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**The role of cultural context in making
John Kennedy
an
American icon**

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts by Research

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Abstract

President John Kennedy is an American icon whose popularity defies critical opinion of his achievements whilst in office. Kennedy has come to symbolise more than his politics, he represents a moment in time when the United States was full of hope and Americans felt good about themselves. To understand how Kennedy came to be the 'man of the hour', this thesis explores the cultural context of Kennedy's evolution as a politician, his impact on that culture, and how subsequent cultural changes have served to enhance his memory. Insight into Kennedy's personal and political life are provided by oral histories, records and personal papers at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. Contemporary magazines, newspapers, television programmes and newsreel furnish the cultural background and reveal the impact Kennedy had on society. The key influences on Kennedy were his family dynamics, and a need to win and appear tough. His father's wealth and understanding of the value of image ensured that Kennedy was politically marketed to suit a new post-war electorate. Within the emerging consumer culture of 1950s America, Kennedy presented an aspirational and inspirational figure. His style generated a unique and eventful presidency, during which he was portrayed as the hero. Following his death, the post-Kennedy decade reveals a country consumed by the Vietnam war and a counter-culture movement that challenged American values, making the Kennedy years seem a halcyon time. This exploration of the cultural context allows us to understand why and how Kennedy resonated with the American electorate. It goes beyond policy and political crises to examine why Kennedy continues to be American icon.

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INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Of all the American presidents, John Fitzgerald Kennedy received the highest average recorded approval rating of 70% during his time in office, a full 5% points ahead of his predecessor, the popular Dwight D. Eisenhower.¹ Since his death, Kennedy remains one of America's most popular presidents and is an American icon recognised around the world.² Yet historians agree that he was no greater than George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, or Franklin D. Roosevelt. Nor was he the only president to be assassinated, to be considered charismatic or inspirational, or to lead his country through a time of crisis.³ This disparity between the iconic status of Kennedy and his achievements has been attributed to the appeal of the Kennedy image. In *Kennedy: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (2013), Mark White explains how this image was carefully crafted and managed to help Kennedy's political career.⁴ Indeed, this image is one of good looks, style, wit and charm, a combination of war hero, family man, and intellectual. Yet the superficial appeal of an image does not explain why Kennedy remains iconic.

An icon is defined as someone or something that is symbolic, and for many, Kennedy symbolises a particular time in America, a time which holds a wide range of associations. David Herwitz in *The Star as Icon* (2008) writes that with no royalty in America, the gap is filled by heroes or celebrities. Kennedy, he suggests, already the hero, was also rich, and with his Hollywood friends, a celebrity by association. Thus, all he needed to add was 'melodrama, T-shirt good looks and charm to beat the band, and you're an icon'.⁵ Yes,

¹Kennedy had an overall average approval rating of 70.1%, Gallup Historical Statistics & Trends, Presidential Approval Statistics, Overall Average rating. Gallup Inc, 'Presidential Approval Ratings -- Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends', Gallup.Com, 2008 <<https://news.gallup.com/poll/116677/Presidential-Approval-Ratings-Gallup-Historical-Statistics-Trends.aspx>> [accessed 18 November 2021].

² Gallup Inc, 'Americans Expect History to Judge Trump Harshly', Gallup.Com, 2021 <<https://news.gallup.com/poll/328670/americans-expect-history-judge-trump-harshly.aspx>> [accessed 24 November 2021]. A 2021 Gallup poll asking respondents how they thought a president would go down in history, showed that Kennedy was rated the highest with 23% saying 'outstanding' and 47% 'above average'.

³ Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1865, James Garfield was assassinated in 1881 and William McKinley was assassinated in 1901.

⁴ Mark White, *Kennedy: A Cultural History of an American Icon*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) p.1.

⁵ Daniel Herwitz, *The Star as Icon: Celebrity in the Age of Mass Consumption* (Columbia University Press, 2008) p.44.

Kennedy was a hero, a decorated war-hero and a hero created by political crises. As sociologist, Orrin E. Klapp suggests, ‘a politician... who can create a crisis is in a position to make himself a hero’,⁶ and chapter two shows how Kennedy was a master of crises. As a hero, Kennedy in life and death also provided the melodrama, but this thesis argues that his iconic status is due to more than his fulfilment of Herwitz’s equation.

Kennedy was more than a rich, good-looking president who survived crises. He was a president who was moulded by his unique family advantages, the Second World War, and the culture of the post-war era. Against this cultural backdrop he created a memorable presidency, during which he became an American political hero, and his unique style influenced contemporary culture. The counterculture of the post-Kennedy years served to retrospectively cast the Kennedy era in an even more favourable light. Consequently, to fully appreciate why Kennedy is iconic, this thesis examines the cultural context of the Kennedy era, including the decade after his death, to expose the full range of associations he holds for us.

The cultural context examined starts with pre-war America and then continues to explore the post-war economically successful 1950s with its consumer culture, the red-scare and the need for social reform. The thesis then explores the culture of the unique and brief Kennedy presidency before moving into the post-Kennedy decade of disillusionment, revealing how this impacted on his legacy. This exploration of Kennedy’s cultural biography is needed for a fresh understanding of how American culture impacted the creation of Kennedy the man, Kennedy the politician, and Kennedy the president. Furthermore, it reveals how he, in turn, impacted on American culture, highlighting where, how, and why Kennedy and his era are inextricably linked. This cultural biographic approach was successfully adopted by David Reynolds in *Abe: Abraham Lincoln in his Times* (2020), facilitating his exploration of the factors that contributed to the complexity of the 16th president. For example, Reynolds explains how having a father from New England puritan stock, and a mother from Virginian gentry, gave Lincoln the understanding and skill of balancing opposing values, never more valuable than when dealing with the Civil War. In *Theodore Roosevelt’s Ghost: The History and Memory of an American Icon* (2017), Michael

⁶ Klapp, Orrin E. ‘The Creation of Popular Heroes.’ *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 54, no. 2, 1948, pp. 136. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2771362>. [Accessed 18 Aug. 2022].

Cullinane reveals how since Roosevelt's death, his memorialisation has changed with subsequent generations, all contributing to his public memory. In the same way, this thesis reviews how Kennedy is memorialised, how the subsequent political appropriation by presidents such as Clinton and Reagan and the changing fashions of biography have contributed to how Kennedy is remembered.

With over 40,000 books written about the Kennedys, this thesis cannot offer a detailed review of the literature.⁷ However, in examining some key examples of the Kennedy historiography, hagiography and biography, it becomes clear how valuable a cultural biographical approach is to understanding Kennedy as an American icon. For instance, a review of the biographical literature reveals a range of attitudes towards Kennedy, but no work that includes an exploration of the cultural context of his era. Two biographies from the Camelot School of biography benefit from the authors' proximity to both Kennedy and contemporary events, yet as Ted Sorensen admits in *Kennedy: The Classic Biography* (1965), 'An impassioned participant cannot be an objective observer'.⁸ While Arthur M. Schlesinger's *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (1965) provides a valuable historian's analysis of events, it also consistently shows Kennedy in the best light while glossing over his personal flaws. Despite some early biographical detail, both hagiographic studies concentrate mainly on the events during the Kennedy presidency, and consequently the opportunity to gain a broader understanding of the cultural context, and what it contributed to the Kennedy persona and his behaviour, is neglected.

Following damaging revelations made public by Judith Campbell in the 1970s about Kennedy's personal life, the ensuing revelatory school of biography's response was too preoccupied with exposing Kennedy's perceived flaws to fully explore the cultural context in which they had emerged.⁹ Thomas Reeves in *A Question of Character* (1991) attacks Kennedy for his low morality, a critique expanded to encompass the Kennedy family by

⁷ Jill Abramson, 'Kennedy, the Elusive President', *The New York Times*, 22 October 2013, section Books <<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/27/books/review/the-elusive-president.html>> [accessed 26 April 2022].

⁸ The term Camelot is used to refer to Kennedy's presidency after Jackie Kennedy suggested it to a reporter. It suggests an idealized period of government, like the mythical tale of King Arthur's Court. Using this term, the Camelot School of literature refers to those writers who write favourably about Kennedy.

Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York; London Toronto Sydney New Delhi Auckland: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2013). p.5.

⁹ As part of the Church Committee investigations into CIA assassination attempts on Castro, it was revealed that Judith Campbell had a two-year affair with Kennedy, and at the same time was seeing Mafia bosses John Roselli and Sam Giancana.

Nigel Hamilton in *JFK: Reckless Youth* (1992). While both bring attention to issues in his formative years, their limited scope denies a more comprehensive exploration of the cultural interplay between Kennedy and America during his time in office and after his death. Of the later biographies, Robert Dallek in *JFK, An Unfinished Life 1917 – 1963* (2003), does provide some evaluation of Kennedy's actions against cultural context, such as his assessment of Kennedy's stance on civil rights, which he describes as 'the greatest domestic issue of the early 1960s'.¹⁰ The focus of the work however is on the interaction between events and Kennedy rather than on any social or cultural context. The limitation of such biographical literature is the required focus on Kennedy's life and events, with little reference to the cultural background. Also, its proscribed time frame prevents an examination of how the later 1960s reflected on the Kennedy presidency.

Taking a psychological approach to Kennedy provides insights into the appeal of the man, which in turn reveal contemporary cultural attitudes and associations. James Barber's *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House* (2009) offers a classification of presidents based on observable traits in office. He describes Kennedy as an active president who enjoyed the challenges of his role, suggesting a self-confidence and an expectation of success, all of which contribute to an appealing personality. Barber's explanation of the public perception of Kennedy is valuable but it doesn't explore what contributed to the Kennedy persona, or any cultural underpinning of what voters' expectations were at that time. In *The American Presidents: Heroic Leadership from Kennedy to Clinton* (2000), Jon Roper's appraisal of Kennedy suggests that he staged himself as an heroic leader, and this theme of Kennedy as hero is one repeatedly found in the critical scholarship of his presidency.¹¹ Bruce Miroff in *Pragmatic Illusions: The Presidential Politics of John F. Kennedy* (1976) criticises Kennedy's preoccupation with courage and his tendency to thrive in an atmosphere of crisis, playing the hero. Such psychological critiques hint at a cultural need for an American hero, as suggested by Herwitz, and which Kennedy surely fulfilled. However, the limited historical and cultural context neglect any appreciation of Kennedy's relevance before and after his presidency, which could help explain his

¹⁰ Robert Dallek, *John F. Kennedy: An Unfinished Life, 1917 - 1963* (London: Penguin Books, 2004).p.707.

¹¹ Other critical literature includes John Hellmann, *The Kennedy Obsession: The American Myth of JFK* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). Garry Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Meditation on Power*, 1st ed (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982).

popularity. Similarly, the literature reviewing his policies and handling of events as president offers some insight into the contemporary political and cultural associations, but is limited in context. Thomas G. Paterson's *Kennedy's Quest for Victory* (1989) is typical of the revisionist school that is critical of Kennedy, in this case accusing him of a fixation with Cuba. Attributing Kennedy's approach to his personal traits of toughness and a need to win, it fails to appreciate why these traits perhaps resonated with the American electorate.

The focus and restricted time frame of the psychological appraisals and political critiques of Kennedy prevent an exploration of the broader cultural context and associations with Kennedy which may contribute to making him an American icon. A parallel approach is to explore the scholarship covering the history and culture of the relevant decades, exploring the context in which Kennedy is set. For instance, James T. Patterson's *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945 – 1974* (1997), provides a detailed exploration of post-war American history and culture, and sets the Kennedy presidency in the context of the pervading hope for the future that the title suggests. In the classic textbook, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (2003), William H. Chafe's examination of the Kennedy presidency in a historical and political context facilitates an interpretation of his role, importance, and impact on American political history. Elaine Tyler May in *Homeward Bound: American families in the Cold War Era* (1988) provides a valuable cultural analysis of life in America during what would have been an influential period in Kennedy's life. Like Patterson and Chafe, May's references to Kennedy focus on his presidency rather than a consideration of the man across the broader time-frame and cultural context. Bernard von Bothmer in *Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush* (2010), discusses the concepts of a 'good' and 'bad' sixties, using definitions that suggest how a favourable light is cast on the Kennedy era when compared with the later sixties. This is discussed in chapter three, but while such a retrospective addresses the post-Kennedy associations, it misses any contributions of an earlier cultural context. The strength of these histories is the provision of a wider political, social and cultural perspective that is lacking in the Kennedy-focussed literature, but while his presidency is addressed, they lack the broad-scope consideration of Kennedy across the wider timeframe.

The opportunity to explore the broader cultural biography of Kennedy is addressed in some measure by White who, in tracing the development and construction of the

Kennedy image, relates it to the culture of the time. However, what this approach does is to limit the cultural context to that deemed relevant to the Kennedy image. Further, he addresses Kennedy's immortality in terms of his memorialisation, neglecting the impact of subsequent cultural changes on his memory.

The cultural biographical approach of this thesis allows an exploration of both the Kennedy and post-Kennedy years, providing a broader context. It allows an understanding of the sweep of cultural changes, how they impacted on Kennedy, and how he was reflected in that culture. Consequently it explores the wide range of associations that help make Kennedy an American icon. This thesis argues that the cultural context of his presidency contributes to the strength of Kennedy's iconic image and suggests this in three ways. Firstly, the thesis examines how Kennedy is associated with the immediate post-war and 1950s America. Chapter one looks at the Kennedy beginnings and reveals how family life, events, and opportunities before and during the war, combined to create the Kennedy persona. It then explores how the early political Kennedy image was made to resonate with the values of a post-war America during his election campaign for Congress. It examines the changing culture of the 1950s, showing how this impacted on the evolving Kennedy image, making him a man of the 1950s but, at the same time, an emerging symbol of hope and change for the 1960s.

Second, while all presidents leave their mark on their years in office, the Kennedy presidency represents a unique period in American history. The Kennedy court was retrospectively named 'Camelot' by Jackie Kennedy, and 1961 to 1963 were an era when Kennedy's rhetorical inspiration made Americans feel good about themselves again. It was an eventful time of Cold War crises that provide immediate associations with Kennedy, who set himself up as the hero. Meanwhile, his White House is remembered as one of culture and style, raising the Kennedy status from politician to international celebrity. The second chapter explores how the Kennedy style and persona set the tone for a new style of presidency. It examines key political events that are now intrinsically associated with him, not least his assassination, 'the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century'.¹² It explores the impact of his death, his memorialisation, and how his legacy has survived despite changes in biographical fashion.

¹² Don DeLillo, *Libra*, Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2006). p.181.

Finally, this thesis considers how the timing of his presidency benefits from the distinct political, social, and cultural contrasts between the 1950s and the post-Kennedy decade. The definitions of a 'good' and 'bad' 1960s, which reveal more how Americans felt about the post-Kennedy era than describe the events that took place, are used to show how the Kennedy era is seen in retrospect. The final chapter explains how the turmoil of the Johnson and Nixon years contrasts with the complacent 1950s, and helps frame the Kennedy presidency as a high point of American self-belief. It describes an America at war in Vietnam but also at war with itself, how this challenged traditional values, and led to a conservative backlash. It reveals why the resulting Nixon presidency is remembered more for Watergate and its impact on the prestige of the presidency, than for any global achievements.

In exploring Kennedy's cultural biography, this thesis adopts an approach not addressed by the current scholarship. Setting Kennedy within his cultural context provides an understanding of the complexity of cultural influences to which Kennedy was exposed, and reveals his impact on American culture. The consequence of this cultural examination is a more comprehensive exposition of what associations we have with Kennedy that contribute an appreciation of why he remains an American icon.

CHAPTER 1: OPPORTUNITY AND IMAGERY

The unique Kennedy upbringing and the value of political image.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was one of the 'greatest generation', those who had lived through the Depression and experienced the Second World War, yet he was far from being typical of this generation. Over the years, his father's wealth and connections provided unique opportunities that helped create Kennedy the man, and the beginning of an image that would contribute to making Kennedy an American icon. This chapter explores the beginnings of the Kennedy persona, his experience of war, and how he came to enter politics in 1946, revealing how his image was managed to reflect post-war American values. The chapter then examines the emerging culture of 1950s America, showing how this influenced the Kennedy image, confirming him as a man who represented the era, but also revealing how he evolved to represent hope for a new decade.

The making of the man

The evolution of the Kennedy persona.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was born to Joseph (Joe) and Rose Kennedy on 29th May 1917, in Brookline, Boston. The second of nine children, Kennedy had all the advantages his rich father could provide for him, but the disadvantages of poor health would affect him all his life. Joe and Rose, both of Irish-Catholic descent, came from politically active families. Rose's father, known as John 'Honey Fitz' Fitzgerald, was a loquacious former mayor of Boston, and Joe's father, P. J. Kennedy, was a businessman and a Massachusetts politician. Consequently business, politics and religion coloured the family environment in which the Kennedy children were raised. Already a successful businessman in the 1920s, Joe branched out into the growing film industry in Hollywood just before the start of the 'talkies'. He eventually became head of four production companies, becoming a multimillionaire and learning the value of image. Despite his success the Kennedys remained outside of Boston Brahmin society, an exclusion that served to fire Joe's ambitions to promote the image of the Kennedys as a large and successful family.¹

¹ Boston Brahmin society was the traditional upper-class society of Boston associated with Harvard and Anglicanism.

