination. When authorities in Atlanta jailed Martin Luther King Jr., Kennedy had responded by asking his brother Robert to arrange King's release. Widely reported in the press, news of the brothers' work on King's behalf had helped Kennedy win the African American vote.

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



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

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, however, 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 out of a Cold War embarrassment. In 1957, the Soviet Union had surprised the world by launching the first artificial satellite into orbit around Earth. Called *Sputnik*, or “Little Traveler” in Russian, the unmanned satellite traveled at 18,000 miles per hour. A month later, the Russians launched *Sputnik II* with a dog onboard.

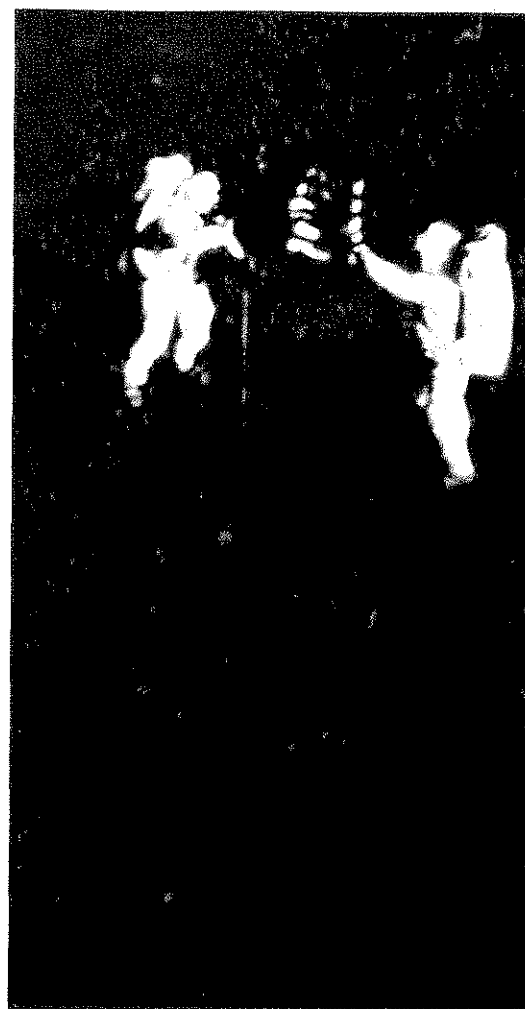
In contrast, delays and failed launches had plagued American efforts to send rockets into space. Around the world, newspapers ridiculed U.S. rockets as “flopniks” and “kaputniks.” When asked what Americans would find if they ever reached the moon, nuclear physicist Edward Teller quipped, “Russians.”

In 1958, President Eisenhower had responded to the Soviet challenge by creating the **National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)**. By the time Kennedy took office, NASA had 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 moved rapidly to meet the challenge. In 1961, astronaut Alan Shepard made a short spaceflight. A year later, John Glenn was the first American to orbit Earth. On July 20, 1969, just eight years after Kennedy had set the goal of a moon landing, Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins, and Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin Jr. reached the moon as part of the Apollo space program. The world watched in awe as Armstrong stepped onto the moon's surface. “That's one small step for a man,” he said as he stepped onto the lunar soil, “one giant leap for mankind.”



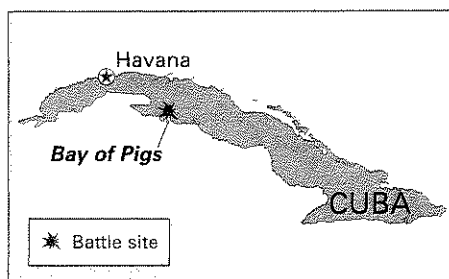
The spaceflight from Florida's Cape Kennedy Space Center to the moon took about 102 hours and 45 minutes. After stepping onto the lunar surface on July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong and Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin Jr. erected a U.S. flag. The two astronauts also collected soil and rock samples and left behind scientific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

48.3 President Kennedy's Record in Foreign Affairs

As president, Kennedy's greatest triumphs—but also his most disastrous mistakes—were in foreign affairs. U.S. relations with Cuba proved to be especially troublesome for the president. 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 his communist ally. He is seen 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 helping make that boast come true.



