

# The White House Years

**J**ohn F. Kennedy struck the tone in the very first moments of his Presidency. And its echoes—muffled so often by unyielding reality—were to have a profound effect on the nation in the brief and tempestuous 34 months to come: the Kennedy Years.

At the beginning, under that glittering sun in the biting January cold, everything seemed within Jack Kennedy's grasp. Americans, and the world, had only to look at the two men sharing the place of honor on the inaugural platform—benign Dwight Eisenhower, Ike, the father, and the lithe and vigorous young President-elect, just 43—to sense the stunning change of mood. John Kennedy sat bareheaded in the numbing wind, doffing his overcoat when the moment came for him—solemn now—to take the oath of office as the 35th President of the United States. And when he rose to speak, he sounded the messianic note that would, in a sense, be the testament of his Administration.

"Let the word go forth from this time and place," he said, "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 cold 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."

**The Key Was Style:** The message was clear. Jack Kennedy was, indeed, America's first twentieth-century President. The elegance and the lean, controlled emotion of his rhetoric matched his style. And his style captured the nation's imagination. The country, reflecting its new leader, had a new look. This was the New Frontier and Jack Kennedy was its trail blazer.

Not since the New Deal had Washington seen such an influx of bright young men. Never before had the White House been such a showplace for the nation's art and artists. Intellectuals suddenly found themselves welcome at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. The sense—and the semblance—of culture was everywhere. That was hardly the sum of it. The "Jackie look," Caroline's antics, even John-John's first toddling steps, enthralled millions of Americans. Rocking chairs—traditional yet utilitarian—were "in" because the President enjoyed one. So were the two-button suits he chose, and the preposterous, entertaining adventures of Mr. Kennedy's favorite fictional hero, Ian Fleming's nerveless secret agent, James Bond.



Inaugural: "...the torch has been passed to a new generation..."

## The Words of John Fitzgerald Kennedy

We must always keep our armaments equal to our commitments. Munich should teach us that; we must realize that any bluff will be called. We cannot tell anyone to keep out of our hemisphere unless our armaments and the people behind these armaments are prepared to back up the command.

— "Why England Slept," 1940

The courage of life is often a less dramatic spectacle than the courage of a final moment; but it is no less than a magnificent mixture of triumph and tragedy. A man does what he must—in spite of personal consequences, in spite of obstacles and dangers and pressures—and that is the basis of all human morality.

— "Profiles in Courage," 1955

I believe in an America where religious intolerance will someday end—where all men and all churches are treated as equal—where every man has the same right to attend or not to attend the church of his choice—where there is no Catholic vote, no anti-Catholic vote... and where Catholics, Protestants, and Jews... will refrain from those attitudes of disdain and division which have so often marred their works in the past, and promote instead the American ideal of brotherhood. •

— Meeting with Protestant ministers, Houston, Sept. 12, 1960

... If we are given the mandate, and if we lead, we are going to get America moving again.

— Campaign speech, Pittsburgh, Oct. 10, 1960

Let every nation know whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall... bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty... To those nations who would make themselves our adversary, we offer not a pledge but a request: that both sides begin anew the quest for peace.

— Inaugural Address, Jan. 20, 1961

And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.

— Inaugural Address, Jan. 20, 1961

The people will find it hard, as I do, to accept a situation in which a tiny handful of steel executives, whose pursuit of private power and profit exceeds their sense of public responsibility, can show such utter contempt for the interest of 185 million Americans.

— News conference, April 11, 1962

**Making History:** Jack Kennedy turned the Presidential news conference into a live TV spectacular. No President had ever been so accessible to the press, no President ever so anxious for history to be recorded in the making: he even let TV cameras peek over his shoulder in moments of national crisis. Critics called some of it "news management," and part of the Kennedy technique was just that. But the President, a student of history himself, felt a keen obligation to the historical record.

Everything a Kennedy—any Kennedy—did was news. Enemies branded the Kennedys the "royal family" and a satiric record called "The First Family" became a best seller. Brother-in-law Peter Lawford was a movie star; press secretary Pierre Salinger was tossed into the pool at a party at the home of brother Robert, the Attorney General. Touch football became a national pastime because the Kennedy clan played it; and the 50-mile hike became a national fad because the President thought physical

fitness was a fine idea.

But beneath the glamour and the frivolity, the Kennedy era was a time of tension—of confrontation with the Russians over Cuba and Berlin that threatened to explode into nuclear holocaust, of the Negro revolution at home, of nagging hard-core unemployment. "There's peace and there's work," said a Cleveland laborer not long ago, putting his stamp of approval on the Kennedy years. But it was an uneasy peace and a nervous, if unprecedented prosperity.