Home life for the Kennedys was chaotic, as Joe was frequently away on business and Rose, an emotionally distant mother, travelled abroad regularly and relied on governesses and nannies to look after the children. Joe however was the mainstay of the family, as biographer Thomas Reeves observes, 'Joe Kennedy did not leave the moulding of his children's character, intellect and physical prowess to chance.'² Instructed by Joe, the Kennedy nannies recorded family events as much as possible on cine film, and as Melissa Geraci notes, 'Probably no other private family in America in the first part of the 20th century was so thoroughly committed to film'.³ The ensuing collection of home movies show a young Jack Kennedy, relaxed and confident in front of a camera.⁴ Joe's influence ensured that his children were imbued with a sense of competitiveness and toughness, whether it was discussing issues around the dinner table, playing touch football or sailing. Jack Kennedy's competitive spirit developed in fights with his older brother Joe Jr., the golden child of the family who was strong and athletic, and against whom Kennedy inevitably fared worst.

Kennedy, a weak and sickly child, suffered a range of often undiagnosed illnesses, however Joe ensured he received the best treatment available. Joe's presence at his son's bedside provided a parental bond that ensured a level of influence throughout Kennedy's life. It was in the sick room that the beginnings of the Kennedy character were formed, as the consequences of the seemingly relentless illnesses he faced were the development of an inward self-reliance, and an outward charm and wit he used to deflect attention, and so appear tough. These became intrinsic elements of his persona and of an image he would consciously project. What his regular convalescences provided was time to read, something he actively enjoyed as opposed to enduring purely for school. To some extent Kennedy was self-educated, immersing himself in books on history he also enjoyed the heroic tales of Sir Walter Scott, Rudyard Kipling, and the tales of King Arthur. John Hellman in *The Kennedy Obsession* (1997) argues that Kennedy's fascination with heroes was in part a contributor to his self-perception as a hero; a theme that will be expanded upon in chapter two.⁵ What his

² Thomas C Reeves, *A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy* (London: Arrow, 1992). P.34.

³ Melissa Wye Geraci, *John F. Kennedy and the Artful Collaboration of Film and Politics, Studies in Twentieth-Century American History*, v. 9 (Lewiston, N.Y: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003). p.19.

⁴ 'View Record: Kennedy Home Movies · BoB'

<<https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/01D34641?bcast=103743786>> [accessed 10 December 2021].

⁵ Hellmann.p.7.

illnesses taught him was to get the most out of life when he was relatively well, unsure when his health would fail him again. In his youth this meant not taking life too seriously. His friend Kirk (Lem) Billings recalls, 'Jack was more fun than anybody I've ever known and I think most people who knew him felt the same way about him'.⁶ Yet Kennedy was shy by nature with a sense of reserve, which is perhaps why, as Reeves states, Kennedy's friends describe him as being unable to relate to anyone emotionally.⁷ Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* (2001) explains that trauma at a young age could create a sense of disconnection in future relationships, and a lack of maternal attention during his endless convalescences could explain Reeves' account of Kennedy's behaviour.⁸ Yet rather than lacking emotion, Lord Harlech, UK Ambassador to the United States 1961 – 1964 and a close Kennedy friend says that, 'I think he had deep emotions. He very much disliked the display of them'.⁹ Kennedy's ability to relate emotionally was not lacking, it was just not encouraged in his family. This emotional reserve mixed with an outward charm created a character that was easy to like but difficult to truly know. At school it made him a popular and easy-going student who made friends easily and while intelligent, he displayed an irreverence and lack of application to his studies, a complete contrast to the studious intensity of his older brother. This did not deter his classmates from voting him 'most likely to succeed',¹⁰ but his academic achievements in his early years at Harvard did little to prove them correct. During this era a grand tour of Europe was akin to a finishing school for rich American young men, and during the summer of 1937, it was such a ten-week tour that fired Kennedy's interest in the relations between the European countries he visited. His travelling companion Billings recalled, 'He felt that he had to find out what was going on in Europe in this very, very important period.'¹¹

In 1938 Joe was appointed as the US Ambassador to Great Britain. Having made his fortune, Joe had backed Franklin D. Roosevelt for the presidency and was rewarded with the position he considered to be a stepping-stone to his own presidency. The fanfare and news

⁶ Kirk LeMoyne Billings recorded interview by Walter D. Sohler, June 30, 1964, (p.243), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program. [accessed 1 February 2022].

⁷ Reeves, p.40.

⁸ Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (London: Pandora, 2001). p.52.

⁹ Lord Harlech (William David Ormsby-Gore) recorded interview by Richard E. Neustadt, March 12, 1965, (p.87), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program. [accessed 2 February 2022]

¹⁰ Fredrik Logevall, *JFK. Volume 1: 1917-1956* (New York: Viking an imprint of Penguin Books, 2020).p.116.

¹¹ Kirk LeMoyne Billings, recorded interview June 30, 1964, (p.146) Dallek, p.49

coverage of the Kennedys' move to London was typical of Joe's promotion of his family.¹² Time spent in England allowed Kennedy to become acquainted with British culture and gain some diplomatic experience in London. He then persuaded Harvard to allow him to spend the Spring of 1939 travelling in Europe, collecting information for his senior thesis. Such an opportunity and its timing granted Kennedy first-hand experience of Europe in the run-up to war. After visiting Russia, the Balkans, and Czechoslovakia, Kennedy visited Germany where in Berlin, a US diplomat gave him a secret message for his father about the imminent outbreak of war. He returned to London on 1st September, the day Germany invaded Poland, and days later was present in the House of Commons for the declaration of war on Germany. His choice of autumn courses on his return to Harvard suggest that this experience of Europe and his proximity to such global events had fuelled his developing interest in international affairs.¹³ Cushioned by his father's wealth and privileged upbringing, Kennedy had little experience of the depression in 1930s America, but more understanding of European politics than most of his generation.

The outbreak of war in Europe impacted on the fortunes of both Kennedy and his father. As Ambassador, Joe believed that Germany would win a war with Britain, and he wanted to avoid American involvement. This made him unpopular both in Britain and at home, where his outspoken criticism of Roosevelt's plans to aid the British were poorly received. Eventually he had to resign, effectively ending his own political ambitions, and casting a cloud over his name. In contrast, the war in Europe provided an opportune moment for the publication of Kennedy's thesis as the book *Why England Slept* (1940), which focussed on why Britain failed to rearm before the Second World War.¹⁴ In it Kennedy argues the case that a country must always keep armaments equal to commitments which was timely advice for America on the edge of the war. The book was a success, despite criticism from Harold Laski who considered it '.... immature, it has no structure, and dwells almost wholly on the surface of things'.¹⁵ It was Joe who used his contacts, turning to his friend, *New York Times* writer Arthur Krock, who helped polish the writing, find a literary

¹² British Pathé, US Ambassador Kennedy's Children Arrive in London (1938), 2020
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zc_-9ewEtro> [accessed 20 November 2021].

¹³ Dallek, p.60. He elected to take courses on Elements of International Law, Modern Imperialism, Principles of Politics and Comparative Politics: Bureaucracy, Constitutional Government and Dictatorship.

¹⁴ John F. Kennedy, *Why England Slept* (Dolphin Books, 1962).

¹⁵ Mark White (*A Cultural History.*), p.5. Harold Joseph Laski was an English economist. The Ambassador arranged for Jack to study briefly under Laski when in London.

agent and a publisher.¹⁶ Henry Luce, the American magazine magnate wrote a laudatory foreword and in July 1940 the book was published. The book appeared in the best-seller lists in both America and Britain, although as Mark White observes in *Apparent Perfection: The Image of John. F Kennedy*, (2013), the rumour persists that Joe boosted sales, buying 30,000 copies, and storing them in his home at Hyannis Port.¹⁷ What the book did achieve was to establish Kennedy as a published author on history and foreign policy, and this was the beginning of his image as an intellectual.

Despite recurring health problems with his stomach and back, by 1941 Kennedy was keen to enlist, and using Joe's influence he eventually entered Naval Intelligence in Washington D.C. Perhaps a desk job was not what Kennedy had envisaged, but it did give him the chance to pursue a social life, and he was popular. Kennedy was a good looking, charming and witty young man from a very rich and well-known family. He was a recognised author and he enjoyed having fun. His philandering would become a key part of the Kennedy persona, perhaps influenced by his father's behaviour, who, according to Dallek, 'made little effort to hide his womanizing.'¹⁸ However, Kennedy's romantic involvement with Inga Arvad, a Danish beauty who had alleged Nazi connections, was brought to his father's attention. It wasn't the romance so much as the political associations that made Joe intervene to protect his son's future career. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and the United States became fully engaged in the war, thousands of Americans rushed to enlist, and Kennedy applied for Patrol Torpedo (PT) boat duty in 1942.¹⁹ The exploits of PT boats in the Pacific had an aura of glamour, and they were popular with Ivy Leaguers and those who had yachting or boating experience. Kennedy's background made him an ideal candidate, but they were also dangerous and provided a rough ride for someone with back issues. His determination is indicative of a need to prove his worth in a competitive family.

Lieutenant John Kennedy was in command of PT109 on a night patrol in the Solomon Islands when a Japanese destroyer, the *Amagiri*, rammed the boat, cutting it in half. Two

¹⁶ Mark White (*A Cultural History*) p.4.

¹⁷ Mark White, 'Apparent Perfection: The Image of John F. Kennedy.' *History*, vol. 98, no. 2 (330), 2013, pp. 226–246. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/24429654. Accessed 17 Mar. 2021.

¹⁸ Dallek p.24.

¹⁹ 'JFK Navy Request for Duty on PT Vessel 1942 | Shapell Manuscript Foundation', Shapell <<https://www.shapell.org/manuscript/jfk-navy-request-for-duty-pt-vessel-1942/>> [accessed 20 November 2021].

crew members were killed immediately, leaving eleven in the water. The story of how Kennedy, despite his back pain, swam for miles leading his men to a nearby island, towing one of his crew with a belt he held in his teeth; how he then swam out to try to raise help and how they were eventually rescued six days later, became part of the Kennedy war-hero legend. Kennedy's actions went beyond bravery, knowing the dangers inherent in those waters, he was courageous and showed leadership. Any doubts over culpability for the incident were subsumed under the celebration of him being decorated with the Navy and Marine Corps medal. It was John Hersey's report in the *New Yorker* entitled 'Survival', that broke the story in June 1944.²⁰ The fact that Kennedy was only one of many decorated servicemen, did not deter Joe from subsequently convincing the more widely distributed *Readers Digest* to print a condensed version in the August edition. The story of PT109 later became a best-selling book and a film, but in 1944 it raised the Kennedy profile and linked him to a successful war for America.²¹ It also provided a valuable war-hero image to add to those of intellectual and published author.

It was the sudden death of his elder brother Joe Jr. while piloting a bombing mission to Germany in August 1944 that impacted on Kennedy's future. It was a tragedy for all the family, but especially for Joe who, having his own political aspirations thwarted, had nurtured hopes for his eldest son.²² Ted Sorensen says that Kennedy had assumed that 'politics was barred to him so long as his older brother Joe....aspired to that profession'.²³ Whether he had aspired to enter politics or not, his brother's death left an unfulfilled role in Joe's ambitions, and for Kennedy who had grown up in a political family, there was almost an inevitability about his entry into politics. In addition, brief experience as a reporter for the Chicago Herald-America immediately after the war had allowed Kennedy to cover the founding United Nations Conference in San Francisco and the British general election in 1945. The opportunity provided useful insight into the workings of the media but, more importantly, it convinced him that it was better to be part of the action rather than report about it.²⁴ An opportunity had opened up in the Massachusetts 11th Congressional District

²⁰ Condé Nast, 'John F. Kennedy's Story of Survival', *The New Yorker*, 1944

<<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1944/06/17/survival-2>> [accessed 3 February 2022].

²¹ The film PT 109 was released in 1963 and starred Cliff Robertson as John Kennedy. It was adapted from the book by Robert J. Donovan, *PT 109: John F. Kennedy in World War II* (USA: McGraw-Hill, 1961)

²² Joe Jr. was flying a Liberator bomber loaded with high explosives when it exploded over the English Channel

²³ Sorensen, p. 15.

²⁴ Logevall. p.391.

as the incumbent Democratic Congressman, Michael Curley, had decided to run for Mayor of Boston.²⁵ The district was a wide-ranging mix of Harvard intellectuals, dockworkers, fishermen, factory workers and included a range of ethnic backgrounds. More importantly, it was a district not unfamiliar with the Fitzgerald or Kennedy name, but to win the nomination, John Fitzgerald Kennedy needed to make himself relevant to the electorate.²⁶

The making of a political celebrity **How Kennedy became a new style of politician.**

By the end of the Second World War the United States had lost a total of 416,800 military personnel.²⁷ Compared to an estimated 60 million lives lost worldwide, the United States had fared relatively well and had emerged not only victorious, but politically more influential, technologically advanced, and economically stronger. The Keynesian economic policy of government deficit spending on war production had driven GDP from 8.8% per annum in 1940 to 18.9% in 1942, and unemployment was almost eradicated.²⁸ Post-war fears that the demobilization of 12 million servicemen would cause a new depression proved unfounded due to a policy of continued government economic intervention, and growing consumer demand. The government funded GI Bill of Rights (1944) provided money for veterans to go to college, buy a home or farm, affording self-improvement and aiding family expansion, which in turn boosted consumer demand.²⁹ This was a time full of hope for a better future for those who had seen out the war at home. It was also full of new opportunities for returning servicemen and expectations were high among the post-war

Arthur M. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*, 1st Mariner Books ed (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002). p.89.

²⁵ Dallek, p.122. Dallek states that the Ambassador offered to pay Curley's legal debts incurred during a recent fraud conviction, and to help fund his campaign for mayor, if he agreed to step down.

²⁶ Honey Fitz had been a congressman here before becoming Mayor of Boston and his paternal grandfather, P.J. Kennedy had worked as a ward boss for the Democrats.

²⁷ 'Research Starters: Worldwide Deaths in World War II', The National WWII Museum | New Orleans <<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-worldwide-deaths-world-war>> [accessed 18 November 2021].

²⁸ 'United States Real GDP Growth Rate 1930-2020', Statista <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/996758/real-gdp-growth-united-states-1930-2019/>> [accessed 18 November 2021].

William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America since World War II*, 7th ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).p.5.

²⁹ 'Our Documents - Transcript of Servicemen's Readjustment Act (1944)' <<https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=76&page=transcript>> [accessed 23 November 2021].

American electorate.

The key elements of Kennedy's 1946 campaign for the Democratic nomination were the funding, the organisation, and the marketing strategy. Indicative of the Kennedy determination to win at any cost, Joe provided the funding, spending between \$250,000 to \$300,000 dollars, more than six times what Thomas Philip "Tip" O'Neil spent six years later to win Kennedy's open seat.³⁰ Seth M. Ridinger argues that it was the organisation and the image that provided Kennedy's success, but it is impossible to ignore the importance of Joe's money which paid for the well-staffed campaign team and for the latest political marketing techniques.³¹ The team hired the expertise of the John C. Dowd Advertising Agency, the specialists Thomas P. O'Hearn set up 90 billboards picturing Kennedy, and Irving Gold Associates were commissioned to run a campaign in the press and in the subway. The strategy was to campaign early, outwork your opponents, meet as many people as possible, and provide an image that worked.³² The Kennedy image at this stage was only the beginning of what it would become, but what was created for the 1946 campaign included key elements that he would use throughout his political career.

Kennedy could not claim to be a man of the people, his privileged background having insulated him from many of the issues facing his electorate. However, his focus on the main post-war issues of affordable housing, better paid jobs, price control and improved health care, appealed to his electorate. He also made the most of the advantages he did have. Already known as the Ambassador's son, his Irish American lineage resonated with those in the district with similar immigrant backgrounds who were seeking to make good. His status as a war hero and his youth were also key to attracting voters. Eoin Cannon suggests that Joe, by promoting his son's heroism, 'turned the socially unifying effect of World War II into the post-war currencies of celebrity and patriotism'.³³ Indeed, the tactic of providing returning veterans with reprints of the *Readers Digest* story confirmed his son as a well-known hero and patriot. His youth appealed to those who had grown tired of the old-style leadership. As Vito Silvestri writes, 'Kennedy was the antithesis of the oratorical, hail-fellow-

³⁰ Dallek, p.130.

³¹ Seth M. Ridinger, 'John F. Kennedy: Public Perception and Campaign Strategy in 1946', *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 41(2): 114-115. (United States, 2013)

³² Vito N. Silvestri, *Becoming JFK: A Profile in Communication* (United States: Praeger Publishers, 2000) p.20.