Fidel Castro Establishes a Communist Regime in Cuba In 1959, communist revolutionaries, led by Fidel Castro, had ousted Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. As a result, the United States suddenly found that it 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. The USSR sent advisers, weapons, and financial aid to Cuba. With this Soviet help, Castro transformed Cuba into a communist country with a **planned economy**. Government planners began to make almost all economic decisions. The government took control of U.S. oil refineries and farms on the island and seized private businesses and properties from wealthy Cubans.

Reluctant to live 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 had begun training some of these Cuban exiles in Florida and Guatemala as guerrilla fighters. The clandestine mission of these exiles was to return to Cuba and lead a popular uprising that would topple Castro and his regime.

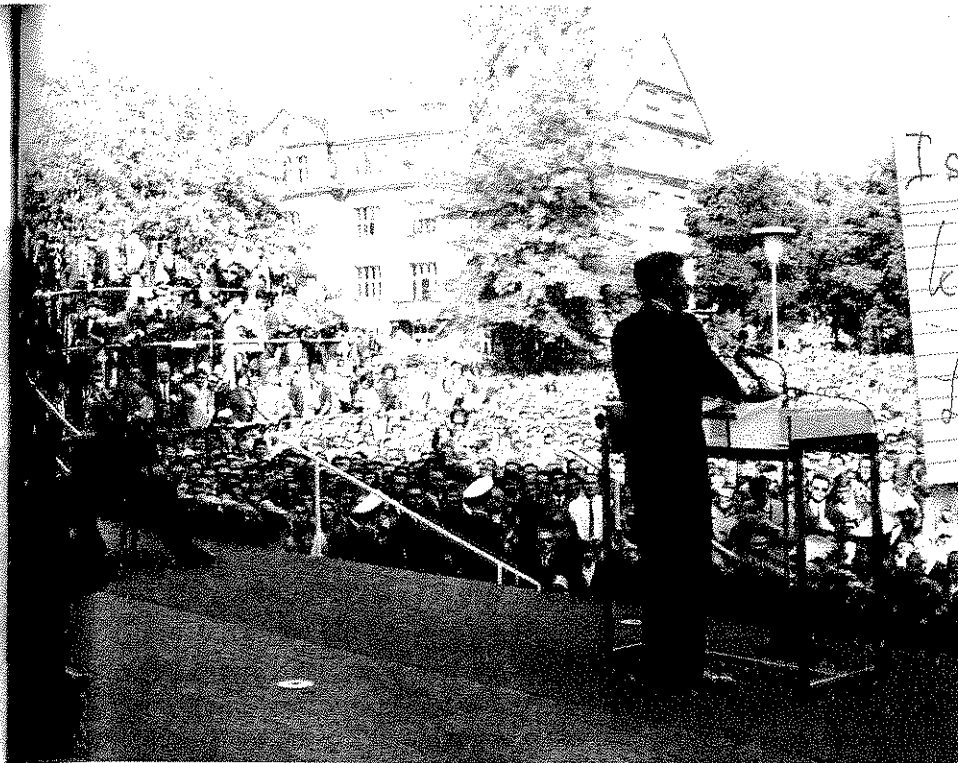
The Bay of Pigs Fiasco Fails to Dislodge Castro The CIA officials who briefed Kennedy on the invasion plan assured the new president that the invasion would inspire Cubans to rise up and rebel against Castro. CIA director Allen Dulles told Kennedy that if he wanted to stop Castro's growing influence in Latin America, the time to act was "now or never." Eager to show he was a strong Cold War president, Kennedy allowed the plan to move forward.

On April 17, 1961, a small army of Cuban exiles sailed into the Bay of Pigs in southern Cuba. The landing was a disaster. CIA trainers had told the exiles they would come ashore on an empty beach, but their boats ran aground on a coral reef. Once the exiles reached land, Cuban troops quickly killed or captured them. Meanwhile, the expected uprising never took place. A few officials tried to persuade Kennedy to send U.S. warplanes to back up the exiles, 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, not long after the Bay of Pigs disaster, Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev held a **summit meeting** in Vienna, Austria. Heads of state hold such meetings to discuss important topics. In Vienna, one of the topics discussed was the future of Berlin.

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



Ich bin ein Berliner
 Lewis Romanus sum
 Lustig hat Berlin kommen

In 1963, a huge crowd in West Berlin turned out to hear Kennedy speak at the Berlin Wall. Before the wall's construction, 2.5 million East Germans had escaped into West Germany. Their loss put severe strains on the East German economy and embarrassed the Soviets by showing just how unpopular communism was. Kennedy used the note card above to make sure he correctly pronounced his assurance that "Ich bin ein Berliner."

