

CHAPTER 1

JOHN F. KENNEDY IN HISTORY

JOHN F. KENNEDY (1917–1963) served only two years and ten months, approximately 1,000 days, as president of the United States. His time in office, which lasted from January 20, 1961, to November 22, 1963, represents the sixth shortest presidential term in U.S. history. Presidents William Henry Harrison (1841), Zachary Taylor (1849–1850), and Warren Harding (1921–1923), all of whom died of natural causes, and James Garfield (1881), who was assassinated, served for shorter periods. Millard Fillmore (1850–1853), Taylor's vice president and successor, also held office for a briefer time than did Kennedy. None of these former presidents has ever evoked much discussion among scholars or the educated public. They are largely forgotten men, with perhaps only Warren Harding still alive in history, serving as the butt of history teachers' jokes, because he was so pathetic and hapless in office. President Kennedy has not, however, been forgotten or reduced to farce. Since his assassination in late 1963, a stream of studies about the life and legacy of Kennedy have appeared. More than forty-five years after his death, President Kennedy remains a subject of fascination for both historians and U.S. citizens.

Notwithstanding the nostalgia that surrounds the Kennedy presidency and lingering shock of his awful death in Dallas, Texas, historical interest in Kennedy reflects the judgment that he led the country during a momentous time. Kennedy perceived himself as a foreign-policy president, and critical international developments marked his time in office. The United States and the Soviet Union had showdowns over the city of Berlin in 1961 and the island of Cuba in 1962. The threat of nuclear war and the prospect of the destruction of

human civilization seemed to hang in the balance. Kennedy used the threat of force, good diplomacy, and sound judgment and kept the United States and the world from falling into the abyss. The U.S. public further associates President Kennedy with achievements for which they express continuing national pride. The president launched the United States on a journey to the moon and space exploration. His program to send volunteers abroad to help the poor of the world—the Peace Corps—remains a source of enduring satisfaction for U.S. citizens. Some scholars would point out, however, that the Kennedy record is not one of unalloyed achievement. His administration played significant roles in two fiascos in the history of U.S. foreign relations—the debacle of the Vietnam War and the failure of the Alliance for Progress, Kennedy's grand plan to transform Latin America. President Kennedy also proved very fond of using the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to destabilize sovereign governments, many of which had popularly elected, constitutional governments.

Popular Memories

The warm affection that the U.S. public has always held for President Kennedy can be attributed to the late president's colleagues and supporters. Laudatory accounts of the Kennedy years by administration officials began to appear soon after the president's death. Dozens of memoirs by friends and supporters would follow these initial insider accounts. In modern U.S. political history, it is not unusual for government officials and friends to publish accounts about their work or their relationship with a president. But these narratives are often critical of the president and his administration. Former officials of the George W. Bush administration (2001–2009), for example, wrote biting critiques of President Bush soon after they left office. But Kennedy people have lavished praise on President Kennedy. To be sure, the U.S. public has gradually learned from these memoirs that President Kennedy was not always faithful to his wife, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, and that he took dubious medicines for his chronic health problems. Nonetheless, the insider histories and memoirs have promoted the Kennedy presidency, especially the president's conduct of international affairs. So remarkably loyal have been officials and supporters to their boss and friend that one scholar dubbed them "honorary Kennedys."¹



*John F. Kennedy, thirty-fifth president of the United States,
January 20, 1961–November 22, 1963. (JFK Library)*

Historian and presidential aide, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., set the tone for popular analyses of the Kennedy presidency with his worshipful memoir, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (1965). Schlesinger worked in the White House and focused on relations with Latin America. As a scholar, he had written award-winning accounts of the presidencies of Andrew Jackson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Like Jackson and Roosevelt, Kennedy was a great Democrat who had changed history for the better. In less than a thousand days in office, “he had accomplished so much.” He faced down Communist aggression in Berlin and Cuba. He made the world a safer place, negotiating a nuclear test