³³ Eoin Cannon. (2015). 'Kennedy, Boston, and Harvard' in A Hoberek (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to John F. Kennedy* (Cambridge Companions to American Studies). P.17. Cambridge University Press.

well-met Boston politician'.³⁴ Kennedy also turned his youth to his advantage, presenting himself as an opportunity for a different approach. His campaign slogan, 'The new generation offers a leader', was in tune with an electorate looking forward after the war and distanced him from the old-school politics which was redolent of back-room deals. As one campaign worker recalls, Kennedy's youth was a definite asset as now more young people seemed interested in politics.³⁵

After the war the marriage rate had jumped from 1.59 million in 1940 to 2.29 million in 1946 and would remain relatively high until 1948.³⁶ The new social emphasis on the concept of 'family' would have social and cultural consequences in the 1950s, but in 1946, the image of a large and successful family such as the Kennedys resonated with both reuniting and newly emerging families. To emphasise this 'family' focus, the campaign held informal house parties each evening where Kennedy, and his family, would meet as many as people as possible. The campaign culminated in a formal tea held three days before the election, to which 'invitations were sent to every woman on the locality's voting list asking her to meet the candidate and his parents'.³⁷ In the immediate post-war atmosphere where mothers were glad to see their sons returning home and young women were looking for husbands, Kennedy's good looks and easy charm could only be an advantage. In targeting the female vote, he addressed another changing element of post-war society. Participation in the workforce during the war had increased women's political involvement, and Kennedy had quickly recognised the significance, announcing to the League of Catholic Women in November 1945 that 'Women not only have political power, but they have financial power'.³⁸ The combination of a well-funded campaign, a strong and innovative organisation, hard work, and a political image that appealed to the new post-war electorate, delivered a success for Kennedy, who won the nomination carrying 42% of the vote.³⁹ Moreover, Boston's 11th district was overwhelmingly Democratic, and so winning effectively

³⁴ Silvestri, p.3.

³⁵ Peter Cloherty recorded interview by John F. Stewart, September 29, 1967, (p.8), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program. [Accessed 31 January 2022].

³⁶ 'Hist_stats_colonial-1970p1-ChB.Pdf'

<https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/1975/compendia/hist_stats_colonial-1970/hist_stats_colonial-1970p1-chB.pdf> [accessed 24 November 2021].

³⁷ Kenneth P O'Donnell and David F Powers, *Memoirs of John Fitzgerald Kennedy*. (Place of publication not identified: Little, Brown & Co, 1970). pp. 64 – 65.

³⁸ Nigel Hamilton, *JFK. Reckless Youth*, paperback ed. (New York: Random House, 1993). p. 765.

³⁹ 'Our Campaigns - MA District 11 - D Primary Race - Jun 18, 1946'

<<https://www.ourcampaigns.com/RaceDetail.html?RaceID=505122>> [accessed 18 November 2021].

guaranteed him the congressional seat, which he carried, winning 71% of the votes. While he spoke about the relevant issues of the time, he also created an image that appealed to, and reflected, the changing electorate of 1946. This image was based on key elements, an emphasis on family, his war-hero status, an obvious appeal to women, and his youth. This image would subsequently evolve in the next decade, but this was the beginning.

Kennedy was successfully re-elected to congress in 1948 when he ran unchallenged, and then again in 1950, when he increased his share of the vote to 82%. Despite this success he struggled to make his mark in the Republican dominated Congress, even acknowledging that his legislative record in the House was not distinguished.⁴⁰ Kennedy's frustrations in Congress were in part due to his determination to be his own man, which suggests either the naivete of a freshman or more likely, a conscious disregard for the old ties to the party leadership. This is consistent with the way he had distanced himself from the old-school politicians in Boston. The consequence was that it left him feeling ignored, and Kennedy aides, Kenny O'Donnell and Dave Powers, suggest he was already planning a move to a state position as early as 1948.⁴¹ Kennedy's interest in foreign affairs had been fired during his trips to Europe in the late 1930s, and the Senate was where he felt he could make a difference. His decision to run for the Senate makes the young and inexperienced Kennedy seem as if he was in a rush, but is indicative of his 'live for today' approach that had been fostered during his childhood illnesses.⁴² His opponent for the seat in the Senate was Henry Cabot-Lodge Jr., the incumbent who, 15 years Kennedy's senior, had also served during the war and was also from a well-known political family.⁴³ The race was close, with Kennedy winning by a margin of 51.5% of the vote to Lodge's 48.5%. Suggestions that Lodge was defeated because he spent his time campaigning for Eisenhower's presidential campaign infer that Lodge's seat was his to lose, and unfairly discounts the effectiveness of the slick Kennedy campaign. Kennedy's success also marked him as a rising Democrat star in the face of the Massachusetts selection of Republican Eisenhower for president by a margin of

⁴⁰ Victor Lasky, *JFK, The Man and the Myth* (New York: Macmillan, 1963) p.99.

⁴¹ O'Donnell and Powers, p.77.

⁴² *Ibid*, p.78.

⁴³ His grandfather had been a Senator Henry Cabot Lodge and his great-grandfather Frederick Theodore Frelinghuysen had been Secretary of State.

208,000 votes over Stevenson.⁴⁴ Kennedy's Senate campaign once again had benefitted from Joe's money, but O'Donnell and Powers argue that Kennedy won not on his policies but on personality, as he now represented a new kind of political figure.⁴⁵ The Senate campaign had continued the image strategy created during the 1946 campaign. His tours around the state had made sure the Kennedy name and face was well known, and should they need reminding, one million copies of the PT109 story were distributed to nudge people's memory of his war-hero status. The immediate post-war societal focus on family was continuing into the 1950s, and this trend allowed the campaign to employ the Kennedy family image once again. Over 70,000 women were invited to meet the candidate, and his family at the now famous tea parties. The appointment of Robert Kennedy as campaign manager confirmed it was very much a Kennedy family concern.

Yet in 1952, while the campaign emphasised issues that were relevant to his electorate, it was the Kennedy persona that was becoming an attraction. His authorship framed him as intelligent and well-educated at a time when many were continuing their education thanks to the GI bill. His perceived intelligence contributed to his personal style, which was reserved yet witty. He was considered a gentleman, providing a welcome contrast to the loud and brash 'knock-down' politicians of previous years, but the biggest opportunity for Kennedy was the arrival of the television. The number of households owning a television rose from 9% in 1950 to 85% by 1960, and Kennedy quickly recognised its value in getting himself more widely known.⁴⁶ He made appearances on television shows such as NBC's *Meet the Press*, and his campaign produced two editions of the programme *Coffee with the Kennedys*, introducing the Kennedy family to a wider audience.⁴⁷ Television not only provided wider coverage for those politicians willing to embrace the medium, it

⁴⁴ '1952 Presidential General Election Results - Massachusetts'

<<https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/state.php?year=1952&fips=25&f=0&off=0&elect=0>> [accessed 15 February 2022].

⁴⁵ O'Donnell and Powers, p.91.

⁴⁶ 'Radioownership1920-1998.Pdf' <<https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/radioownership1920-1998.pdf>> [accessed 21 November 2021].

⁴⁷ Alamy Limited, 'John F. Kennedy's 1952 Senate Campaign. "Coffee with the Kennedys" Call-in Program. Seated, L-R: Patricia Kennedy, Rose Kennedy; Standing, L-R: John F. Kennedy, Jean Kennedy, Eunice Kennedy Stock Photo - Alamy' <<https://www.alamy.com/john-f-kennedys-1952-senate-campaign-coffee-with-the-kennedys-call-in-program-seated-l-r-patricia-kennedy-rose-kennedy-standing-l-r-john-f-kennedy-jean-kennedy-eunice-kennedy-image181504881.html>> [accessed 5 February 2022].

David Von Pein's JFK Channel, JOHN F. KENNEDY ON NBC'S 'MEET THE PRESS' (DECEMBER 2, 1951), 2021 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZGKK2qXIb0>> [accessed 3 August 2022].

Kennedy appeared on NBC's *Meet the Press* programme 8 times during the 1950s.

also had an impact on how the public judged them. The 1952 presidential election saw Eisenhower's television campaign promoting his personality and his experience as a war veteran while his opponent, Adlai Stevenson's campaign, was built around policy. The resulting campaigns of 'I like Ike' and 'I love the Guv' provided a style versus substance battle, and style won.⁴⁸ The advent of television meant that the campaigns focussed more on the candidate, bringing personalities into the living room and making the audience feel that they knew them personally. No longer were politicians judged purely on their political policies, style counted, and Kennedy's style was perfect for television. His telegenic youthful good looks, his concise way of making a point, and his confidence and composure in front of the camera, all combined to portray the new style of politician that O'Donnell and Powers had identified.

Television programmes and advertising not only entertained and informed, they also reinforced the family lifestyles and values of a new emerging 1950s culture. The post-war dream of owning your own home was facilitated by the new Levitt towns being built in the suburbs. 11 million homes were built to relieve the pressure on overcrowded cities caused by the post-war 'baby boom', when the annual birth rate jumped from 2.55 million in 1940 to 4.3 million in 1957.⁴⁹ The mass migration to the developing suburbs was key to the creation of the 'consumer culture', the defining image of the United States in the 1950s, one of white middle-class families enjoying the good life. Paul Goldberger of the *New York Times* described these new communities as 'social creations more than architectural ones',⁵⁰ as sociability was key to getting along, and gender roles became increasingly socially defined. As David Halberstam in *The Fifties* (1994) explains, 'the husband was the designated leader and hero... the wife was his mainstay on the domestic side, duly appreciative of the immense sacrifices being made for her and her children'.⁵¹ The husband's 'sacrifice' was to commute each day in his new car to his new job in the city, to earn the money to pay for his new suburban lifestyle. Owning the latest car symbolised success, in the same way that

⁴⁸'Museum of the Moving Image - Exhibitions - The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials, 1952–2020' <<http://www.movingimage.us/exhibitions/2020/09/30/detail/the-living-room-candidate-presidential-campaign-commercials-19522020/>> [accessed 18 November 2021].

⁴⁹Baby boom is a term associated with the increase in babies born between 1946 – 1964. Chafe, p.112.

⁵⁰ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York Oxford: Oxford university press, 1987). p.236.

⁵¹ David Halberstam, *The Fifties*, 1st Ballantine Books ed (New York: Random House Pub. Group, 1994). p.591.

owning the latest fridge or television was the signature of a modern family home.

Kennedy's image in the early 1950s was a good representation of the American values of the consumer culture. A fourth-generation immigrant whose family had worked hard and proved successful, Kennedy was also a patriot and a hero, an intellectual whose youth suggested a new and fresh approach. However, Kennedy was now in his thirties and needed to settle down or be regarded as a philanderer, which he undoubtedly was. His eligibility as a bachelor had brought him notoriety, with the Kennedy looks and lifestyle enabling him to compete with film and television stars for the front pages of magazines of the day. A *Saturday Evening Post* article entitled *The Senate's Gay Young Bachelor*, written by Paul Healey, reflected the interests of the readers. It detailed Kennedy's background, his war record, and intellectual talents, but it focussed mainly on his good looks, sex-appeal, and athleticism.⁵² Kennedy feared it gave the impression of him as a socialite rather than a serious-minded politician, and reinforced the idea that the lack of a wife could potentially become a disadvantage. In 1951 Charles Bartlett had introduced Kennedy to Jacqueline (Jackie) Bouvier, a photojournalist for the *Washington Times Herald*. After a long courtship, Kennedy proposed in 1953. Jackie, introduced to America through a *Life* magazine article in July 1953 entitled, '*Senator Kennedy Goes a-courting*',⁵³ ultimately became a significant part of the Kennedy image. Their wedding in September 1953 was a much-publicised affair that was pictured on the front of the *Boston Sunday Post*. The guest list included politicians and businessmen, the influential and powerful, many unknown to the bride but of potential value to Kennedy's career.⁵⁴ Twelve years younger than her fiancé, Jackie was elegant, refined, cultured, fluent in French and Spanish, she added a further glamour to Kennedy by association. The marriage completed Kennedy's image of the ideal politician of the time, an intellectual, good looking war hero with a beautiful wife and a comfortable lifestyle.

The Kennedys reflected the success of life in 1950s America, their affluence and lifestyle making them an aspirational couple that featured regularly in magazines, but there

⁵²'The Senate's Gay Young Bachelor', *The Saturday Evening Post* <<https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/reprints/the-senates-gay-young-bachelor/>> [accessed 18 November 2021].

⁵³ Time Inc, LIFE (Time Inc, 1953). *Life Magazine* cover, July 20th, 1953. https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=XklEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q

⁵⁴ 'Wedding, 1953: Dowd Publicity Material: General (2 of 4 Folders) | JFK Library' <<https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JPKPP/025/JPKPP-025-006>> [accessed 21 November 2021].

were many who failed to benefit from the country's post-war prosperity. The 1952 election of conservative Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower had delivered a president who was not one to tackle controversial issues. Opportunities to enact social reform were lost due to a reluctance to engage with issues, and a complacent reliance on the image of a strong, successful United States, driven by its economy and the consumer culture. As Chafe states, 'As with so much else during the 1950s, the appearance of comfort and complacency obscured contradictions and tensions that would inevitably surface and explode'.⁵⁵ The tensions that were emerging in America informed Kennedy's policy stance but, more importantly from an image perspective, provided a backdrop which allowed him to appear not only aspirational but also inspirational.

The majority of Americans had supported the use of the atomic bomb in Japan and felt confident emerging victorious from the Second World War.⁵⁶ When the Soviets obtained their own bomb in 1949 this confidence faded. The price of the Truman Doctrine for the United States was to be prepared to defend itself and its allies at all times. As Elaine May states, 'the Soviet Union loomed in the distance as an abstract symbol of what Americans might face if they became "soft"'.⁵⁷ The war in Korea had provided Truman with an opportunity to prove that the Democrats were not soft on communism, and while the United States lost 33,000 servicemen in the war, a poll showed that 50% of Americans agreed that the war had not been a mistake.⁵⁸ Yet as John Mueller's analysis of the support for the Korean war shows, if asked whether the United States was right or wrong in sending American troops to stop the Communist invasion of South Korea, the inclusion of the word 'Communist' elicited a higher level of support throughout the duration of the war.⁵⁹ This

⁵⁵ Chafe, p.135.

⁵⁶ Gallup Inc, 'Majority Supports Use of Atomic Bomb on Japan in WWII', Gallup.Com, 2005 <<https://news.gallup.com/poll/17677/Majority-Supports-Use-Atomic-Bomb-Japan-WWII.aspx>> [accessed 18 November 2021].

⁵⁷ 'Our Documents - Truman Doctrine (1947)' <<https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=81>> [accessed 17 December 2021].

The Truman doctrine was based on a report from George Kennan, the Deputy Chief of Mission in the US Embassy in Moscow, issued an 8000-word cable, 'the long telegram', laying out what he considered to be Soviet Policy.

Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, Revised edition (New York: Basic Books, 2017). p.12.

⁵⁸ Gallup Inc, 'The Gallup Brain: Americans and the Korean War', Gallup.Com, 2003 <<https://news.gallup.com/poll/7741/Gallup-Brain-Americans-Korean-War.aspx>> [accessed 18 November 2021].

⁵⁹ John E. Mueller, 'Trends in Popular Support for the Wars in Korea and Vietnam', *The American Political Science Review*, 65.2 (1971), 358–75 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/1954454>>.

highlights the emotive power of the word ‘communist’ and reflects the overriding foreign policy concern for the country at that time. In his 1952 Senate campaign, Kennedy made plain his anti-communism, stating that ‘All problems are dwarfed by the necessity of the West to maintain against the Communists a balance of power’.⁶⁰ This belief in being able to stand up to your enemies is an echo of thoughts he first expressed in *Why England Slept* when he considered rearmament, but now he considered communism to be the threat militarily, politically and economically. Kennedy’s anti-communist rhetoric resonated with many Americans and proved a highly valuable theme in his campaigns.

The red-scare culture of the United States included a fear of communist subversion at home. This fear was fuelled by the arrest of Alger Hiss in 1948, and Klaus Fuchs and the Rosenbergs in 1950, when it was revealed that they had passed information to the Soviets about the atom bomb.⁶¹ Senator Joseph McCarthy’s zeal in pursuing supposed communists in the State department and the army reflected this red scare culture, but his tactics were so unpopular that the term ‘McCarthyism’ became synonymous with groundless accusations and smear campaigning. The playwright Arthur Miller used this theme in his play *‘The Crucible’*, highlighting how the red hunt was becoming ‘the dominating fixation of the American psyche’.⁶² Kennedy maintained his anti-communist stance but had begun to distance himself from McCarthy and his tactics. However his failure to vote in the Senate censure of McCarthy led to questions over his loyalties, as McCarthy was a family friend. This failure to vote cast a shadow over Kennedy, but his excuse was that at the time he was convalescing from a serious back operation.⁶³ It was during this convalescence that the book *‘Profiles in Courage’* (1956) was written, a collection of eight stories about courage shown by both Democrat and Republican senators who voted against party or constituency interests for what they felt was right. Opinions vary regarding the true authorship of the

⁶⁰ ‘JFK on the Containment of Communism, 1952 | Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History’ <<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/jfk-containment-communism-1952>> [accessed 9 February 2022].