In time, the border between Eastern and Western Europe was closed everywhere except in Berlin. As a result, Berlin became the only escape route for people trapped behind the Iron Curtain. Hundreds of thousands of East Germans took advantage of this opening 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.

During the Vienna summit, Khrushchev warned 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. At this point, Khrushchev decided that the only option left to East Germany was to wall itself off from West Berlin. On August 13, 1961, East German workers began building 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 reacted with outrage to the building of the Berlin Wall. To show American support for the people of West Berlin, Kennedy spoke 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

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

To discuss ways to respond to this new threat, Kennedy brought together a group of his 12 most trusted advisers. Called the Executive Committee for National Security (later known as ExCom), its members all agreed that the United States must halt construction of the Soviet missile sites. Failure to remove this threat would endanger American cities. It would also make the United States look weak to its European allies and to anti-Castro forces in Latin America.

The ExCom did not, however, agree on how to deal with the **Cuban missile crisis**. Some advisers urged the president to bomb the missile sites before they could be completed. Others suggested blockading Cuban ports to prevent Soviet ships from bringing missiles to the island. They called the blockade a “quarantine,” because under international law, establishing a naval blockade is an act of war. Kennedy chose the quarantine plan.

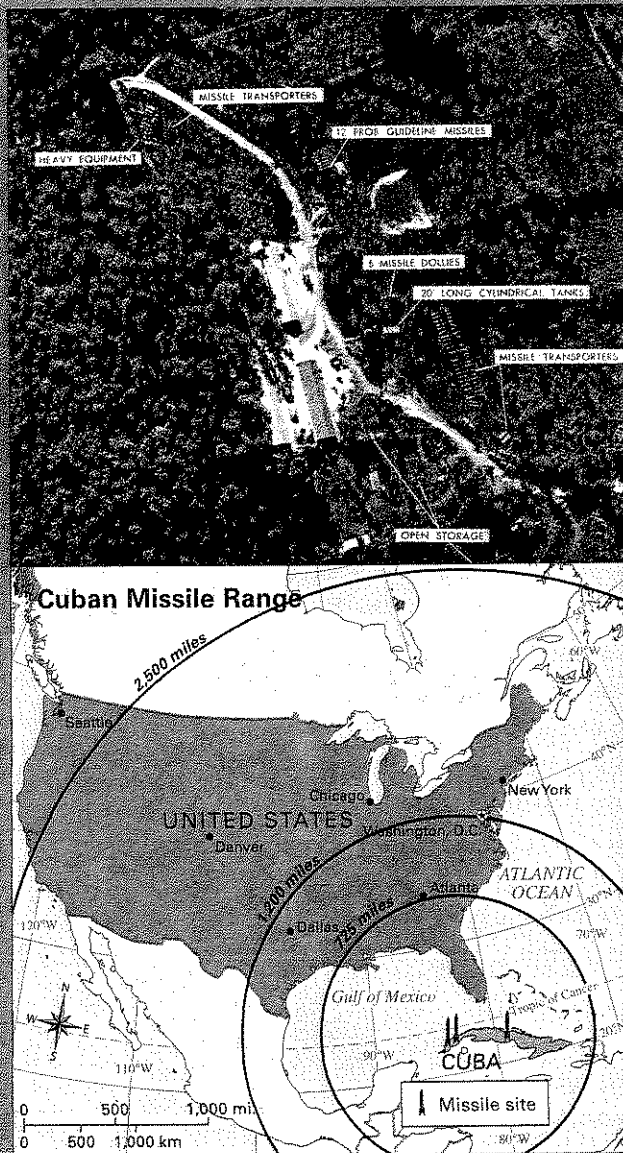
On October 22, Kennedy announced to the nation the discovery of the missile sites and his decision to quarantine the island. He warned that the United States would view any nuclear missile launched from Cuba as an attack on the United States by the Soviet Union. He also demanded that the Soviets remove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

For the next two days, Soviet ships continued to move toward Cuba. Fearing that the nation 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. Then, on October 24, Khrushchev ordered Soviet ships approaching Cuba to slow down or turn around. With great relief, 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. In exchange, he demanded that Kennedy end the Cuban blockade and promise not to invade Cuba. The next day, he sent a second note. In it, he proposed removing the Cuban missiles in exchange for the United States removing missiles it had placed in Turkey, which bordered the USSR.

