

John F. Kennedy

by **Joshua Foo**



John Fitzgerald Kennedy, also nicknamed JFK or Jack, was sworn in as the 35th President of the United States (US) on 20 January 1961.¹ In his inaugural speech he spoke of the need for all Americans to be active citizens. "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country,"² he said. President Kennedy, together with his wife and two children, brought a new, youthful spirit to the White House. Both Kennedy and his wife had the idea that the White House ought to be a place to commemorate and promote American culture and history. Hence, they often invited artists, scientists, poets, musicians, actors, and athletes to visit them. As the years have gone by and other presidents have written their chapters in history, Kennedy's brief time in office stands out in people's memories for his leadership, personality, and accomplishments. He was most known for the handling of the "Bay of Pigs Invasion," and his policies during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Unfortunately on November 22, 1963, when he was hardly past his first thousand days in office, John F. Kennedy was killed by an assassin's bullets as his motorcade wound through Dallas, Texas. Kennedy was the youngest man elected President; he was also the youngest to die.³

Jacqueline Kennedy shared her husband's interest in American history. Gathering some of the finest art and furniture the US had produced, she restored all the rooms in the White House to make it a place that truly reflected America's history and artistic creativity.

EARLY LIFE

Of Irish descent, he was born in Brookline, Massachusetts, on 29 May 1917.⁴ Graduating from Harvard in 1940, he entered the Navy. In 1943, when his PT boat was rammed and sunk by a Japanese destroyer, Kennedy, despite grave injuries, led the survivors through perilous waters to safety.⁵

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was named in honor of his maternal grandfather, John Francis Fitzgerald, the Boston Mayor popularly known as Honey Fitz. Before long, family and friends called this small blue-eyed baby Jack. Jack was not a very healthy baby, and his mother Rose recorded on his notecard the childhood diseases from which he suffered, such as "whooping cough, measles, chicken pox." On 20 February 1920, when Jack was not yet three years old, he became sick with scarlet fever, a highly contagious and potentially life-threatening disease.

When Jack was three, the Kennedys moved to a new home a few blocks away from their old house in Brookline, a neighborhood just outside of Boston. There was a lot of prejudice against Irish Catholics in Boston at that time, but Joseph Kennedy, Jack's father, was determined to succeed. Making a million dollars by the age of 35 was one of the targets he set for himself, as a benchmark for success. Jack's grandfathers did even better for themselves, both becoming prominent Boston politicians.⁶ Jack, because of all his family had done, could enjoy a very comfortable life. The Kennedys not only had everything they needed, but more than enough to feed future generations.

Jack was very popular student and had many good friends at Choate, a boarding school for adolescent boys in Connecticut. Tennis, golf and basketball were few of the sports that the sport-inclined Kennedy used to play. His friend Lem Billings remembers how unusual it was that Jack had a daily subscription to the *New York Times*, not common in that day and age. Jack had a "clever, individualist mind," his headmaster once noted, though he was not the best student. He was often lazy and unmotivated, not working as hard as he could, except in subjects he was interested in like history and English.

Soon after being elected senator, Kennedy, at 36 years of age, married 24 year-old

Jacqueline Bouvier, a writer with the *Washington Times-Herald*. Unfortunately, early on in their marriage, Senator Kennedy's back started to hurt again and he had two serious operations. While recovering from surgery, he wrote a book called *Profiles in Courage* about several US Senators who had risked their careers to fight for the things in which they believed. The book was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for biography in 1957.⁷ That same year, the Kennedys' first child, Caroline, was born.

MILITARY INFLUENCE

Soon after graduating from Harvard College, Jack joined the Navy. He was made Lieutenant (Lt.) and assigned to the South Pacific as commander of a patrol torpedo boat, the *PT-109*. Kennedy commanded a crew of twelve men whose mission was to deter Japanese ships from delivering supplies to their soldiers. As they patrolled the waters on the night of 2 August 1943 for enemy ships to sink, a Japanese destroyer suddenly appeared traveling at full speed straight towards them. At the helm of his boat, Kennedy made an effort to swerve out of the way, but to no avail. The enormous Japanese warship rammed the *PT-109*, splitting it in half and killing two of Kennedy's men almost instantly.⁸ The others managed to jump off as their boat went up in flames but Kennedy was slammed hard against the cockpit, once again injuring his weak back. Patrick McMahon, one of his crew

members, had horrible burns on his face and hands and was ready to give up. In the darkness, Kennedy managed to find McMahon and haul him back to where the other survivors were clinging to a piece of the boat that was still afloat. At sunrise, Kennedy led his men toward a small island several miles away. Despite his own injuries, Kennedy was able to tow McMahon ashore, a strap from McMahon's life jacket clenched between his teeth. Six days later two native islanders found them and went for help, delivering a message Jack had carved into a piece of coconut shell. The next day, the *PT-109* crew was rescued. Jack's brother, Joe, who enlisted at the same time as him, was not so lucky. He died a year later when his plane exploded during a dangerous mission in Europe.