⁶¹ Alger Hiss, a government employee, was accused of passing secrets to a Soviet agent, Whittaker Chambers, in the 1930s. The exposure of the American-British spy ring led to the arrest of Klaus Fuchs, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg who had fed information to the Soviets about the atom bomb.

⁶² Condé Nast, ‘Why I Wrote “The Crucible”’, *The New Yorker*, 1996 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1996/10/21/why-i-wrote-the-crucible>> [accessed 18 November 2021].

⁶³ Kennedy underwent an operation to have a metal plate inserted to stabilize his spine, but he fell seriously ill due to complications caused by his Addison’s disease, previously diagnosed in 1947. John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage*, (USA: Harper & Row, Inaugural edition, 1961)

book and although Dallek suggests that it was ‘more the work of a “committee” than one person’,⁶⁴ the book, published in 1956 was credited to Kennedy. It remained on the best seller list for 66 weeks and provided a boost to his intellectual credentials, raising his profile nationally after a period of absence from the Senate. White suggests that Kennedy’s motivation for writing the book was probably to create a link between himself and the theme of courage, to ameliorate for his perceived lack of courage regarding the McCarthy censure. Arguably the book could equally have served to highlight the issue.⁶⁵ What the book does suggest about Kennedy is perhaps more revealing and brings us to the theme of heroism. Jon Roper argues that the book provides an idea of Kennedy’s ideal politician, ‘...one who puts service to the nation above support of party or section of the country;’ and as such, Kennedy perhaps considered himself heroic.⁶⁶ Indeed, Kennedy had voted for the development of the St. Lawrence Seaway in January 1954, a project that would benefit the country but would damage the port of Boston.⁶⁷ What it does confirm is that the theme of heroism and political courage was part of the Kennedy psyche.

Cold War anxieties were only part of the changing culture in which Kennedy needed to remain relevant. Despite the war energising the civil rights movement, Patterson explains that ‘Most blacks, northern as well as southern, remained very poor....they encountered discrimination and ejection almost every day of their lives.’⁶⁸ Discrimination in the workplace and in housing meant that African Americans remained housed in overpriced and often substandard city apartments. Political expediency often overruled any moral considerations however, as politicians were conscious that civil rights legislation potentially risked the loss of the Southern vote. Key incidents during the 1950s ensured that the issue of civil rights was not going away. In 1954, the ground-breaking Supreme Court ruling in the *Brown versus Board of Education* case stated that separate educational facilities were inherently unequal, yet the court delayed for another year any decision on how to

⁶⁴ Dallek, p.199.

⁶⁵ Mark White, (*A Cultural History*) p.20.

⁶⁶ Jon Roper, ‘John F. Kennedy: Hero’, in *The American Presidents, Heroic Leadership from Kennedy to Clinton* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 41–66 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrmk3.6>> [accessed 24 November 2021].

⁶⁷ ‘John F. Kennedy’s Pre-Presidential Voting Record & Stands on Issues (p. 1 of 9) | JFK Library’ <<https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/life-of-john-f-kennedy/fast-facts-john-f-kennedy/voting-record-and-stands-on-issues>> [accessed 21 November 2021].

⁶⁸ James T. Patterson and C. Vann Woodward, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945 - 1974*, The Oxford History of the United States / C. Vann Woodward, General Ed, Vol. 10, 13. Nachdr. (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998). p.30.

implement the ruling. In 1955, the murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi, brought more attention to the civil rights movement and in December 1955, the refusal by Rosa Parks to move seats on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, was eagerly used by the local NAACP to raise the profile of their cause.⁶⁹ Led by Martin Luther King Jr., the civil rights movement in the 1950s pursued a policy of non-violent protest, but this would change in the 1960s. Eisenhower's reluctance to push the states towards implementation of the Brown versus Board of Education ruling allowed southern states to resist the ruling, and in 1957 the nation saw Governor Orval Faubus of Arkansas use the National Guard to block school entry for black students.⁷⁰ No longer just a southern issue, television meant that civil rights disputes in the south now made the national news, which not only raised the profile of the cause, but put further pressure on the government.

The only familiarity Kennedy had with black people was with servants and chauffeurs during his youth, yet he was not insensitive to the issue of civil rights, he just saw it in political rather than moral terms. During the mid 1950s, when social reform was not at the top of Eisenhower's agenda, Kennedy's position did not unduly damage his image. Ironically, his actions regarding the imprisonment of Martin Luther King Jr. during his 1960 presidential campaign (covered in the next section,) would significantly affect his political fortune. Furthermore, the outbreak of civil rights riots in the cities during the later 1960s would retrospectively cast Kennedy's civil rights stance in a relatively positive light.

As well as civil rights, the problem of poverty was also heightened after the war. Hopes for an 'industrial democracy' faded when relative household income dropped and price controls were removed, resulting in high inflation. The ensuing wave of strikes put five million workers on strike in one year, and the unions shelved hopes for shared control to concentrate on wage negotiations. Patterson observes, 'If there had been a "poverty rate" at the time, it would have identified at least 40 million people, 30 percent of the population as poor by the standards of the era.'⁷¹ Poverty did fall gradually during the 1950s due to the

⁶⁹ Accused of offending a white woman in a store, the woman's husband and friend later attacked and killed Till, yet on being tried by an all-white, all-male jury, both were acquitted.

NAACP – National Association for the Advancement of coloured People

⁷⁰ Theodore White, *The Making of the President 1960* (New York: Atheneum Publishers 1963) p.281.

'1957: Little Rock 9 Blocked from School - CNN Video' <<https://edition.cnn.com/videos/us/2011/09/04/vault-little-rock-nine.kark>> [accessed 20 November 2021].

⁷¹ Patterson, p.62.

booming economy, yet the American Dream was far from everyone's reach. Michael Harrington in *The Other America* (1962), argues that there existed a persistent level of poverty which wasn't just ignored, it went unseen.⁷² He explains how many remained trapped in a vicious cycle of low wages or unemployment due to discrimination, poor housing, diet, health, education, and healthcare. Once again, poverty was an issue that Kennedy had not seen or experienced, protected as he was by his father's wealth, but he became personally more aware of the issue while campaigning. Arguably a less politically contentious issue than civil rights during the 1950s, Kennedy voted for improved unemployment compensation and extended social security coverage. At this stage of his political career Kennedy was seen to pay his dues to liberalist reforms. He sponsored a labour reform bill in 1958 known as the Kennedy-Ives bill, which targeted mainly union reform, but it failed to get approval in the Senate.⁷³ During the 1950s Kennedy could be considered a successful American Senator, he looked and played the part, he represented traditional American values and his political stance reflected the pressing issues of the day and the Democratic party line. Yet Kennedy gradually came to represent something different that gained him prominence, and the changing culture and society of the 1950s helped to promote this.

One side-effect of the successful consumer culture was paradoxically a growing disillusionment amongst men, women, and their children. The rise of big corporations and the middle-class white-collar worker meant that men now needed the social skill of being able to fit in, and 'go along to get along' was the new adage. In *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), David Riesman recognised this change, describing three cultural types, firstly, tradition-directed types who follow previously set rules, then inner-directed types who define their own rules, and finally, other-directed types, who live seeking approval and direction from others.⁷⁴ The new conformity of the 1950s constituted a change in direction of the American psyche from inner-directed to other-directed, leaving many with a sense of having lost their

Michael Harrington, *The Other America Poverty in the United States* (New York: Scribner, 50th Anniversary Edition, 2012), p.186. Harrington estimates that between 40,000,000 and 50,000,000 people were living in poverty.

⁷² Harrington, p.3.

⁷³ 'Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy on the Labor Reform Bill in the Senate, Washington, D.C., August 22, 1958, | JFK Library' <<https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/united-states-senate-labor-reform-bill-19580822>> [accessed 18 November 2021].

⁷⁴ David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, Veritas paperback edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

individualism. The status of a suburban lifestyle had effectively subjugated the spirit of the American frontiersman, and it would be Kennedy who would offer a revival, with his New Frontier.

Similarly, the 1950s housewife, despite the benefits of the consumer culture, found running a home unfulfilling, leaving them feeling confused and guilty. In a bid to professionalise their child rearing and derive some satisfaction from the role, they adhered to the child-led parenting advocated by Dr. Spock's *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1946). This only led to criticisms of spoilt teenagers who would come of age in the rebellious 1960s. Those choosing to work, many of whom were older women or those needing to help pay the bills to sustain their new lifestyle, faced discrimination in the workplace in terms of role and wages. Women's participation in the workforce had risen from 13 million to 19.3 million between 1941 and 1945. They had enjoyed the better pay of industrial and manufacturing jobs, but after the war many resented having to give up their well-paid jobs to men, or return to the service sector.⁷⁵ It seems that 'Rosie the Riveter had become a file clerk',⁷⁶ and the Bureau of Labour Statistics show that five years after the war, women's median earning were only 53% of men. Attention to the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) declined as Eisenhower showed little interest, and there were still very few women in government, with only ten in Congress in 1949, rising to a mere sixteen in 1957.⁷⁷ Many women were either frustrated at home or in the workplace, and while the term 'equal but separate' may have been an attempt to reconcile domestic life with their husband's work, it failed to ensure any semblance of gender equality.

Amongst 1950s teenagers a cultural backlash emerged as they rallied to a new singing star named Elvis, who introduced a sexuality into his performance of rock and roll on the *Ed Sullivan Show* in September 1956. A new actress, Marilyn Monroe, also symbolized the more overt sexuality that was emerging, and the young and good-looking Kennedy provided the political version of this trend. Hollywood provided new anti-conformist heroes with non-smiling and angst-ridden Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift, and James Dean becoming the epitome of 'cool' in films such as *Rebel without a Cause* and *From Here to*

⁷⁵ Patterson, p.32.

⁷⁶ Cynthia Harrison, *On Account of Sex: The Politics of Women's Issues, 1945 -1968* (Berkeley, 1988) pp. 4-5.

⁷⁷'Women Members by Congress, 1917–Present | US House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives' <<https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/WIC/Historical-Data/Women-Representatives-and-Senators-by-Congress/>> [accessed 19 November 2021].

Eternity. In the film *The Wild One* (1953) the character Johnny Strabler, played by Brando, when asked what he was rebelling against answered, 'Whad'ya got'⁷⁸ and suddenly Brando became a cult icon of the 1950s. In response to the consumer culture, a group of people who viewed themselves as more spiritual and less materialistic, became known as the Beats or Beatniks, a pejorative term, that blended the name of the Russian satellite Sputnik and the Beat generation. Allen Ginsburg's *Howl and Other Poems* (1956) criticised a society that focussed on wealth rather than emotion, and the movement embraced jazz music, poetry, art, and literature, with perhaps the best-known work being Jack Kerouac's, *On the Road* (1957). Still in its early days, this counterculture movement laid the seeds for the hippie movement that would fully emerge in the later 1960s, but in the 1950s, the consumer culture constituted affluence and success, and Kennedy epitomised both.

Yet the reality of the 1950s was a disillusionment with suburban life, a struggle for equality for African Americans, ethnic minorities and women, and a culture where the indignities of life lived in poverty were mixed with anxieties generated by the Cold War. For the government, these issues had both domestic and foreign policy relevance. Abroad, the United States felt the need to project an image of unity at home, demonstrating the qualities of life in a capitalist system that could attract other countries meanwhile revealing no weakness that could make it vulnerable to communism. At home, there was the potential that these groups would move towards left wing politics and that this might lead to socialism and even communism.

In the 1956 President Eisenhower was re-elected, beating Adlai Stevenson by 457 electoral votes to 73.⁷⁹ Eisenhower remained popular, he had ended the Korean war, the economy was strong, and his supporters played up his likeability rather than his leadership skills. It was during the 1956 Democratic convention however that Kennedy significantly raised his profile, both within the party and across the country, thanks to television. His narration of a film about the history of the Democratic Party received a standing ovation on stage from the 11,000 delegates. Having previously announced his support for nominee Adlai Stevenson, who in return, indicated some interest in Kennedy as a potential running

⁷⁸ Daniel Simone, *The Wild One* (Marlon Brando) - 1953 - Full Movie [HD], 2020 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ecd8VVJJY>> [accessed 14 July 2022].

⁷⁹ '1956 Electoral College Results', National Archives, 2019 <<https://www.archives.gov/electoral-college/1956>> [accessed 8 July 2022].

mate, he delivered Stevenson's first nominating speech, announcing that, 'The time is ripe. The hour has struck. The man is here: and he is ready'.⁸⁰ Stevenson decided to let the delegates choose who would be his Vice-Presidential running mate, and despite heavy lobbying by Kennedy's team, he lost out to Estes Kefauver, the Senator for Tennessee, 'by an eyelash',⁸¹ according to the *New York Times*. This result led to Kennedy's third appearance at the convention. His speech thanking delegates for their votes and graciously hoping that the convention would make the Kefauver nomination unanimous, showcased a young, intelligent politician, magnanimous in defeat and loyal to the party.⁸² It was apparent that Kennedy was different to the old-style politicians, and this was transmitted by television across the nation. This evolution in his image was preferable to the magazine articles which had focussed heavily on his sex appeal, it imbued him with a political gravitas. The fact that Kennedy lost to Kefauver and that Stevenson went on to lose the 1956 election to Eisenhower did not tarnish Kennedy's image. Then, in 1957, *Profiles in Courage* won the Pulitzer Prize for biography. Sorensen states that 'Of all honours (Jack) would receive throughout his life, none would make him more happy than his receipt of the Pulitzer Prize'.⁸³ The first to be awarded to a member of Congress, it brought him literary fame and even more national attention.⁸⁴ It also put him in a position to run for the presidency.

A President for the sixties

Kennedy represents hope and change for a new decade.

Following the 1956 convention, Kennedy started to set himself up to win the 1960 Democratic nomination despite reservations from some, including his friend Charles Bartlett

⁸⁰ 'Nominating Stevenson for President, Chicago, Illinois, 16 August 1956 | JFK Library' <<https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKSEN/0895/JFKSEN-0895-024>> [accessed 21 November 2021]. Unhappy with the original speech Kennedy had worked with Sorensen through the night and delivered the speech the next day.

⁸¹ 'Kefauver Nominated for Vice President; Beats Kennedy, 755 1/2 -- 589, on Second Ballot; Stevenson Vows Drive for a "New America"' <<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/politics/camp/560818convention-dem-ra.html?scp=140&sq=president%252520kennedy&st=Search>> [accessed 17 December 2021].

⁸² 'Kennedy Pullout Speech; Roll Call for V.P. Nomination | C-SPAN.Org' <<https://www.c-span.org/video/?3396-1/kennedy-pullout-speech-roll-call-vp-nomination>> [accessed 18 November 2021].

⁸³ Sorensen.p.68.

⁸⁴ 'Democrat Senator JFK Wins 1957 Pulitzer Prize for Book "Profiles in Courage"', *Stevens Point Journal* (Stevens Point, Wisconsin, 7 May 1957).

who questioned his level of experience.⁸⁵ Kennedy may have lacked experience, but he worked hard and he was popular. He finally gained a seat on the Foreign Relations Committee, he also backed the Civil Rights Bill in 1957, immigration reform, health care for the elderly, and an increase in the minimum wage and aid for education. As well as making efforts to win support from the south where his Catholicism might be an issue, he embarked on a countrywide speaking tour, meeting people, and making contacts within local parties. The hard work and national exposure paid off when Kennedy won the 1960 Democrat nomination for president on the first ballot.

Kennedy's choice of Lyndon B. Johnson as his running mate showed him to be politically savvy. Johnson was the Senator for Texas and Senate Majority leader, but he was unpopular with the Kennedy team. Kenny O'Donnell told Kennedy it was the worst decision he had ever made as the labour unions were against Johnson. Bobby Kennedy was also antagonistic towards Johnson, but Kennedy knew that Johnson would be able to deliver the southern vote. He also considered it better to have him out of the senate and unable to mess up his intended legislative agenda.⁸⁶ In addition, while only nine years older than Kennedy, Johnson was seen as an old-style politician compared to Kennedy's urbane and quick-witted style, consequently as a team they held a broad appeal. On accepting the nomination, Kennedy immediately positioned himself as the man representing something new, saying, 'The old era is ending. The old ways will not do', announcing that 'today we stand at the edge of a new frontier'.⁸⁷ The message of a new approach was like that of his first congressional campaign, but this time it wasn't the end of a war that created the need for a new leader, it was Kennedy creating the vision of a battle for the future.

The basics of the image had already been created during his congressional and senatorial campaigns, but the 1950s had allowed further elements of his image to develop and give him prominence. His war-hero status still marked him out as a patriot and appealed to veterans from the Second World War, and now veterans from the Korean War. His intellectual credentials, enhanced by his recent Pulitzer Prize, provided a contrast to the

⁸⁵ Charles Bartlett recorded interview by Fred Holborn, January 6, 1965, (p.34), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

⁸⁶ Dallek, p.272.