The President himself recognized the discrepancy between his goals and his gains. In an interview with the three television networks—again unprecedented—near the end of his second year, he admitted: "I think the problems are more difficult than I had imagined they were. . . . It's much easier to make the speeches than it is to finally make the judgments." And even when the judgments were made, it was another matter to make them stick.

The crises—especially in the unceasing

struggle with Communist power around the globe—came with appalling frequency. The new Administration had been in office just three months when the fiasco of the Cuban invasion shook the President and the nation with doubt. And just two months later Mr. Kennedy had his first face-to-face meeting with Nikita Khrushchev—the portentous Vienna summit—probing for any areas of possible agreement on Berlin. There proved to be none. The President returned home terribly disheartened. He had, he felt, shown his steel to the Soviet leader. But the talks had only reaffirmed Mr. Kennedy's conviction that the issue of the divided city could well touch off nuclear war. "It looks," the President concluded, "like a cold winter." In August, Communist East Germans defiantly threw up the Berlin wall.

Despite the auguries of the first months, Cuba was eventually to provide the President with his most satisfying triumph—and set the stage for a new mood in U.S.-Soviet relations. From the start, Khrushchev had dangerously misread the President's mettle. The Cuban invasion had been allowed to fail, the Berlin wall left standing. Parroting Khrushchev's contempt, former Soviet Ambassador to Washington Mikhail Menshikov sneered during the summer of 1961: "When the chips are down, this country won't fight for Berlin."

In October 1962, the chips went down in Cuba. And this time it was the Russians who flinched. The crisis touched off by the discovery of Soviet missiles just 90 miles from American shores brought the superpowers awesomely close to nuclear catastrophe. Perhaps Khrushchev expected a repetition of the tactical fumbling that doomed the Bay of Pigs adventure. Instead, the cool American show of strength convinced him for the first time that Mr. Kennedy would indeed go to war to block further Soviet military expansion. It was history's first nuclear confrontation—and probably John F. Kennedy's finest hour.

More respectful now of American power—and of the young President—the Soviet Premier adopted a new approach. And the President was as ready to deal with Khrushchev's open hand as he was with the Russian's mailed fist. Mr. Kennedy, in fact, was willing to go so far—in his historic speech at American University last May—as to assure the Russians that the U.S. was really interested in peaceful coexistence. The speech encouraged Khrushchev to move toward the détente that President Kennedy had set as his goal. It laid the groundwork for the limited nuclear test-ban treaty that stands—subject to the perspective of a fragile future—as a monument to the Kennedy years.

**Trouble From de Gaulle:** But diminishing Soviet truculence served to intensify another pivotal problem for the President: keeping the Western Alliance from disinte-

## 'A Man Does What He Must'

I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House—with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.

—Dinner for 49 Nobel Prize winners at the White House, April 29, 1962

It might be said now that I have the best of both worlds—a Harvard education and a Yale degree.

—Commencement address, Yale, June 11, 1962

One path we shall never choose, and that is the path of surrender, or submission. Our goal is not the victory of might, but the vindication of right; not peace at the expense of freedom, but both peace and freedom here in this hemisphere, and, we hope around the world. God willing, that goal will be achieved.

—Report on the Cuban crisis, Oct. 22, 1962

What kind of peace do I mean and what kind of peace do we seek? Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war. Not the peace of the grave or the security of the slave. I am talking about genuine peace—the kind of peace that makes life on earth worth living—and the kind that enables men and nations to grow and to hope and build a better life for their

children—not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women—not merely peace in our time, but peace in all time.

—Commencement address, American University, June 10, 1963

Now the time has come for this nation to fulfill its promise. The events in Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased the cries for equality that no city or state or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them. . . . It is time to act in the Congress, in your state and local legislative body, and, above all, in all our daily lives.

—Report on the civil-rights crisis, June 11, 1963

According to the ancient Chinese proverb, a journey of 1,000 miles must begin with a single step. My fellow Americans, let us take that first step. Let us, if we can, step back from the shadows of war and seek out the way of peace. And if that journey is 1,000 miles or even more, let history record that we, in this land, at this time, took the first step.

—Report on the test-ban treaty, July 26, 1963

This is a dangerous and uncertain world. . . . No one expects our lives to be easy—not in this decade, not in this century.