Kennedy had already decided to remove the U.S. missiles from Turkey, because they were outdated. However, he did not want Khrushchev to think he was bowing to

Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962



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.

Soviet pressure. The ExCom advised him 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 agree to the second deal as well. On October 28, Khrushchev agreed to remove all Soviet missiles from Cuba. About three months later, the United States removed its missiles from Turkey.

Easing Cold War Tensions The Cuban missile crisis led Kennedy and his advisers to rethink the doctrine of “massive retaliation” adopted during the Eisenhower years. Instead, Kennedy began to talk about the need for a flexible response to local Cold War conflicts. When communists seemed on the verge of taking over Vietnam, a small country in Southeast Asia, the president 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 communism.

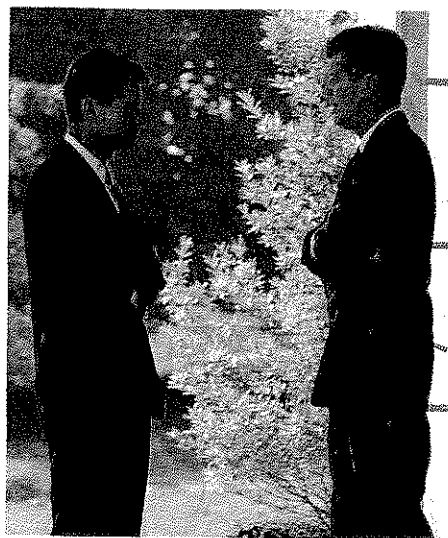
The missile crisis also left Kennedy and Khrushchev frightened by how close they had come to nuclear war. As a result, both men began looking for ways to ease tensions between the superpowers. As a first step, the two leaders established a **hotline** between them. This line of communication would be kept open at all times so they could contact each other instantly during a crisis. The hotline still exists today and has been tested once an hour since 1963.

Later the same year, the superpowers took another step in establishing more amicable relations. Along with Great Britain, they signed a **Test Ban Treaty**. This agreement banned nuclear testing in the atmosphere, while allowing underground nuclear weapons tests to continue. By signing, the United States and Soviet Union showed that they could cooperate on important issues.

Aiding Development in Foreign Countries President Kennedy was deeply concerned about the spread of communism to **developing countries**. Such countries are poorer and less industrialized than the wealthy **developed countries** of North America, Western Europe, and parts of Asia. In a campaign speech in San Francisco, Kennedy spoke about his vision for helping 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 creating the **Peace Corps**. This new government agency sent thousands of men and women to developing nations to support local communities in such areas as education, farming, and health care. Before moving overseas, Peace Corps volunteers learned languages and skills they could use to build and help run schools and health clinics, teach farming methods, or plant crops.

Kennedy also launched an aid program for Latin America, called the Alliance for Progress. Its goal was to provide economic and technical aid to Latin American nations while encouraging democratic reforms. The program had little impact, however. Wealthy elites in Latin American nations resisted reform efforts. In time, most Alliance for Progress funds ended up in the pockets of anticommunist dictators for use in fighting communist rebels or others who opposed their rule.



President Kennedy often conferred with his younger brother, Attorney General Robert “Bobby” Kennedy. In an effort to reduce tensions during the Cuban missile crisis, Bobby sometimes conferred secretly with Soviet diplomats.



Like this early volunteer in the African country of Togo, Peace Corps workers have sought to improve life for the poor in developing countries for more than 40 years. Volunteers are of all ages and from a variety of backgrounds. Most share a strong commitment to the ideal of helping to create a free and peaceful world.

48.4 The Tragic and Controversial End to Camelot

In late November 1963, President Kennedy and the first lady traveled to Texas. Kennedy wanted to build support there for his reelection campaign, since the next presidential election was a year away. Just before noon on November 22, the Kennedys joined Texas governor John Connally and his wife in a motorcade that drove through downtown Dallas. It was a sunny day, and people eager to see the presidential couple crowded the streets. 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.