⁸⁷ Papers of John F. Kennedy. Pre-Presidential Papers. Presidential Campaign Files, 1960. Speeches and the Press. Speeches, Statements, and Sections, 1958-1960. General: The New Frontier acceptance speech.

supposed anti-intellectual backdrop of the mass culture of the 1950s.⁸⁸ The family theme was promoted once again to a family-centric society. His marriage to Jackie and the arrival of his daughter Caroline in November 1957, made the Kennedy's the picture-perfect family which appealed to the families. At a time when the baby boom had created more young people than ever, the potentially youngest elected president held some appeal to the emerging idealism and anti-establishment tendency of the young. In addition, as the sexual mores of American society were changing, his good looks and style were a distinct advantage. Kennedy was tall, slim, tanned, well-dressed, and as Herbert S. Parmet observed, 'Maturity and improved health had filled out his face and he had never looked better'.⁸⁹ His personal style drew attention, with his tailored suits hinting at a European influence rather than provincial America, and style was now appreciated by consumers of magazines and television. The Kennedy lifestyle was aspirational to 1950s America, reflecting everything Americans believed in, but Kennedy now represented something different as well. He represented traditional American values but at the same time, his youth, his distinctly different style, his intellect and patriotism, his young family, his persona of wit and charm, his rhetoric, all combined to provide a different type of politician from those seen before. Maybe Kennedy would perhaps have preferred the media coverage to reflect his gravitas as a politician, but the image he had developed was significant in this consumer culture age where style, modernity and celebrity held considerable appeal.

Combined with the image was a political approach that focussed on addressing the cultural tensions that had emerged during the 1950s. With a nation fearful of the red-scare, Kennedy played on the concern that America was falling behind, not just in missiles, but also in space technology following the 1957 Soviet launch of the Sputnik satellite. He attacked the Eisenhower years, using the perceived missile gap to highlight the lack of progress and emphasise his anti-communism, setting himself up as a proponent of change.⁹⁰ He recognised that the nation was financially rich but socially in need of reforms. He

⁸⁸ Thomas Brown, *JFK: History of an Image* (U.S.A. Indiana University Press, 1988) p.9.

⁸⁹ Herbert S. Parmet, *JFK, the Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Dial Press, 1983).p.10. His observation overlooks the fact that Kennedy's appearance was probably due to the side-effects of the steroids he used for his worsening back condition and the tanning side-effect of his Addison's disease.

⁹⁰ Papers of John F. Kennedy. Pre-Presidential Papers. Presidential Campaign Files, 1960. Speeches and the Press. Speeches, Statements, and Sections, 1958-1960. Defense and disarmament: Missile gap The Gaither Committee, set up to advise on strategies to increase United States defence systems and preparation for a nuclear attack, reported in 1957 that a missile gap between the two nations favoured the Soviet Union.

acknowledged that despite the prosperity of the consumer culture, the issue of poverty remained, and that many faced psychological doldrums due to the conformity of the 1950s, saying that the Republicans

talk about their prosperity, but it is a prosperity for some, not for all. And it is an abundance of goods, not of courage. We have the most gadgets and the most gimmicks in our history, the biggest TVs and tailfins but we also have the worst slums, the most crowded schools, and the greatest erosion of our natural resources and our national will. It will be for some an age of material prosperity, but it is also an age of spiritual poverty.⁹¹

It was not only his campaign that highlighted the different Kennedy style, the contrast between Kennedy and his Republican opponent, Richard Nixon, served to do so as well. The difference between the two candidates was not just their political approach, it was also what they represented to the public. Nixon had been Ike's vice-president and as such represented the culture of the 1950s. Kennedy represented the chance for change and a new modernism. The contrast between Kennedy and Nixon is noticeable in their individual campaigns. Due to his Senate commitments, the Kennedy campaign was unable to start as early as Nixon, but quickly flexed to focus on nine large states.⁹² Nixon, having pledged to visit all 50 states, doggedly stuck to his arduous plan, despite a two-week hospital stay for an infected knee. The Kennedy campaign embraced new ideas such as organising a registration drive, employing experts to brainstorm new approaches and adopting new marketing and polling techniques. Theodore H. White in *The Making of a President 1960* (1961) states that, 'Decisions now came with snap and confidence; the machinery purred; the candidate's style seemed to top itself with each day touring'.⁹³ Ben Bradlee, a *Newsweek* journalist, contrasted both campaigns stating 'the difference was the difference between night and day...the men around Nixon....cordially disliked the press and simply spoke a different language, where the men around Kennedy genuinely liked the press and spoke the same language.'⁹⁴ These relationships had consequences as Mark White comments, 'there is no doubt that this kindness, respect and cultivation of the press

⁹¹ 'John F. Kennedy's Pre-Presidential Voting Record & Stands on Issues (p. 1 of 9) | JFK Library'.

⁹² The nine states the Kennedy campaign focussed on were New York, Pennsylvania, California, Michigan, Texas, Illinois, Ohio, New Jersey, and Massachusetts.

⁹³ T. White, p.320.

⁹⁴ Benjamin C. Bradlee, *Conversations with Kennedy* (New York. W.W. Norton & Company, 1984) p.19.

colored all the reporting that came from the Kennedy campaign'.⁹⁵

The Kennedy campaign machine, well-tested by experience and well-oiled with Joe's money, embraced the new phenomenon of televised debates between the candidates. On September 26th, 59.5% of television owning American households tuned in to watch the first of four debates between Kennedy and Nixon.⁹⁶ While television viewers considered Kennedy the winner, Nixon won with radio listeners. The fact that Kennedy won over the television audience is easy to understand considering his telegenic looks, his experience and better understanding of the medium.⁹⁷ Parmet suggests the first interview was relatively bland allowing viewers to concentrate on appearance rather than content, but it was the attitude of the two candidates that made the difference.⁹⁸ Kennedy, relaxed, rehearsed, well-prepared and perfectly groomed, strolled onto the set moments before the start.⁹⁹ Nixon, recovering from an infected knee looked physically unwell and ill at ease, later acknowledging the 'disadvantageous contrast in our physical appearances'.¹⁰⁰ Nixon had a tendency for self-reliance on his own opinion, compared with Kennedy who was willing to accept help from advisors and experts. Kennedy proved himself to be the better-known Nixon's equal. He appeared confident and in control of the facts, and he was not remembered so much for what he said, as for his image and his portrayal of precision, expertise, and judgement.¹⁰¹

Kennedy's campaign, so expertly executed, could however so easily have been undermined by several issues. His image of glowing good health and vigour was a myth. His back operation was known of, but not that he had continuing problems, so he worked hard at making sure he was never seen on the crutches he often needed. Accusations made by Lyndon Johnson's team during the 1960 Democratic primaries that Kennedy had Addison's disease, although true, were strongly denied by Kennedy himself, stating that his health was

⁹⁵ Mark White, (*A Cultural History*) p.338.

⁹⁶ 'Highest Rated Presidential Debates 1960 To Present' <<https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/article/2008/top-ten-presidential-debates-1960-to-present>> [accessed 20 November 2021].

⁹⁷ Smithsonian Channel, How JFK's Clever TV Strategies Helped Him Win the Election, 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMWQnoDA0o8>> [accessed 18 November 2021]. Smithsonian Channel.

⁹⁸ Parmet, p.45.

⁹⁹ T. White, pp. 284-285.

¹⁰⁰ Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, with a New Introduction, The Richard Nixon Library Edition, 1st Touchstone ed (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990).p.219.

¹⁰¹ James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, Longman Classics in Political Science, 4th ed (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009).p.360.

excellent.¹⁰² Biographers Thomas Reeves and Seymour Hersch have covered in detail Kennedy's womanizing, including his alleged affairs with Marilyn Monroe and others, but at the time, Kennedy benefitted from the unspoken pact that the press did not report on the sex lives of politicians if it wasn't too blatant, and was not going to affect them doing the job. Despite the new overt sexuality that had emerged during the 1950s, politicians were held to a high moral code, but as Hersh observes, 'Kennedy was placing his political well-being in the hands of a group of Hollywood actresses, reporters and publicists'.¹⁰³ In addition, Kennedy's Catholicism was a double-edged sword. With 96% of Americans saying they believed in God, Kennedy was viewed favourably as a man of faith, but some feared he would be influenced by Rome.¹⁰⁴ The decision to confront this issue early by appearing before a televised meeting of Protestant Ministers in Houston, Texas, paid dividends. His speech stating, 'I am not the Catholic candidate for President, I am the Democratic Party's candidate for President, who happens also to be a Catholic',¹⁰⁵ was broadcast nationwide and portrayed him as a man of moral conscience and with a strong sense of responsibility. There was however one key event that Eisenhower later pinpointed as having contributed significantly to Kennedy's election, and which is indicative of the difference between the two candidates.

The event was the arrest of Martin Luther King Jr. following a restaurant sit-in, for which he was sentenced to four months hard labour. Kennedy rang King's wife, Coretta, to assure her of his concern and his intervention if necessary. The intervention eventually led to King's release and word spread throughout the black community, with King's father now pledging his vote for Kennedy. Kennedy had previously shown only little interest in civil rights, but the Kennedy team had recognised an opportunity to increase the Democratic black vote. This opportunity, rather than any moral considerations over the justice of King's arrest, had influenced Kennedy to make the call.¹⁰⁶ His campaign team printed two million pamphlets about the event entitled, "'No Comment'" Nixon versus a Candidate with a

¹⁰² Janet G. Travell recorded interview by Theodore C. Sorensen, January 20, 1966, (p.12), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program. Kennedy's physician, Dr. Travell acknowledges that he did not have classical Addison's disease as it was defined at that time, but subsequent extensions to the definition of the disease means that in retrospect, he was suffering from Addison's.

¹⁰³ Seymour M Hersh, *The Dark Side of Camelot* (Hammersmith, London: Harper Collins, 1998). p.106.

¹⁰⁴ Diggins, p.209.

¹⁰⁵ N, P, and R, 'Transcript: JFK's Speech on His Religion', NPR, 5 December 2007

<<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16920600>> [accessed 18 November 2021].

¹⁰⁶ Kennedy knew he needed a large share of the black vote and made it a priority in his campaign.

Heart', which were distributed outside churches.¹⁰⁷ Kennedy's one call had swayed the African American vote and linked him with the civil rights movement, even though it was to be Lyndon Johnson who eventually got the Civil Rights Bill passed in 1964. Even years later, it is Kennedy's association with civil rights that is celebrated in the song 'Abraham, Martin and John' by Dion DiMucci released in 1968.¹⁰⁸ Whether this one event secured Kennedy the presidency in what was a very close result is debatable, but it undoubtedly had some impact on the election and on his legacy. Nixon does not mention the event in his memoirs, but does acknowledge that previously unencountered election factors helped Kennedy win. Nixon cites the impact of television and the way it controlled the political debate, as well as the way reporters became infected with Kennedy's 'personal sense of mission', and the organisation and ruthlessness of the Kennedy campaign.¹⁰⁹

The Kennedy persona was an amalgam of more than just the individual elements of his image that had carefully been managed and promoted. He had a hybridity of appeal that fit with the mood of change. He was a man of the 1950s representing traditional values to older Americans, his lifestyle portraying American life at its best. Yet at the same time he represented a man for the 1960s, appealing to the young with his young family and his physical allure, and to the disillusioned, he offered a sense of purpose with the inspirational concept of a new frontier. His persona of elegance and style, combined with his slightly reserved approach, suggested a sense of 'cool' and modernity that was futuristic and aspirational to many tired of the Eisenhower years. Yet his wit and charm made him appear approachable and suggested a comfortable familiarity. As White argues, 'it was his hybridity, his capacity to appear as the personification of old values and as a symbol of the change and greater eroticism of the sixties that endowed his image with such power.'¹¹⁰ Kennedy won the election with 303 electoral college votes to Nixon's 219, but the popular vote was much closer, with Kennedy achieving 49.72% to Nixon's 49.55%, a margin of only 0.17%.¹¹¹ The Kennedy image and persona would go on to create a memorable presidency.

¹⁰⁷ Parmet, p.56.

¹⁰⁸ Somewhere maybe, Abraham, Martin and John - Lyrics - Dion, 2016
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eN4ZIST1tGc>> [accessed 21 November 2021].

¹⁰⁹ Nixon, (1990) p.225.

¹¹⁰ Mark White, (*A Cultural History*), p.144.

¹¹¹ John F Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, '1960 Presidential Election Results | JFK Library'
<<https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/life-of-john-f-kennedy/fast-facts-john-f-kennedy/1960-presidential-election-results>> [accessed 20 November 2021].

John Kennedy had grown up in pre-war America where his background sheltered him from the realities of the Depression and the struggles of African Americans. His own personal struggles with ill health helped him develop a resilience and persona that would become part of his personal style, one of confidence, charm, and wit. His privileged family background provided him with a first-hand experience of Europe before the war, and his subsequent war experience made him a decorated veteran, both of which gave him a head start in his bid for a seat in Congress after the war. In addition, he had the advantages of youth, good looks, and a rich father who, ambitious for his family, was happy to promote his son at every opportunity. Image was key, and Kennedy was carefully promoted to represent the traditional American values of family, religion, and courage, but he also emerged to represent a new, fresh approach that made him stand out against the complacency of the 1950s. His good looks appealed in an increasingly overtly sexual society, and while fear of being known as a philanderer made marriage a judicious step, his marriage to Jackie made the Kennedy couple the aspirational American family in the 1950s. His intellectualism, youth and style suggested a new modernism, that appealed to those jaded by the consumer culture. Against the backdrop of the 1950s, Kennedy encompassed a hybrid appeal, he was a product of pre-war America and his traditional values appealed to families, but his modernism appealed to the young and he inspired the disillusioned. It was this unique combination that defined him as someone who represented hope for the new decade.

CHAPTER 2: A MOMENT IN TIME

Why the Kennedy presidency was so different.

All presidencies are unique in their own way, from Abraham Lincoln keeping the Union together, to Gerald Ford serving as the only ever president unelected as either president or vice-president. However, the short years of the Kennedy presidency represent a very particular moment in time. This chapter examines how John Kennedy represented a new style of president, a young and rhetorically inspirational figure who surrounded himself with the brightest and the best. The tone of the Kennedy court was enhanced by the creation of a White House that associated itself with culture and celebrity. This chapter examines how within this setting, exposure to the foreign and domestic crises of the early 1960s confirmed Kennedy's status as an American hero. The chapter then reveals the impact of the assassination of the man who had effectively become American royalty, and how trends in literature have sustained the Kennedy legacy.

The Kennedy White House

How the Kennedy style changed perceptions of the White House.

Kennedy created a new style of presidency and it began with the inauguration, during which nothing could emphasize his youth more than the visual juxtaposition of Eisenhower and Kennedy. Kennedy's battle cry to man the New Frontier, encapsulated in the memorable phrase, 'ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country,'¹ conjured a new and fresh sense of purpose, and has become part of the lexicon. Kennedy not only promised political change, he also epitomised change.

From the very beginning he was imbued with an aura of glamour. His inaugural ball was orchestrated by his friend Frank Sinatra and featured many Hollywood stars of the day, underlining Kennedy's celebrity associations. The media coverage of Kennedy as a congressman and senator had made him a political celebrity, and now the media eagerly promoted the image of the new president and his young family in the White House, with articles such as *Life* magazine's '*Inside the White House Nursery*' featuring his new son, John

¹ 'Inaugural Address | JFK Library' <<https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/inaugural-address>> [accessed 20 November 2021].

Jr..² While Jackie and her fashion style had featured in American magazines before becoming First Lady, now her fashion sense influenced style across the world as pillbox hats, bows, long gloves, and her bouffant hairstyle grew in popularity. Her knowledge of languages, history, music, and art, together with her affinity with European style, provided an aura of culture within the Kennedy White House. This sense of refinement reflected well on the Kennedy image, enhancing his intellectual qualities, and suggesting a president of taste and sophistication.

As First Lady, Jackie chose to act as helpmate and homemaker rather than involving herself politically, as had Eleanor Roosevelt. This could suggest an affinity with the culturally defined role of 1950s housewives, yet Jackie's renovation of the White House to reflect its historical heritage was homemaking on a much grander scale, and made full use of her knowledge of history and art. The resulting *Tour of the White House* television broadcast brought renewed public interest in the White House, and it also increased interest in its occupants. The sense of grandeur that Jackie restored to the White House was enhanced by a cultural programme of poets, musicians, artists, and writers who were invited to perform. It was Jackie who persuaded Andre Malraux, the French Minister of Cultural Affairs, to loan the Mona Lisa painting to America, increasing visits to the National Gallery from 3,000 to 80,000 in 4 days.³ Garry Wills disputes that Kennedy did much for culture and the arts in America, but Jackie's cultural events within the White House did much for the Kennedy's presidential image, providing a contrast to the folksy and provincial image of previous presidents.⁴ This modern yet cultured image was confirmed by Ben Bradlee, who said of his friend, 'John was about the most urban and urbane man I have ever met.'⁵ A trained speed reader, Kennedy devoured newspapers, briefing and policy documents, but publicly, more was made of his enjoyment of Ian Fleming's James Bond novels.⁶ Bond was a new type of Cold War hero with whom the modern young president was likened. Kennedy had become more than a political personality, he elicited the sort of adoration normally reserved for film stars. For example, in a *Life* magazine special report entitled, '*Well Suited for the White*

² Time Inc, *LIFE* (Time Inc, 1961). *Life Magazine* 24 Nov 1961, Published by Time Inc.