—Last speech, Fort Worth

grating. Indeed, Charles de Gaulle, aloof, stubborn, and determined to make France an independent nuclear power, caused the President more trouble than Khrushchev during his last months in office. The Germans and British, too, were proving less tractable. And while there was no slackening in America's commitment to defend Western Europe, Mr. Kennedy had accomplished nothing more in Berlin than to maintain the status quo.

There was other unfinished business: the drawn-out war against the Viet Cong in South Vietnam, the economic plight of Latin America—where the Alliance for Progress was foundering—the stalemate on disarmament. But almost everywhere the problems were at least being confronted, energetically, realistically—and with hope.

John Kennedy brought the same promise and spirit of dynamism to the nation's domestic problems—with the same unevenness of results. He scored a major legislative victory by winning broad tariff-cutting



With Khrushchev in Vienna

**How to Get Moving:** In a sense, the burgeoning U.S. economy did more for President Kennedy than he did for the economy (though not for lack of trying). During the Kennedy years, the U.S. added nearly 100 billion dollars to the gross national product while climbing out of a recession. Had he lived, he probably would have been able to announce by January or February that the



With Bay of Pigs veterans: A fumble, but soon the Russians flinched

powers from a reluctant Congress—but, frustratingly, they were largely pegged to Britain's futile effort to enter the Common Market. He did manage to hold prices steady—and, in the process, triggered one of the biggest domestic flaps of his White House career: the steel crisis.

Mr. Kennedy felt he had made a major stride toward his goal of containing inflation when a modest union contract was concluded in the steel industry in April of last year. Then mammoth United States Steel suddenly raised its prices \$6 a ton and four other big steelmakers quickly followed suit. The result was the battle of wills with board chairman Roger Blough—and victory, of a sort, for the President. The industry knuckled under after a stunning display of Presidential fury and pressure. It was during that episode that Mr. Kennedy observed acutely that his father had told him "all businessmen were sons of bitches, but I didn't believe it until now." The remark leaked out, haunting the President's relations with the business community for the rest of his days.

long-sought \$600 billion level of gross national product had been attained. But he never solved the crux of the problem of "getting the country moving again"; unemployment never dipped below 5 per cent. He tried to tackle the problem with a technique more congenial to theorists than to politicians: an income-tax cut despite budget deficits. But it languished in the hands of politicians.

The race for space was frustrating, too.



With Randolph in Washington

Mr. Kennedy might savor the afterglow of John Glenn's pioneering orbital flight and the subsequent, more ambitious space exploits of the other American astronauts. But the Russians always managed to do better, and in the first years of his Administration the President knew he was in a desperate race for space with the Soviets. Even after Khrushchev declared the Russians out of the race to put a man on the moon—and U.S. intelligence confirmed the fact—Mr. Kennedy insisted that the nation pursue its ambitious space program. But the Senate, like the House before it, was cutting deeply into the program's appropriations the day before he died.

The gravest domestic issue of his Administration brought the President to grips with a national crisis in civil rights as no Chief Executive had been since Abraham Lincoln—who, the nation recalled with a turn last week, was also succeeded upon his assassination by a president named Johnson. The Freedom Rides began during Mr. Kennedy's first months in office, and as the civil-rights drive swelled in the streets, racial violence became an ugly commonplace of American life. Like the Negro leaders themselves—even such veterans as A. Philip Randolph and Roy Wilkins—Mr. Kennedy was caught up by the Negro revolution. He federalized troops in Mississippi and Alabama when he had to; when he spoke out on the issue, it was more firmly and forthrightly than any President in history. And he placed high priority on a civil-rights bill that went farther to meet Negro grievances than any before. He was still waiting for the message to get through to Congress.

**Timetable:** Indeed, in his final months in office, Mr. Kennedy saw his two most significant items of domestic legislation—the civil-rights bill and the tax cut—nearly suffocated in the pigeon holes of Congressional committees. Time and again he had to revise his timetable. Finally, even the President had to concede that neither bill would reach his desk before 1964.

Despite top-heavy Democratic majorities in the 87th and 88th Congresses (especially in the Senate), the President left behind few legislative landmarks. Perhaps the creation of the Peace Corps—the embodiment of that New America he invoked in his Inaugural—may prove to be the most enduring.

How will history evaluate the Kennedy Years? The tantalizing question was never far from the President's thoughts. More than anything, he wanted to make his mark as a strong Chief Executive, in the tradition of FDR. Whatever its verdict, history will share one haunting, unanswered question with his countrymen in their moment of grief: with his gifts of intellect, purpose, and charm, and his high hopes of winning a second term, what great and lasting accomplishments might he have forged?