ban treaty with the Soviet Union. He championed nationalism, identifying the United States with the emerging nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. And he reached out to the world's poor and needy with programs such as the Alliance for Progress, the Peace Corps, and Food for Peace. In Schlesinger's judgment, history had rarely witnessed a leader so capable of combining toughness and restraint, of will, nerve, and wisdom. President Kennedy had also galvanized international diplomacy and dazzled citizens at home and abroad with his idealism and breathtaking eloquence. His inaugural address in 1961 and his declaration of solidarity with the people of Berlin in 1963 inspired "many to bear any burden" in the defense of liberty.² Other members of the president's staff sustained Schlesinger's testimony. Roger Hilsman, an assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern Affairs, wrote of working for a "leader" and a "hero." Theodore Sorensen, who composed many of the president's speeches, predicted that history would remember Kennedy not only for his grace, wit, and style but also for his "substance—the strength of his ideas and ideals, his courage and judgment."³

Schlesinger and his colleagues can perhaps be forgiven for abandoning scholarly restraint in their histories. They loved and admired the man that they served. Writing in the mid-1960s, they may also have been traumatized by Kennedy's assassination. But their memoirs have transcended time and place. Over the past five decades, their fellow citizens have agreed that President Kennedy represented the best that the United States had to offer. Kennedy had a narrow victory in the presidential campaign, defeating Vice President Richard M. Nixon in November 1960 by less than 1 percent. Despite the close election, Kennedy always enjoyed solid job approval ratings from the public. Frequently 75 percent of the public approved of his job performance. Kennedy probably would have won a big re-election victory in 1964. By mid-1963, 59 percent of U.S. citizens claimed to have voted for him in 1960. After the assassination, that figure rose to 65 percent. In the twenty-first century, it would be difficult to find many elderly citizens who would admit to having favored Nixon over Kennedy in 1960. Beyond fibbing about their voting records, U.S. citizens have honored the memory of Kennedy by building monuments to him and naming airports, schools, and buildings after him. Monuments to President Kennedy abound throughout the world. Cities in Western Europe and Latin America have boulevards and avenues named after the president. A distinguished center

of research on international relations and North American Studies is the John F. Kennedy Institute at the Freie Universität (Free University) in Berlin.

U.S. citizens continue to believe that what the nation and the world needs is another John Kennedy. In 1996, a presidential election year, a *New York Times*/CBS News public opinion survey found that if voters could pick any former president to govern the country, they would choose Kennedy. He easily outpolled Franklin Roosevelt, the most influential political leader of the twentieth century. The survey's respondents preferred Kennedy over the sculpted faces on Mt. Rushmore—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt. When asked to explain their choice, respondents cited Kennedy's quality of leadership. A decade later, citizens still considered Kennedy one of the greatest leaders in U.S. history. In mid-2007, the polling firm, Rasmussen Reports, found that 80 percent of adults in their sample viewed Kennedy favorably. Only the Mt. Rushmore crowd and Franklin Roosevelt merited such high marks. George W. Bush and Richard Nixon, each with an approval rating of only 32 percent, earned the lowest grades.⁴ Nixon's low favorability ratings added zest to Kennedy's joking question—"How did I manage to beat a guy like this by only a hundred thousand votes?"⁵

Scholars have speculated on the enduring popularity of President John Kennedy. Professor Alan Brinkley of Columbia University noted that Kennedy was a man of the television age—gifted, witty, and articulate. When contemporary citizens see him on old film clips, they are "struck by how smooth, polished, and spontaneously eloquent he was, how impressive a presence, how elegant a speaker." Kennedy also stands out by comparison. After the assassination, the United States endured the calamity of the Vietnam War and the lying, corruption, and abuse of power dubbed "Watergate" under President Nixon. Although well-intentioned politicians, neither President Gerald Ford nor Jimmy Carter overcame the national economic malaise engendered by the Vietnam War. The pleasant Ronald Reagan displayed Kennedy-style charisma and grace and had the good fortune to preside over the end of the Cold War. But Reagan nearly bankrupted the nation with his unwise tax cuts for wealthy citizens and even his closest advisers conceded that Reagan lacked intellectual depth. President Bill Clinton resolved U.S. federal budgetary problems and proved a tireless worker for peace in Northern Ireland, the Middle East, and southeastern Europe. But Clinton's lack