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=oVMEAAAAMBAJ&q=> [accessed 8 August 2022]

³ British Pathe, *Mona Lisa Makes U.S. Debut* (1963), 2014 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iX9HiZtNbVA>> [accessed 20 November 2021].

⁴ Wills, p.43.

⁵ Bradlee, p.212.

⁶ Time Inc, *LIFE* (Time Inc, 1961). Hugh Sidey reports that Kennedy able to read 1200 words per minute.

House, the report refers to Kennedy's dress sense rather than his politics, stating that 'Kennedy is almost certainly the most clothes-conscious occupant of the White House since Martin van Buren'.⁷ Coverage of an American president was not a new media phenomenon. Eisenhower and Truman had featured in both *Look* and *Life* magazines, but the Kennedys and their young family brought a young modernity and glamour to the White House that had not been seen before. Still, the Kennedy imagery was not left to chance, as Kennedy and Jackie worked closely with White House photographer, Cecil Stoughton, and other press photographers, to control how their images were used. While Jackie may have appeared 17 times on the front of *Look* magazine during the short Kennedy presidency, back in the White House, staff were asked to sign confidentiality agreements forbidding release of any personal details.⁸ As president, Kennedy's image now combined his traditional values and his modernity with the gloss that came with the presidency, the aura of culture provided by Jackie, and a touch of Hollywood from his celebrity associations.

Within the White House, the Kennedy court was also different. It was a combination of loyal aides and the best and brightest of intellectuals and experts. Many were of Kennedy's own generation and had gone to Harvard, amongst them, a dozen Rhodes scholars.⁹ The impression the Kennedy White House gave was less of being run by political experts than of being staffed by a group of young intellectuals. This in turn emphasised Kennedy's youth and intellectualism. The epithet of 'intellectual' was associated with Kennedy following the publication of his two books. Brown suggests that his intellectualism was driven more by his interest in using new ideas, than an interest in ideas for ideas sake.¹⁰ As such, Kennedy was pragmatic rather than ideological. His preferred mode of operation was to personally act as the hub of discussions and decision-making rather than employ a bureaucracy of staff to filter information and then present policy ideas to him. Consequently, the young Kennedy generated an air of busyness, which combined with his youth gave the impression of bustling energy. In promoting Kennedy, his press secretary, Pierre Salinger, recognised the value of getting their news out first on television before the

⁷ Time Inc, LIFE. 'Google Books Link' <<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=sIMEAAAAMBAJ>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

⁸ Michael J. Hogan, *The Afterlife of John Fitzgerald Kennedy: A Biography* (United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2018) p.45.

⁹ Barber, p.361.

¹⁰ Brown, p.10.

press, knowing that while most journalists liked Kennedy, newspaper owners were often more critical.¹¹ Furthermore, Kennedy was extremely telegenic. Comfortable in front of a camera since childhood, Kennedy's appearances were polished, showing him as confident not only in his material, but in the way he handled questions, often using his wit to deflect attention from the issue or from himself.¹² In addition, the elevation of the status of the White House as a centre for culture and glamour framed the president as a celebrity. To Americans, the Kennedy White House provided an idealized version of the American dream not seen before, the American equivalent of a Royal family.¹³

Kennedy as the President

Kennedy's presidential style and personal growth.

In Barber's classification of presidents he defines Kennedy as an 'active-positive' president.¹⁴ This is someone who pursues their purpose with vigour and enjoys the process, indicating high self-esteem and expectations of success, someone whose self-confidence affords flexibility and who relies on reason. Sorensen agrees that Kennedy was a happy president, as the office allowed him to use all his faculties in pursuit of excellence and that any disappointments only made him more determined.¹⁵ Sorensen's comment could be expected from a self-professed Kennedy admirer, yet Barber's classification is consistent with the Kennedy confidence, his enjoyment of competition and the determination to win. Kennedy portrayed himself as the hero whenever possible to an America familiar with heroes in print, in cinemas, and now on their television screens. Heroism however requires opportunity, and Kennedy's skill was to set himself up as the hero, as demonstrated in his inaugural address.

¹¹ During his presidency Kennedy appeared in several different television formats, four debates, seventy press conferences and interviews, nine videoed chats and six White House documentaries.

¹² e2 films, *The Wit of JFK*, 2015 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRcTCUTXr5M>> [accessed 3 December 2021].

¹³ Diana Lurvey and others, *The Kennedys: America's Royal Family* (Ideal Publishing Corp., 1962).

¹⁴ Barber, p.9.

¹⁵ Sorensen, p.366.

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility—I welcome it.¹⁶

Michael Hogan considers that ‘he was an inspirational figure, but he turned ordinary problems into major crises mostly to enhance his own authority’.¹⁷ Perhaps so, but the few Kennedy years were packed with enough crises to provide him the opportunity to appear the hero, such that it became a part of Kennedy’s presidential image. Linked to heroism is the theme of personal growth that has emerged in biography and historical critiques written by Kennedy admirers, such as Sorensen.¹⁸ While Kennedy’s youth and lack of experience on becoming president were a concern for some, it can be argued that his handling of crises shows him maturing as a politician. This theory of growth also allows for mistakes, such as the Bay of Pigs, described later in this chapter. Consequently the concept of a hero growing through personal adversity has become part of the Kennedy story and used to enhance memories of his presidency.

Less favourable critiques argue that the Kennedy presidency was an example of style over substance, suggesting that he achieved little during his presidency. Miroff argues that rather than encouraging people to engage with politics, it was Kennedy’s style and image that provided something for the American people to vicariously identify with.¹⁹ While Kennedy did endeavour to inspire the young to engage in politics, for example in his inauguration speech, the public did undoubtedly aspire to identify with this modern president. The impact of his style saw a change in fashion from power suits and broad ties to the slim-fitted suit and narrow ties popular in the early 1960s. Yet as Mark White argues, ‘just because he was effective at developing an appealing image did not mean he had less substance when it came to crafting policy.’²⁰ Kennedy, constrained by a slim mandate and with a difficult congressional coalition between southern conservative Democrats and Republicans to negotiate, adopted a pragmatic approach on domestic issues.²¹ He focussed

¹⁶ ‘Inaugural Address | JFK Library’.

¹⁷ Hogan, p.183.

¹⁸ Sorensen, pp.23 – 27.

¹⁹ Bruce Miroff, *Pragmatic Illusions: The Presidential Politics of John F. Kennedy* (New York: McKay, 1976).p.28.

²⁰ Mark White, *(Apparent Perfection)*, p.245.

²¹ The balance in the House was 262 Democrats to 174 Republicans and 65 Democrats to 35 Republicans in the Senate. Most Democrats were progressive, but conservatives and Republicans could outnumber Kennedy supporters.

on what he felt he could achieve, long believing that a politician needed to retain power to be able to get anything done.²² Style does not preclude substance, but it is understandable that the unique Kennedy style is so strongly associated with the man. Furthermore, his tendency to style himself the hero only adds to the strength of his imagery.

Kennedy's handling of US Steel is a good example of how he managed to achieve a political objective and also strengthen his image as the hero. To be able to tackle any foreign policy issues, Kennedy needed to maintain a strong domestic economy and unity at home, but his economic advisor, Walter Heller, warned that a rise in steel prices and wages would increase inflation. The US Steel company raised wages by only 2.5% and agreed to maintain prices, but then reneged and issued a price increase. Kennedy used a news conference broadcast on television to castigate the steel corporations, saying,

... the American 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 one hundred and eight-five million Americans.²³

It is alleged that Kennedy, using information provided by the FBI, threatened to expose embarrassing secrets of executives lives which helped to persuade the steel companies to back down.²⁴ From the public's perspective however, Kennedy's success in fighting the steel companies made him the hero. The broadcast had ensured that the battle was staged as a fight between big business and the people, with Kennedy as the people's hero, a view that was celebrated in a song sung by Marilyn Monroe at his 45th birthday celebrations.²⁵

Part of the hero concept was the image of Kennedy as an inspirational leader. He turned the negativity of the red scare culture of the 1950s into a positive by suggesting a New Frontier, inspiring Americans to go forth and spread the values of democracy and

²² Kennedy, (1961) p.7.

²³ Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*, Papermac Original (London: Papermac, 1994).p.297. 'News Conference 30, April 11, 1962, | JFK Library', p. 30 <<https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-press-conferences/news-conference-30>> [accessed 4 March 2022].

²⁴ Barbara Leaming, *Mrs Kennedy: The Missing History of the Kennedy Years* (London: Orion, 2002).p.222.

²⁵ 'Thanks Mr. President, For all the things you've done, The battles you've won, The way you deal with US Steel, And our problems by the ton, We thank you, so much.'MarilynMonroeOnline, Marilyn Monroe Sings Happy Birthday to Kennedy, 2008 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jfQtfw8U06g>> [accessed 4 March 2022].

peace in the spirit of the old frontiersmen. This also provided a psychological focus to help lift Americans out of the complacency of the 1950s. His Alliance for Progress aimed to help stop the spread of communism in Latin America and facilitate economic co-operation. The Peace Corps, established in 1961 by *Executive Order 10924*, targeted the young by facilitating volunteers to work abroad in education, construction, farming, and health care in developing countries.²⁶ Although initially criticised as a gimmick and denounced by communists as an attempt at espionage, the Peace Corps grew and was, according to Sorensen, 'the most stirring symbol of John Kennedy's hope and promise'.²⁷ In creating such programmes Kennedy, if not representative of a specific ideology, was symbolic of a new hope and promise. More specifically, he symbolised an American leader and hero facing a challenge, and never more so than when competing with the Soviets. To combat fears of Soviet domination in space, Kennedy promised that NASA would put a man on the moon by the end of the decade.²⁸ Sorensen admits that Kennedy's aim was more symbolic than for any substantive gains, but the project was typical of Kennedy who, perhaps with one eye on his legacy, linked himself with a challenge he pitched as difficult to achieve.²⁹

We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.³⁰

Kennedy's main area of interest however remained foreign policy, and it is within this sphere that the notion of heroism is more immediately associated with Kennedy.³¹ He was inexperienced in foreign affairs and Paterson accuses him of being unable to develop

²⁶ 'Peace-Corps.Pdf' <<https://www.archives.gov/files/historical-docs/doc-content/images/peace-corps.pdf>> [accessed 10 December 2021].

²⁷ Sorensen, p.532.

²⁸ According to Ted Sorensen, landing a man on the moon was not at the top of the list for NASA, but it was decided 'to focus our space effort on that objective.' Theodore C. Sorensen recorded interview by Carl Kaysen, March 26, 1964, (p.3.), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program. [accessed 10 December 2021].

²⁹ Ibid. p.1.

³⁰ 'JFK RICE MOON SPEECH' <<https://er.jsc.nasa.gov/seh/ricetalk.htm>> [accessed 7 December 2021].

³¹ Kennedy was unable to rely on a Democratic majority as many southern democrats were suspicious of his north-eastern establishment background and his policies.

due to his entrenched Cold War views and his personality.³² Certainly his fundamental need to win meant that Kennedy instinctively took a tough approach, and combined with a dislike of bureaucratic decision-making, there was a general air of alarm, with members of the Kennedy team recalling one crisis meeting after another.³³ Managing crises once again set Kennedy as the hero, and in the early 1960s these crises were played out on the television news. For a president comfortable at manipulating the media, it can only be assumed that this was a situation Kennedy was happy to promote to a hero-loving American audience.

Fidel Castro's overthrow of the Cuban Batista government, his declared adherence to Marxist-Leninism and increasing reliance on the Soviet Union for support, had brought the Cold War within 90 miles of the United States. Fear of communism, or more importantly, the spread of communism, had unified Americans since the end of the Second World War, and standing up to a communist threat remained a key part of the American psyche. Consequently, a planned invasion of Cuba that is now referred to as the Bay of Pigs, was congruent with the red-scare culture prevalent in the country. It was also consistent with Kennedy's personal anti-communism and his need to appear tough. The invasion in April 1961 by 1400 exiled anti-Castro Cubans, covertly funded and directed by the United States, went wrong from the beginning. It failed due to bad planning and the prior knowledge of the invasion by Castro, and it was Kennedy's first major foreign policy crisis. Kennedy, having eventually been persuaded to accept the plan, subsequently refused to send back-up air support when needed, despite intense pressure from his advisers and the CIA. Whether he could maintain the perception of no American involvement or not, he needed to end what he now recognised was a doomed offensive, sooner rather than later. The debacle revealed Kennedy's inexperience in the early days of his presidency, and announcing in a television broadcast that, 'Victory has a thousand fathers, but defeat is an orphan',³⁴ he personally shouldered the blame. This was in no way a heroic performance, yet the event surprisingly increased his public approval rating to 82%, suggesting that Americans either approved of him acting in the first place, or perhaps admired him for

³² *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1963*, ed. by Thomas G. Paterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).p.7.

³³ Wills, p.171.

³⁴ 'Press Conference, 21 April 1961 | JFK Library' <<https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKWHA/1961/JFKWHA-027/JFKWHA-027>> [accessed 10 December 2021].

stepping-up to accept responsibility.³⁵ Kennedy survived what could have been a serious setback to his administration, and it provided a salutary lesson about trusting his advisors.

Shortly after, in June 1961, the Kennedy confidence was hit once again on meeting Khrushchev at the Vienna summit. After the Bay of Pigs debacle, he needed to appear confident and resolute, but he was not prepared for the more experienced Soviet leader's antagonistic style, for whom the Kennedy charm held little weight. On returning to Washington D.C. Kennedy admitted that the meeting had not gone well, and although an agreement was reached over the neutralisation of Laos, Khrushchev's threats to block access to West Berlin for the allies made Kennedy realise he might need to take action. His handling of the developing crisis in Berlin shows some of the personal growth Sorensen talked about. This time, personally taking full charge of the situation, he initiated a Berlin Task Force to consider responses to Khrushchev's threat, challenging their suggestions. While Khrushchev used tough rhetoric, Kennedy quietly sought authorization to call up reserves and he increased the number of missiles, army divisions and air force power, and then he waited. The continuing exodus of skilled labour from East Berlin eventually pushed Khrushchev into building the Berlin Wall in August 1961. The wall was a tangible symbol of the Cold War but was, as Kennedy conceded, better than a war. Kennedy's stand against Khrushchev meant that he was considered the hero, especially to Berliners with whom he empathised, announcing during his 1963 visit to West Berlin that, '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'.³⁶

The Cuban missile crisis in October 1962 became Kennedy's biggest foreign policy nightmare, and the one most immediately associated with Kennedy in people's minds. Evidence of nuclear missiles being installed by the Soviet Union in Cuba might not have altered the balance of power in terms of arsenal, but the world's perception of a change meant that Kennedy once again needed to be seen to act, or fear being seen as weak. The crisis reveals evidence of a maturing politician, the hero growing through adversity. Once again Kennedy took charge, establishing an Executive Committee (Ex Comm) to provide options for a considered response to Khrushchev's move, rather than relying purely on his

³⁵ Barber, p.368.

³⁶ 'Remarks at the Rudolph Wilde Platz, Berlin | JFK Library' <<https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/remarks-at-the-rudolph-wilde-platz-berlin>> [accessed 10 December 2021].

military advisers. Allowing them to meet at times without him, a freer exchange of opinions generated a range of solutions which he could consider and push back on when necessary. In this way the pressure by the military chiefs to bomb the missile sites was held in abeyance until the alternative option to impose a quarantine around the island was agreed. Favouring the quarantine option gave Khrushchev time to consider his next steps rather than forcing the issue. Kennedy considered the situation from different aspects and his brother Bobby wrote of 'the importance of placing ourselves in the other country's shoes'.³⁷ Only when this response was agreed did Kennedy use a television broadcast to tell the world about the situation in Cuba, stating that any attack on the Western Hemisphere from Cuba would be considered an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States. Putting the onus firmly back on Khrushchev he said, 'I call upon Chairman Khrushchev to halt and eliminate this clandestine, reckless and provocative threat to world peace and to stable relations between our two nations.'³⁸ The broadcast positioned Kennedy as the calm but strong hero facing up to the Soviet aggressor, a hero not only for America, but this time for the world. His implementation of a quarantine was a restrained, rational response as opposed to the calls from the military to bomb the missile sites, and effectively bought him time. The resulting stand-off between the two nations held the potential threat of either side raising their level of response, but meanwhile a diplomatic solution was reached and managed in such a way to ensure that Kennedy was not seen to concede anything. The Soviet Union agreed to dismantle the missile sites and remove the weapons, while in return Kennedy agreed to not undertake an unprovoked invasion of Cuba. Kennedy also secretly agreed to remove nuclear missiles from Turkey, but this would not be acknowledged publicly. Consequently, it was Khrushchev who was seen to back down, and Kennedy the one to stand his ground.