A National Tragedy Unfolds in Dallas The motorcade took the president's car past the Texas School Book Depository. Lee Harvey Oswald, a worker in the building, stood waiting on its 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 those bullets also struck Governor Connally. The driver rushed both men to the hospital, and Connally survived. Doctors frantically worked to revive Kennedy, but at 1:00 p.m., they declared him dead.

Two hours after the shooting, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson met Jacqueline Kennedy and the president's coffin at the Dallas airport. Together they would return to Washington. Before the plane took flight, however, 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 and charged him with the president's murder. Authorities knew Oswald strongly supported Fidel Castro and the Cuban revolution and had lived in the Soviet Union for three years. However, before they could learn anything about his motives for assassinating Kennedy, Oswald too was killed. This second murder occurred as police moved the prisoner from one jail to another, more secure one. With scores of newspaper and television reporters looking on, a local nightclub owner named Jack Ruby jumped out of the crowd and fired at Oswald. Television viewers watched in horror as live news cameras beamed Oswald's murder into their homes.

Inside a crowded Air Force One—the presidential airplane—U.S. district judge Sarah Hughes swore in Lyndon B. Johnson as president just two hours after Kennedy was shot. A somber Jacqueline Kennedy stood at Johnson's side as he took the oath of office.



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, as many as a million people lined the streets of Washington as the funeral procession carried the slain president to Arlington National Cemetery. There, Kennedy's brothers and wife lit an "eternal" gas flame on his grave.

Across the nation and around the world, people mourned Kennedy's death. To this day, 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 almost 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 unanswered 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? Eager to know the truth, President Johnson created a special commission to investigate the assassination. Headed by Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, it became known as the Warren Commission. After a year of pouring through thousands of pages of documents and listening to more than 550 witnesses, the Warren Commission reported 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.

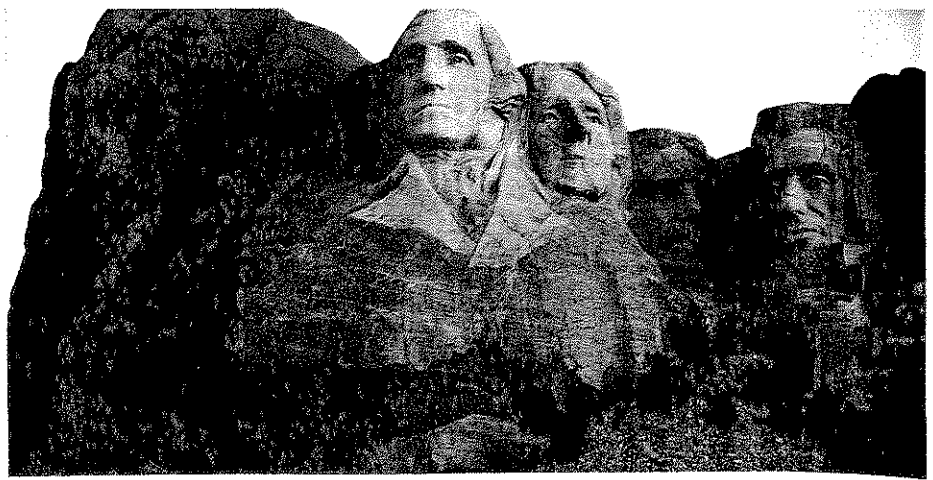
—*Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy, 1964*

Many Americans questioned the Warren Commission's findings. In the years since Kennedy's death, numerous conspiracy theories and assassination myths have emerged. Some involve 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 the time of Kennedy's death. However, because Oswald did not survive to speak for himself, the full story of the Kennedy assassination may never be known.



With Robert and Ted Kennedy at her sides, Jacqueline Kennedy and her children, Caroline and John Jr., watched President Kennedy's casket travel to Arlington National Cemetery for burial. At the funeral, an "eternal" flame was lit that still marks Kennedy's grave today.

Four of the most influential U.S. presidents appear on Mt. Rushmore in South Dakota. In 1997, visitors to the monument began taking a poll to determine which presidents are most popular. In the 2005 tally, Kennedy ranked sixth.



Differing Viewpoints

48.5 What Makes a President Great?

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

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 pledged to put an American on the moon by the end of the decade. In 1969, NASA achieved this bold goal.

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

Berlin Wall In 1961, a concrete barrier dividing communist East Berlin from noncommunist West Berlin became 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, partly due to Kennedy's measured response and a willingness 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 nuclear weapons tests in the atmosphere.

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