of personal restraint tarnished the peace and prosperity he had achieved. Brinkley concluded that U.S. citizens believe that Kennedy's death "marked the end of an age of confidence and optimism and the beginning of an era of conflict and disenchantment." Kennedy's sense of mission and idealism stands, in Brinkley's judgment, "as an appealing contrast to what seems the emptiness and aimlessness of today's public world."⁶ The disasters that have befallen the United States under President George W. Bush—the Iraq War, Hurricane Katrina, staggering federal budget deficits, and the collapse of the financial markets of Wall Street—only heighten that longing for an accomplished leader.

John Kennedy stands, as Brinkley observed, as "an important figure in our national imagination." His presidency set in motion powerful forces for change. Countless Americans, both old and young, dedicated themselves to public service, remembering Kennedy's inaugural day challenge to ask themselves what they could do for the country and the world. "Miss Lillian" Carter, President Carter's mother, joined the Peace Corps in 1966 at the age of sixty-eight, using her skills as a registered nurse to help people in India. Idealistic university students, black and white alike, risked their lives, as they sought simple justice for African Americans who lived in the segregated "Jim Crow" South. When they marched in demonstrations, picketed segregated public facilities, and registered people to vote, students were responding to the young president's exhortation to "make a difference" and fulfill America's unfulfilled promises. Kennedy's "children" also included Lt. Philip Caputo, a young U.S. Marine Corps officer who landed in Danang, South Vietnam in March 1965 as part of the first U.S. combat units sent to Vietnam. Caputo recalled that, as he marched through rice paddies, he was imbued by "the missionary idealism he [Kennedy] had awakened in us." Along with his rifle and field pack, Caputo carried with him the conviction that the Communist enemy would soon be beaten and that "we were doing something altogether noble and good."⁷ Ironically, young people who left their university campuses and took to the streets to oppose the war in Vietnam similarly believed that they were upholding the idealism and commitment that John Kennedy expected of young Americans. The decision by Robert Kennedy, the slain president's brother and closest adviser, to run for the presidency in 1968 on an antiwar platform underscored the faith of the protestors.

Long after the tumultuous 1960s passed, the Kennedy spirit continued to infuse citizens, especially those who favored liberal, progressive policies. In 1992, at the Democratic Party's national convention, the delegates collectively gasped when they saw, in a campaign biography film, President Kennedy reach out into a crowd of young men and shake the hand of Bill Clinton. Clinton, almost seventeen, met the president while attending a leadership conference sponsored by the American Legion. To Democratic loyalists, however, it might have seemed as if the young Clinton had ascended to Camelot to be knighted by King Arthur! In the twentieth century, aspiring young leaders wanted, as Kennedy said in his inaugural address, for "the torch" to be "passed to a new generation of Americans." President Barack Obama, as the Democratic presidential candidate in 2008, received the coveted endorsement of the Kennedy family. Obama frequently appeared at campaign rallies with Caroline Kennedy, the president's daughter, and Obama appointed her to a committee to recommend a vice presidential choice.

Scholarly Analyses

U.S. citizens took up public service, becoming primary schoolteachers, university professors, elected officials, diplomats, U.S. Marines, community organizers, and Peace Corps volunteers, because they took seriously President Kennedy's inaugural day challenge to spurn self-indulgent careerism and to explore what they could do for their country, the world, and fellow human beings. The United States is a more humane and progressive society because of this public service. Scholars are on solid ground when they assess the impact of Kennedy's idealism and stirring rhetoric on generations of Americans. Scholarly analysis must, however, transcend fascination with the man and a longing for the hope and promise of the 1960s. Scholars are enjoined to analyze the concrete domestic and international policies that Kennedy pursued between 1961 and 1963. Did he achieve his agenda or at least make good progress, during his limited time, toward that agenda? Can he be held responsible for failures? Were the challenges he faced extraordinary? Did he learn from his experiences? Scholars must further ask the ever-present historical question of change and continuity. Did President Kennedy alter the course and conduct of foreign policy? How did he change the U.S. approach in the Cold War? Did his decisions prolong or hasten the end of the Soviet-American confrontation? Finally, did President Kennedy preserve the

national security of the United States and the West, and did he make progress toward global peace?