When Kennedy returned home, he was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for his leadership and courage.⁹ With the war finally coming to an end, it was time to choose the kind of work he wanted to do. He had considered becoming a teacher or a writer, but with Joe's tragic death suddenly everything changed. After serious discussions with him about his future, Joseph Kennedy convinced him that he should run for Congress in Massachusetts' eleventh congressional district, where he won in 1946. This was the beginning of Jack's political career. As the years went on, Kennedy, a Democrat, served three terms (six years) in the House of

Representatives, and in 1953 he was elected to the US Senate.

POLITICAL LIFE

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

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

Shortly after his inauguration, Kennedy permitted a band of Cuban exiles who were armed and trained, to invade their homeland.¹⁰ This was an attempt by Kennedy to overthrow the regime of Fidel Castro, but was a miserable failure. Soon thereafter, the Soviet Union renewed its campaign against West Berlin. Kennedy responded by reinforcing the Berlin garrison and increasing the strength of the US military, including new efforts in outer space. Confronted by this reaction, Moscow, after the erection of the Berlin Wall, relaxed its pressure in central Europe.

The Russians sought to

install nuclear missiles in Cuba. When this was discovered by air reconnaissance in October 1962, Kennedy imposed quarantines on all offensive weapons bound for Cuba. While the world trembled on the brink of nuclear war, the Russians backed down and agreed to take the missiles away. The American response to the Cuban crisis evidently persuaded Moscow of the futility of nuclear blackmail.

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

VISION FOR AMERICA

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

His Inaugural Address offered the memorable injunction: "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for

your country." As the President of the US, he set out to redeem his campaign pledge to get America moving again. His economic programs launched the country on its longest sustained expansion since World War II; before his death, he laid plans for a massive assault on persisting pockets of privation and poverty.

PUBLICATION – WHY ENGLAND SLEPT

Why England Slept, a book written by Kennedy about the 1930s in England: international relations, local politics and national defense.¹¹ The book questions England's lack of prevention against German aggression, and why they pursued a policy of appeasement. In essence, it was Kennedy's evaluation of why it took England so long to realize the threat posed by Germany's rearmament and increasing belligerence during the 1930s. Kennedy incorporates military budget figures, giving the reader a startlingly frank glance at the inaccuracies of myth—the world-spanning Royal Navy only had a slight budgetary advantage over the British Army, and even in 1936 the German military budget dwarfed those of Britain and France combined. Kennedy further drives home the point by noting that Britain's national income was already only a fraction of America's by 1936. There is a tendency in history books to credit World War Two (WW2) with the decline of imperialism and the rise of the two superpowers, but Kennedy's

analysis of prewar Britain demonstrates how vulnerable she already was prior to the war. The time was ripe for America's rise, and if WW2 hadn't taken place, then surely some other event would have served as the catalyst for the end of Empire. Looking at the bigger picture, it is about the relative merits and weaknesses of democracy compared to totalitarian government. He concluded that, while a democratic and capitalistic system is superior over the long term, a dictatorship is more effective in preparing for and prosecuting war at the outset. *Why England Slept* was a very interesting study, especially when readers consider the fact that it was written well before the outcome of WW2 was known.¹²

HIS LEGACY

President Kennedy's death caused enormous sadness and grief among all Americans. Most people still remember exactly where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news. Hundreds of thousands of people gathered in Washington for the President's funeral, and millions throughout the world watched it on television.

Many respect his calm state of mind when faced with difficult decisions—like what to do about Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962. Others admire his ability to inspire people with his eloquent speeches, with his charismatic personality. His compassion and willingness to fight for new government programs

to help the poor, the elderly and the ill also ranked as one of the more important parts of his career. Like all leaders, Kennedy made mistakes, but he was always optimistic about the future. He believed that people could solve their common problems if they put their country's interests first and worked together. 🌐

Endnotes

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4. "John F. Kennedy Biography," *The Biography*, November 2013, <http://www.biography.com/people/john-f-kennedy-9362930>.
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