The world regarded Kennedy the hero, and his handling of the crisis inspired confidence in his administration, with Germany's Chancellor Adenauer attributing his increased trust in Kennedy to 'the firm American handling of the Cuban crisis'.³⁹

³⁷ Barber, p.379.

³⁸ 'Address During the Cuban Missile Crisis | JFK Library' <<https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/address-during-the-cuban-missile-crisis>> [accessed 1 March 2022].

³⁹ 'The Times Archive | The Times & The Sunday Times' <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/archive/page/1962-11-13/10.html>> [accessed 10 December 2021].

Sir Alec Douglas-Home, the British Foreign secretary later stated that 'Khrushchev, the realist, quickly recognized that he was up against a man whose nerve could not be broken'.⁴⁰ Indeed, McNamara says that during the crisis the President was 'Calm and cool – and highly rational and unemotional during the period'.⁴¹ Although his critics accused him of having caused the crisis due to his Cold War rhetoric and the Bay of Pigs invasion, his handling of the crisis undoubtedly demonstrated the ways in which he had matured during his short time in the White House. Kennedy's star had never been so high, and his statesmanship effectively dismissed any concerns over his political maturity.

The impact of the crisis was felt worldwide, but the impact on Kennedy was profound. Kennedy's 'peace speech', made at the American University in Washington in June 1963 demonstrated his personal growth and his departure from entrenched thinking. His anti-communism reflected American society in the 1950s, but the culmination of crises had brought the two ideologies of communism and capitalism to near disastrous consequences that gave both Kennedy and Khrushchev pause. Kennedy's call for a re-examination of attitudes to the Soviet Union and for peace, not just for Americans, but for all men and women, provided a distinct step-change from his previous rhetoric.⁴² In turn, Khrushchev acknowledged this departure from the usual American stance, saying, 'That statement can be called courageous and more realistic than what the Soviet Union and other countries of the socialist world often heard from American shores'.⁴³ It was Kennedy's change of tone that led to negotiations for a Nuclear Test Ban Treaty which limited nuclear testing to underground, and while it did not prevent further nuclear developments, it slowed the arms race. The impact at home was a reduction in fear over the threat of nuclear war, and America now saw a politically mature and confident Kennedy after the Cuban crisis.⁴⁴

1961 to 1963 are the years remembered for the Cold War crises that are immediately associated with Kennedy, especially the Cuban missile crisis. The themes of

⁴⁰ Sir Alec Douglas-Home, written statement, March 17, 1965, (p.10), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program. [accessed 8 August 2022].

⁴¹ Robert S. McNamara recorded interview by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., April 4, 1964, (p.20), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program. [accessed 10 December 2021].

⁴² 'World Peace, 10 June 1963 | JFK Library' <<https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/USG/USG-01-07/USG-01-07>> [accessed 10 December 2021].

⁴³ Nikita Khrushchev, written statement received by Robert F. Kennedy, June 29, 1964, (p.4), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program. [accessed 11 December 2021].

⁴⁴ Dallek, p.630.

personal growth and heroism demonstrated during this time can be seen as a mythical hero who develops insight through suffering. For Kennedy admirers, such an attribution serves only to enhance his memory and the theory of personal growth serves Kennedy well. As Brown notes, the notion of growth provides Kennedy admirers with an explanation for his successes, but also the rationale that any mistakes he made were an opportunity to learn.⁴⁵ To his admirers, it suggests that Kennedy's early death deprived the nation of what this evolving political hero might have achieved. It also suggests that any failures by Lyndon Johnson in his bid to continue Kennedy policy, would not have happened if Kennedy had lived. As such Kennedy, it seems, could not lose. Yet inherent in the 'if he had lived' scenario is the assumption that Kennedy would have made the correct decisions. The theory of personal growth also fails to differentiate Kennedy's growth in office from that of any other inexperienced president, suggesting that his growth was only a consequence of his lack of maturity, not his presidential inexperience. It seems his youth worked in his favour once again.

The issue of Vietnam exemplifies how Kennedy admirers excuse him from blame. Kennedy inherited America's involvement in Vietnam and sent 17,000 troops that 'changed the commitment without changing the war',⁴⁶ according to David Halberstam. Kennedy's actions in deepening the commitment to Vietnam were congruent with his belief in containment, but whether he would have escalated America's commitment in the same way as Johnson remains open to conjecture. Johnson, determined not to lose Indochina, became embroiled in a war that was to engulf his presidency. The ability of Kennedy supporters to distance their hero from the unpopularity of the Vietnam war using the 'if Kennedy had lived' scenario allows them to maintain his hero status, and Kennedy's involvement in Vietnam is subsumed under America's association of Vietnam with Johnson and Nixon.

⁴⁵ Brown, p,20.

⁴⁶ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992).p.200.

Rendezvous with death ⁴⁷

The end of a presidency and the beginning of the Kennedy myth.

The Kennedy years were eventful, and although his approval rating had dipped during 1963, due mainly to his stand on civil rights, his popularity remained relatively high as he planned his re-election campaign for 1964.⁴⁸ The Kennedy persona elicited a fervour in public and large crowds were anticipated for a planned trip to Dallas in November 1963. The trip was a bid to raise campaign funds, kick-off his re-election campaign and help settle a fractious Texas Democrat party.⁴⁹ However, the visit was not popular with everyone, as the Dallas Morning News headline read, 'Storm of Political Controversy Swirls Around Kennedy on Visit'.⁵⁰ The John Birch Society had taken out an advertisement in the paper denouncing Kennedy as pro-communist following events in Cuba, and a right-wing flyer was circulating in Dallas accusing Kennedy of treason.⁵¹

Despite this open hostility, Kennedy insisted on removing the car roof so the crowds could see him and Jackie, and they were rewarded with cheering crowds lining the route, until his car reached Dealey Plaza. As the shots rang out at 12.30pm, Abraham Zapruder captured key footage of the motorcade, footage that became evidence for innumerable conspiracy theories about Kennedy's assassination.⁵² Audiences watched as Walter Cronkite on the CBS news bulletin struggled to announce, 'President Kennedy died at 1pm Central Standard Time'.⁵³ Americans and the world watched as television, the medium that Kennedy had used so well during his political career, now replayed the events in Dallas, and three

⁴⁷ Rendezvous with Death is taken from the poem by Alan Seeger and is alleged to have been Kennedy's favourite poem. Poetry Foundation, 'I Have a Rendezvous with Death by Alan Seeger', Poetry Foundation (Poetry Foundation, 2022), <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45077/i-have-a-rendezvous-with-death>> [accessed 2 March 2022]

⁴⁸ Gallup Inc, 'Presidential Approval Ratings -- Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends', Gallup.Com, 2008 <<https://news.gallup.com/poll/116677/Presidential-Approval-Ratings-Gallup-Historical-Statistics-Trends.aspx>> [accessed 18 November 2021].

⁴⁹ A quarrel had developed and was continuing between Senator Ralph Yarborough, a liberal democrat whose ideology was based on New Deal principles and Governor John Connally, a conservative democrat who spoke out for the oil industry and businessmen.

⁵⁰ *The Dallas Morning News*, November 22nd, 1963, <https://www.shapell.org/manuscript/jfk-signed-dallas-newspaper-morning-of-assassination-november-22-1963/#transcripts> [accessed 7/8/22]

⁵¹ Robert Glenn Klause, '[Flyer of President John F. Kennedy by Robert Glenn Klause]', The Portal to Texas History, Unknown, United States - Texas - Dallas County - Dallas <<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph337403/>> [accessed 10 December 2021].

⁵² Charlton Woolfolk, Jr., Zapruder Film Original - JFK Assassination, 2018 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6vwl8ow8J0>> [accessed 7 December 2021].

⁵³ KOIN 6, Walter Cronkite Announces Death of JFK, 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WVIDLjW2qQk>> [accessed 9 December 2021].

days later, relayed pictures of his funeral procession.⁵⁴ As Senator Mike Mansfield, delivering Kennedy's Eulogy said, 'A piece of each of us, died at that moment'.⁵⁵

Yet the Kennedy phenomenon did not die in Dallas, it evolved into a memorialisation that continues today. The impact of Kennedy's life was reflected in the reactions to his death, not just in America, but around the world. In Germany, 60,000 people attended a candlelight march in memory of Kennedy and in Rome, Pope Paul VI expressed his sorrow to an invited American television crew. In Britain, flags flew at half-mast and the House of Commons was adjourned.⁵⁶ The funeral, designed by Jackie to mimic that of Abraham Lincoln, was televised and broadcast worldwide. It showed Kennedy's young son saluting his father's cortege, the procession of family and politicians from around the world marching behind the coffin, and eventually the burial site, with an eternal flame, suggesting his legacy would never die.⁵⁷

But it was the shock of his death and the trauma felt by Americans that adds to the Kennedy memory. 79% of Americans equated the grief as the same as the 'loss of someone very close and dear'.⁵⁸ Transported into Kennedy's world by the power of television, the American audience felt a familial connection. In addition, the lack of explanation for his death left Americans with no rationale or explanation as to how this could have happened in their country. When the shock faded, a sense of loss developed, a loss of what they had but moreover, a loss of what might have been. His death represented more than just the loss of their president, as Kennedy had come to represent more than just his politics. Kennedy's portrayal as the young hero who had grown through adversity, was a metaphor for a young nation that was coming into its own during the twentieth century. He had represented the best of themselves, of their hopes for the future and suddenly, he was

⁵⁴ Live coverage of the funeral was provided to 23 European countries. *Alice L. George, The Assassination of John F. Kennedy: Political Trauma and American Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2013).p.23.

⁵⁵ 'There Was the Sound ... Eulogy Delivered at the Bier of John Fitzgerald Kennedy in Rotunda of the Capitol by the Honorable Mike Mansfield, Senator from Montana, November 24, 1963. McKeesport, Pa., Wivagg Printing Company [1963].', Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA
<<https://www.loc.gov/item/rbpe.16204500/>> [accessed 10 December 2021].

⁵⁶ George.pp.94 – 96.

⁵⁷ DANNOTCH'S NEWSVIDEOS, NBC News Coverage of President Kennedy's State Funeral-11-25-1963, 2019
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X18-2BPM1j8> [accessed 18 November 2021].

⁵⁸ The majority of respondents in a survey who could recall feeling the same shock at a death, likened it to the death of a relative. Paul B. Sheatsley and Jacob J. Feldman, 'The Assassination of President Kennedy: A Preliminary Report on Public Reactions and Behavior', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 28.2 (1964), 189
<<https://doi.org/10.1086/267237>>.p.6.

gone. Americans were left with a sense of uncertainty, and events over the ensuing decade would, by comparison, make the Kennedy years appear even more a halcyon moment in time. Oliver Stone sums this up saying, 'Kennedy to me, was like the Godfather of my generation. And his murder marked the end of a dream, the end of a concept of an idealism that I associate with my youth,'.⁵⁹ Stone's subsequent film, *JFK* (1991), offers the subjunctive notion, felt by many Americans, that America would have been greater had he lived. In retrospect, even the briefness of his presidency enhances the emotive power Kennedy still has for the nation.

The Kennedy years were quite unique, and his legacy has since been carefully managed. In the aftermath of his death, the Kennedy family sought to protect his memory, helping those authors who wrote kindly of the president, but blocking publication of any material considered to be too revelatory. Paul B. Fay, a naval friend of Kennedy, made one too many revelations in his book, *The Pleasure of his Company* (1966), consequently he was excluded from the family circle. William Manchester, commissioned by the family to write *Death of a President* (1963) ended up with protracted legal battles with the Kennedy family before he could finally publish. Yet it was Jackie's post-assassination interview with Theodore White, published in *Life* magazine entitled, *For President Kennedy: An Epilogue*, that introduced the concept of the Kennedy presidency being akin to Camelot. This association of Camelot and John Kennedy provided an almost tangible sense of the Kennedy reign, a time of an elegant society with a king and queen, a time associated with heroism, high ideals and promises of a better life.

Revisionist authors during the later 1960s and the 1970s, such as Paterson and Miroff, were critical of his approach to foreign policy. His rhetoric and handling of the Bay of Pigs is blamed for the Cuban missile crisis, and he is accused of humiliating Khrushchev. Such revisionist theory could suggest an overturning of the popularity of Kennedy, but his public polls remain high. If revisionism did not impact on the public perception of Kennedy to any great extent, the ensuing revelatory literature of the 1970s onwards did strike home, but again the impact was not as expected. Revelations by Judith Campbell-Exner of her affair with Kennedy whilst simultaneously seeing a mafia boss, opened the door to critiques of the Kennedy character. Garry Wills argued that the family were trapped by their focus on

⁵⁹ Mark White, (*A Cultural History*), p.120.

family, sex, charisma and power, and Thomas Reeves was critical of Kennedy's character and personal life. However, the lasting impact on the Kennedy image is minimal, time has passed, and the culture has changed. The Kennedy image has survived to see more balanced literature emerge, such as Dallek's. While a more balanced approach could have diminished Kennedy's standing by making him appear less heroic, his popularity and legacy remain intact. The preponderance of literature focussing on assassination conspiracy theories, together with documentaries and films such as Stone's '*JFK*', suggests that Kennedy appears to be defined as much by his death as by his life. Indeed, his life is celebrated in the plethora of public memorials such as Kennedy statues, buildings and streets named 'Kennedy', the JFK Memorial Library and Kennedy museums. Yet it is the continuing controversy over his death that regularly reignites the public's memories of Kennedy and along with it, associations of that era.⁶⁰

John Kennedy's image had been created and managed to reflect everything the 1950s family-centric electorate aspired to, and he effectively combined the skills of political marketing with his unique persona to provide a new style of presidency for the early 1960s. The Kennedy White House was presented as a haven of culture not seen before, and adding to the perception of Kennedy as someone who represented something new and different. As a politician his concept of a New Frontier inspired a nation fearful of the Cold War and those looking for something beyond the consumer culture of the 1950s. A pragmatist, facing a difficult Congress he fought for what could be achieved at home. His expertise in foreign policy was tested, particularly in Berlin and Cuba, and while his approval rating survived the disaster of the Bay of Pigs, his handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis was to become the most memorable and crucial moment of his presidency. His handling of the event that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war, earned him plaudits from around the world. Portrayed as the hero, critics deny that Kennedy was a serious and effective politician with a developing statesmanship, but this would undermine the evidence and underestimate his political contribution. Yet that contribution is inextricably linked to an image and style that created a new type of presidency, and which fascinated not only America, but the rest of

⁶⁰ Chris Kirk, Emma Goss, and Nicholas Duchesne, 'There Are 400 Streets, Parks, and Schools Named After JFK. Here's a Map.', *Slate Magazine*, 2013
<http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/slate_labs/2013/11/kennedy_street_school_airport_and_more_memorials_to_john_f_kennedy_mapped.html> [accessed 24 May 2022].

the world. Kennedy's approach to politics was undoubtedly built upon past experiences, but his style provided energy and hope for the 1960s, and he came to represent more than just the president. For many he represented Americans at their best, and his assassination killed not only a president, a husband, and a father, but also the dream of what they could be. His time in the White House was branded as Camelot, an idealistic moment in time which would be made more memorable by being bookended by the indulgences of the 1950s and the turmoil of the 1960s.

CHAPTER 3: DECADE OF DISILLUSIONMENT ¹

The post-Kennedy decade of culture change and war.

The era referred to as the 1960s can be extended beyond calendar dates to conjure a period that began with the election of Kennedy in 1960 and ended with Nixon in 1974. This long view of the 1960s, argues Bernard von Bothmer, enabled the period to be split into a 'good 1960s', and a 'bad 1960s'.² The 'good 1960s' includes the Kennedy years, a time of inspiration, peace corps and the New Frontier. It extends to cover the early Johnson years, a time when Kennedy's memory helped deliver a legislative programme, a time for civil rights bills and plans for a Great Society. The 'bad 1960s' are the later Johnson years and the Nixon era, a time of escalation in Vietnam, riots in the cities, social and cultural change, and the impact of Watergate. It is acknowledged that not all events match these simplistic definitions of the period. Referring to the Kennedy years as 'good' glosses over crises in Berlin and Cuba, and civil rights demonstrations. Equally, the 'bad 1960s' assumes the counterculture movement was not a positive expression of social change and fails to allow for Nixon's successful foreign policy initiatives with Russia and China. Rather than reflect the events, the definitions better reflect how Americans feel about the period. It is generally accepted that the Kennedy years are regarded as a time of hope and self-belief for Americans, which Alan Brinkley describes as, 'a time when the nation's capacities looked limitless, when its future seemed unbounded, when Americans believed that they could solve hard problems and accomplish bold deeds'.³ Indeed Kennedy, the inspirational and heroic leader gave cause for Americans to believe in themselves, and in the aftermath of his death, Johnson made good use of the Kennedy memory to help deliver legislation. Equally the later Johnson and the Nixon years are regarded as a time when Americans were left disillusioned and confused as to what had happened to their country. This chapter makes use of these broad definitions to show how this post-Kennedy decade of disillusionment, with its cultural changes and social unrest, not only provides a distinct contrast to the

¹ Title is taken from the book by Jim F Heath, *Decade of Disillusionment: The Kennedy-Johnson Years* (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1976).