As a group, historians, political scientists, and presidential scholars rate President Kennedy in favorable terms. Like citizens, scholars enthusiastically participate in “rate the president” surveys. In professional surveys conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, historians have rated Kennedy as an “above average” or “average (high)” president. Kennedy is the only president who served one term or less to receive such creditable ratings. Recent surveys have continued to place Kennedy in the upper ranks of presidents, although with some variation. In a survey of fifty-eight presidential scholars conducted on President’s Day, February 21, 2000, by the public affairs cable channel, C-Span, Kennedy earned an eighth place rating out of forty-one presidents. In terms of presidential leadership, he finished just behind Woodrow Wilson and Thomas Jefferson and in front of Andrew Jackson and James Madison. On President’s Day, February 16, 2009, C-Span released a new survey conducted among sixty-four scholars. John Kennedy had now risen to a sixth place, passing both Wilson and Jefferson. The scholars gave Kennedy especially high marks for his economic management skills and his commitment to equal justice. By comparison, in a survey published on October 1, 2000, the *Chicago Sun Times* asked scholars to rate presidents in five categories: leadership, foreign policy, domestic policy, character and integrity, and impact on history. In this survey, Kennedy earned only a nineteenth-place rating in the aggregate score. His leadership and foreign policy grades were strong but his marks were only average for domestic policy and impact on history. The scholars gave Kennedy dismal ratings on character and integrity.⁸ The respondents apparently took a dim view of Kennedy’s incessant womanizing and his refusal to disclose the severity of his health problems, especially his Addison’s disease, a disease of the adrenal glands.

John Kennedy by choice focused his energies on international affairs. He proved unable to persuade the U.S. Congress to pass his domestic agenda. Of the twenty-three bills he submitted to Congress early in his administration, only seven were enacted into law. Programs such as a tax cut to stimulate the economy and federal aid to education would not receive congressional backing until President Lyndon Johnson had the opportunity to employ his remarkable legislative skills. President Kennedy also belatedly embraced the central moral

issue of his era—the movement for freedom and justice for African Americans. He waited until 1962 to sign an executive order banning discrimination in public housing, and he nominated defenders of segregation laws to serve as judges in federal courts in southern states. Kennedy eventually responded to the civil rights movement and the courage and commitment of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and his followers. In mid-1963 he submitted a comprehensive civil rights bill to Congress, and he began to speak eloquently about the need for simple justice in the nation's life. His televised address to the nation on June 11, 1963, on civil rights ranks with his inaugural address, and two other public performances in June 1963—his commencement address at American University on the Cold War, and his speech in Berlin decrying the Berlin Wall.

Despite his thin domestic record, President Kennedy continues to merit his above average rating from Professor James N. Giglio. Giglio's *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (2006) is a distinguished scholarly study of the Kennedy administration. Professor Giglio, whose expertise is in domestic political history, argues that a president should be judged on whether he met his stated goals and whether he improved the life of the country. Giglio sees a mixed record in international affairs for Kennedy. He enhanced U.S. global prestige and managed crises well. But Kennedy unwisely relied on counterinsurgency and intervention and left a dangerous problem in Vietnam. On the domestic side, Giglio credits Kennedy for boosting economic growth and reducing unemployment through judicious federal spending, job training, and improvements in the minimum wage and Social Security. Having introduced a domestic reform agenda and with a growing economy, Giglio judges that Kennedy would have had many of the legislative successes achieved by President Johnson. In 1964, he would have attained landmark civil rights legislation and a tax cut that would stimulate rapid economic growth. In a second term, Kennedy would have likely won victories in health, education, and welfare. Giglio would also dispute the low marks that some historians assign to Kennedy on the issues of character and integrity, noting the Kennedy administration was remarkably free of corruption and scandal.⁹ U.S. citizens still had faith in the early 1960s in the ability of government to do great things.

Robert Dallek in *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917–1963* (2003) takes up Professor Giglio's theme that Kennedy simply needed more

time. Kennedy had an “unfinished presidency.” Dallek’s eight-hundred-page biography is an influential recent study of Kennedy’s life and is written in a style designed to appeal to the educated public rather than to scholars alone. Dallek, whose background is in the study of the history U.S. foreign relations, considers Kennedy a great president because of his achievements and promise in international affairs. Dallek dismisses Kennedy’s domestic record as “distinctly limited.” “Foreign affairs, as Kennedy himself would have argued, were the principal concerns of his presidency.” The Alliance for Progress, the Peace Corps, and the Apollo space program were “significant measures” of his foreign policy. But the “telling measures” of Kennedy’s presidential leadership came during crises with the Communists over Berlin, Cuba, and Vietnam. Kennedy rejected military solutions during the Berlin and Cuba confrontations between the United States and the Soviet Union that could have precipitated a nuclear war. The consequences of nuclear war in the early 1960s would be with us in the twenty-first century. Kennedy’s decisions during the Cuban missile crisis served as “an imperishable example of how one man prevented a catastrophe that may yet afflict the world.” Dallek finds evidence that Kennedy would have improved relations with the Soviet Union and Cuba in 1964 and thereafter and that he would have limited the U.S. military involvement in Vietnam and spared the country that disaster.¹⁰

Overviews of the Kennedy presidency, however insightful and influential, necessarily give little attention to potentially significant issues and questions. Proper assessments of the meaning and impact of an administration’s foreign policy must not be limited to analyses of the “crisis-event,” like Berlin and Cuba. How an administration conducted relations with countries, leaders, and political movements that did not garner newspaper headlines and public attention can help provide a rounded, complete view of a leader’s foreign policy. Kennedy’s lofty Alliance for Progress and Peace Corps programs might be measured and weighed against the administration’s nasty covert interventions in Latin America and Africa. In the 1980s and 1990s, scholars published case studies or monographs of Kennedy’s foreign policy in various regions of the world. In addition, Thomas G. Paterson, Diane Kunz, and Mark White edited collections of essays on Kennedy’s foreign policies.¹¹ As historian Burton I. Kaufman noted in 1993, the scholarship portrayed a president who was “complex and ambiguous.” In terms

of the developing regions of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, for example, Kennedy showed sensitivity to anti-colonial, nationalistic aspirations of Third World people. But the historical literature suggested that Kennedy remained “an inveterate Cold Warrior whose dogmatic anticommunism often blinded him to the very forces that he championed.”¹²

At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, an appraisal of John Kennedy’s foreign policy seems appropriate. Foreign-policy records of the Kennedy administration, including some files of the CIA, have finally been declassified. The end of the Cold War has also facilitated scholarship. The records of the former Soviet Union have become increasingly open to scholars. Scholars have gained access to meetings that Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev had with his colleagues in the Kremlin. In a meeting held in late May 1961, for example, Khrushchev revealed his goals for his summit meeting with President Kennedy in Vienna in June 1961. China and Vietnam have also declassified Cold War records. These records from the Communist world broaden understanding of the character and nature of the Cold War.

This concise, interpretative history of John Kennedy’s role as world leader will first look at the president’s foreign-policy background, his core beliefs, and who he chose for his foreign-policy team, and how he organized them. Subsequent chapters will analyze the administration’s policies toward the Soviet Union, Cuba, and Vietnam but also relations with key countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. A thorough examination of Kennedy’s historic role must move beyond the obvious flashpoints of his administration—Berlin and Cuba—and consider Kennedy’s global impact. A final chapter will offer a reasoned judgment on Kennedy’s significance in international affairs. This study can perhaps contribute to the debate about whether John Kennedy deserves the solid reputation he continues to enjoy with the U.S. public and many scholars.