² Bernard von Bothmer, "'The Sixties': Defining an Era', in *Framing the Sixties, The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), pp. 11–27 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vk9gz.5>> [accessed 13 January 2022].

³ Alan Brinkley, 'The Legacy of John F. Kennedy', *The Atlantic*, 2013 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/08/the-legacy-of-john-f-kennedy/309499/>> [accessed 25 May 2022].

1950s, but also helps frame the Kennedy presidency as a high point of liberal hope and a psychological pinnacle of American self-belief.

'You're no Jack Kennedy' ⁴

President Johnson's struggle to step out of the Kennedy shadow.

Vice-president Johnson did not enjoy the usual inauguration ceremony outside the U.S. Capitol in front of crowds of Americans. Instead, he was inaugurated as the 36th president of the United States onboard Air Force One, whilst still in Dallas. Immediate security issues notwithstanding, it was perhaps appropriate for a nation that was in shock. While it ensured the process of government was continuing, it also meant that nobody openly celebrated the transition of power to Johnson. From the beginning of his presidency, Johnson was made to feel the usurper.

At 55 years old, Lyndon Baines Johnson was an ambitious, successful, and skilful politician, but the antithesis of Kennedy in looks, style and personality. For a nation used to the Kennedy persona, Johnson was a different proposition. Born in Texas, he overcame his poor background to become a teacher before entering politics as a congressional aide, and then became a congressman in 1937. Biographer Doris Kearns says that Johnson tended to look to father figures as mentors, playing the helper until he could learn the role, and his role as vice-president put him in a similar learning position. His elevation to president suddenly positioned him up front and centre, but Johnson lacked the Kennedy rhetoric the nation had become used to.⁵ Johnson's style was to influence on a one-to-one basis, and while happy to do others favours, he fully expected payback. As William Fulbright describes, he held 'a reservoir of obligations'.⁶ Politically successful, yet always aware of his background, the Johnson psyche is summed up by Robert McNamara who noted, 'In a sense he had an inferiority complex, I think, in the face of the Kennedys' easy social graces.'⁷

⁴ 'You're no Jack Kennedy' was a remark made in the 1988 vice-presidential debate by Democratic candidate Senator Lloyd Bentsen to Republican candidate Dan Quayle. The phrase has since been used to deflate anyone who thinks too highly of themselves.

⁵ Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (London: Deutsch, 1976).p.161.

⁶ J. William Fulbright recorded interview by Pat Holt, April 11, 1964, (p.97), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

⁷ Transcript, Robert S. McNamara Oral History Interview I, 1/8/75, by Walt W. Rostow, Internet Copy, LBJ Library. P.8. [Accessed 21st July 2021]

The inevitable comparisons between the two presidents, together with his sense of inferiority, influenced Johnson's behaviour in the early days of his presidency. Fully aware of the goodwill felt towards Kennedy, he tried to emulate his appeal. Johnson mimicked Kennedy's style of dress and employed attractive personal secretaries to suggest a sex appeal that for Kennedy, had been intrinsic, but for Johnson, was not. The folksy images of Johnson at home on the ranch could not displace the rocking chair image of Kennedy relaxing in a cultured White House. Even Johnson's Texan drawl was considered ignorant compared to Kennedy's New England accent. Johnson's bluff approach belied a quick political mind, but his complex personality struggled to put aside his antipathy towards the Kennedy east coast intellectual elite he inherited. In attempting to persuade them to stay on however, he acknowledged that he wasn't as smart as Kennedy, saying, 'I just want to say that I need you far more than John Kennedy ever needed you'.⁸ Kearns states that Johnson felt that if his policies were approved by these men, he would not seem incompetent.⁹ Competent maybe, but as Paul Henggeler argues, while Johnson was a strong politician, it was the style and appeal of Kennedy that people missed.¹⁰

Johnson leveraged the nation's grief to his advantage when announcing, 'First, no memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the Civil Rights bill for which he fought so long'.¹¹ Catching the moment to get bills passed also gave him a successful legislative record to use in the upcoming 1964 presidential campaign. Johnson pushed through a legislative agenda that included the 1964 Civil Rights bill, he also took up Kennedy's initiative regarding the poor, introducing the phrase 'a war on poverty', in his State of the Union Address in January 1964.¹² In addition he developed a community action programme, providing training for those left out of the job market but which also addressed the educational, health and medical problems that kept people in poverty. The Economic Opportunity Act provided \$1billion of funding for this programme and in early 1964 Congress passed the Kennedy's planned tax cut which stimulated consumer spending, boosting GNP, employment and

⁸ Robert A. Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* (London: The Bodley Head, 2012).p. 411

⁹ Kearns, p.256

¹⁰ Paul R. Henggeler, *In His Steps: Lyndon Johnson and the Kennedy Mystique* (Chicago: I.R. Dee, 1991). p.4.

¹¹ Lyndon Baines Johnson, November 27, 1963: Address to Joint Session of Congress, UVA Miller Center, Presidential Speeches.

¹² Lyndon Baines Johnson, January 8, 1964: State of the Union, UVA Miller Centre, Presidential Speeches [accessed 2/8/22]

subsequently government revenue. Between 1961 and 1968, over 3 million American families moved above the poverty line.¹³ Caro argues that these liberalist successes were due to Johnson's political skills, and that this immediate transition period from November 1963 to January 1964, brought out 'the finest that was in him'.¹⁴ Yet so soon after Kennedy's death, the passing of such bills cannot be attributed solely to Johnson.

Johnson also inherited Kennedy's policy regarding America's involvement in Vietnam, and as early as 26th November 1963 he confirmed the United States commitment in NSAM 273.¹⁵ Ann Moya Ball argues that Johnson's decision to continue American commitment to Vietnam was framed by Kennedy's death.¹⁶ On inheriting the same advisory team, Ball suggests that Johnson wanted to stick with Kennedy's policies, perhaps due to his need to be accepted by the Kennedy aides. Ball also suggests that continued commitment in Vietnam was a way of maintaining national prestige following the assassination. While the Johnson persona would not allow himself to be considered soft on communism, nor seem as less smart than Kennedy, Ball's suggestion that the decision was a consequence of a lingering Kennedy phantom neglects to consider the validity of Vietnam policy decisions. In 1964 however, the war in Vietnam was not the problem it was to become.

In the run-up to the 1964 Presidential election, Johnson's selection of Hubert Humphrey as his running mate instead of the strongly promoted Robert Kennedy, demonstrated the beginning of his move out from Kennedy's shadow. This was in part to preserve his own self-esteem, as he stated, 'With Bobby on the ticket, I'd never know if I could be elected on my own'.¹⁷ The continuing strength of feeling towards Kennedy was apparent at the Democratic National Convention in 1964, when on the last day, Robert Kennedy presented a short film about his brother, and received a 22-minute standing ovation from the delegates.¹⁸ Even without Robert Kennedy on the ticket, for a nation still

¹³ Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1960 to 2020 Annual Social and Economic Supplements (CPS ASEC). Table 13. Number of Families Below the Poverty Level and Poverty Rate: 1959 to 2019. [accessed 15/8/22]

¹⁴ Caro, p.603.

¹⁵ Federation of American Scientists, Intelligence Resource Program, National Security Action Memorandums, Johnson Administration, 1963-69, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsam-lbj/nsam-273.htm> [accessed 10/8/22]

¹⁶ Ball, Moya Ann. 'The Phantom of the Oval Office: The John F. Kennedy Assassination's Symbolic Impact on Lyndon B. Johnson, His Key Advisers, and the Vietnam Decision-Making Process.' *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1994, pp. 105–119. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/27551197. Accessed 7 June 2021.

¹⁷ Tye, p.302. The well-known feud between Robert Kennedy and Johnson also made the alliance unlikely.

¹⁸ 'Robert Kennedy 1964 Convention Speech | C-SPAN.Org' <<https://www.c-span.org/video/?3418-2/robert-kennedy-1964-convention-speech>> [accessed 17 May 2022].

coming to terms with his death, Kennedy's influence and the level of goodwill generated towards his successor, undoubtedly contributed to Johnson's election win. Johnson was also fortunate with the Republican choice of nominee, Senator Barry Goldwater. His right-wing policies of non-intervention in civil rights, social policy, and individual freedom, outlined in his book *The Conscience of a Conservative* (1960), helped place Johnson as a centrist. Yet, even when the Democrats political television advert, 'Daisy', positioned the right-wing Goldwater as pro-nuclear war, it also prompted recollections of how Kennedy had saved the world from such a war.¹⁹

Whether Johnson would have won without the Kennedy effect and the far-right positioning of Goldwater is debatable, but his landslide victory gave him a clear mandate to pursue his own policies, which he introduced in a speech to the Graduating class of the University of Michigan in 1964:

We have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society but upward to the Great Society where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community...it is a place where men are more concerned with the quality of their goals than the quantity of their goods.²⁰

The concept of a Great Society was built more on the foundations of Roosevelt's New Deal than a continuation of Kennedy's New Frontier. While the New Frontier was a call to action for Americans, Johnson's Great Society, which focussed on a domestic qualitative liberalism, was an example of 'big government' that could be more easily attacked by conservatives. However, it was a concept with which Johnson could be associated in his own right, and his early successful legislative programme helps place the early Johnson years as part of the good 1960s.²¹

¹⁹ The Daisy advert showed a child counting flower petals which then morphed into a countdown of a bomb detonation. Schwartz, Tony, and Monique Luiz. Peace, little girl: Daisy political spot. 1964. Video. Retrieved from the library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/mbrs01185386/. The advert was shown officially only once but became the subject of talk shows.

²⁰ Lyndon Baines Johnson, Transcript of Presidential speech, May 22, 1964: Remarks at the University of Michigan, UVA Miller Center, Presidential Speeches.

²¹ Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, 3rd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).p.147. Congress passed his legislation for Medicare and Medicaid programmes, an Education Act, a new department for Transportation Highways, Highway Safety and Traffic Safety Acts and an Immigration Act.

Sea change

Events turn against President Johnson.

Just as Johnson was stepping out from Kennedy's shadow, it seems the tide of events turned against him. The consumer culture of the 1950s had provided America with the image of a successful nation that was portrayed to the world. Yet social reforms were needed, and the conformity engendered by the suburban culture proved a catalyst for cultural change. These emerging cultural changes did not impact on Kennedy's presidency to the extent that they affected Johnson. Consequently, the Kennedy presidency is more readily associated with the foreign crises he navigated, and these help to maintain his memory as a modern hero and inspirational leader. The issue of civil rights provides an example.

Although regarded as the hero in securing Martin Luther King Jr.'s release from jail, Kennedy's reluctance to act confirms that he still considered civil rights a political rather than a moral issue. The violence meted out to the Freedom Riders forced him to act, but rather than pursue legislation that might tie up his policy agenda, he issued *Executive Orders 10925 and 11063*.²² It was only in June 1963, months before his death, that he called on Americans to recognize the cause as a moral issue.²³ It was Johnson who secured both the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Bill in 1965, but the frustration still felt by black Americans who faced continuing discrimination in housing and jobs, resulted in riots. These began in 1964 in New York, with worse to follow in Watts, Los Angeles, in August 1965, followed by three further summers of race riots in cities across the United States. In addition, the controversial *Moynihan Report* (1965) angered the black community when it suggested that problems within black society went deeper than racism, blaming family instability and a reliance on welfare. The irony is that it was Johnson who had actively supported civil rights and pushed through two ground-breaking bills, but who then experienced the consequences of the shift from the non-violent protests of King to the

²² Civil rights activists in the south who rode the interstate buses to protest segregation and met with violence are known as Freedom Riders.

These Executive orders ensured equality of employment and banned segregation in federally funded housing.

²³ 'Address to the American People on Civil Rights - John F. Kennedy - Civil Rights Movement'

<<https://civilrights.jfklibrary.org/media-assets/address-to-the-american-people.html#The-Address>> [accessed 18 March 2022].

more radical Black Power movement. The riots and violence that ensued generated a backlash as Republicans blamed Democratic liberalism for the breakdown of law and order and a growing welfare dependence. Meanwhile Kennedy, who acted only latterly in his presidency after civil rights protests, is the president associated with the inspirational high point of the civil rights movement when Martin Luther King Jr. announced, 'I have a dream'²⁴ at the March on Washington in August 1963. It is Kennedy who is associated with defending civil rights in the mind's eye of the black community. It is Kennedy, not Johnson, who was pictured as the hero on African American walls.²⁵

The rise of the youth culture provides another example. Rock and roll music had helped channel youth rebellion of the 1950s, and then came Kennedy, who inspired the young to engage in politics. The emerging New Left and the student movement of the 1960s not only demonstrated increased student engagement in politics, but went on to drive cultural changes that would challenge the abiding cultural and political thinking of the United States. As Doug Rossinow states, 'To conservative Americans in that era, and in the popular memories of 'the sixties', cultural and political rebellion were and are indissolubly linked'.²⁶ If Kennedy inspired this cultural change, the full impact would be felt by Johnson. As part of the New Left, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), who advocated increased democratic participation, civil rights, and the need for university reform, embraced the anti-war movement. The movement which began in 1964, impacted on the Johnson and Nixon presidencies as campus demonstrations gradually spread across the United States. The extent to which the anti-war movement influenced foreign policy in Vietnam is undetermined, but television coverage of student demonstrations undoubtedly put pressure on the presidency and added to a growing public concern over law and order.

The emerging hippie-movement of the 1960s, which prioritised human experience over material goods, wanted to drop-out of the system.²⁷ Perhaps not the political engagement Kennedy had envisaged, but the hippie movement left a lasting impact on

²⁴ N, P, and R, 'Read Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" Speech in Its Entirety', NPR, 14 January 2022, section Race <<https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>> [accessed 13 May 2022].

²⁵ Brown, p.25.

²⁶ Doug Rossinow; 'The New Left in the Counterculture: Hypotheses and Evidence'. *Radical History Review* 1 January 1997; 1997 (67): 79–120. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-1997-67-79>

²⁷ Norman Mailer used the word hipster in his book *The White Negro* (United States: City Lights, 1957) p.50. By 1965, hipsters had become "hippies."

1960s culture that contributed to a sense of the over-turning of American values of the 1950s. The Summer of Love in 1967 saw thousands of hippies descend on the Haight-Ashbury area of San Francisco to celebrate free love, experiment with drugs and as Scott McKenzie sang, 'There's a whole generation with a new explanation'.²⁸ What the hippie movement generated was a sense of more personal freedom and particularly the freedom of expression against society.²⁹ Like the anti-war movement of the SDS, this cultural shift made people question what had previously been accepted, parental authority, what universities taught, and more importantly, what the government said. How Kennedy would have harnessed the emerging youth rebellion is unknown, but Johnson did not have the same appeal, representing a return to more old-school politics than the youthful idealism of Kennedy.

This cultural atmosphere of more personal freedom and questioning of previously accepted social mores suited the emerging feminist movement of the 1960s which also challenged traditional American society. Housewives unhappy with the social conformity of the suburbs informed Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which questioned a culture where women were treated as sex objects or second-class citizens. Although representative of a mostly white middle-class section of society, it proved a catalyst for action, and the Civil Rights bill of 1964 helped by legislating against discrimination based on sex.³⁰ The National Organisation for Women (NOW), created in 1966, stated its aim to 'take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society...'.³¹ This challenged the zeitgeist of the 1950s when Jackie Kennedy, although not a typical

²⁸ Lyrics from Scott McKenzie song, 'San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Some Flowers in Your Hair)', released 1967. <https://www.songfacts.com/lyrics/scott-mckenzie/san-francisco-be-sure-to-wear-flowers-in-your-hair> [accessed 15/8/22]

²⁹ *The Transatlantic Sixties: Europe and the United States in the Counterculture Decade*
Chapter Title: The Summer of Love and Protest: Transatlantic Counterculture in the 1960s Chapter Author(s): Russell Duncan Book Editor(s): Grzegorz Kosc, Clara Juncker, Sharon Monteith and Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson
Published by: Transcript Verlag Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1wxt2b.9>

³⁰ Transcript of Civil Rights Act 1964, www.ourdocuments.gov
<https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=97&page=transcript> [accessed 18/9/21].
The 1964 Civil Rights bill, title VII, not only forbade discrimination in employment based on race, religion, national origin, but also sex.

³¹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963), pp. 11- 27.
Initially Friedan's work attracted mainly middle-class women, as working-class women were already working or had children and could not afford the childcare required to enable them to go out to work, but *The Feminine Mystique* was a seminal work that raised expectations.
National Organization of Women, 'Statement of Purpose: The National Organization for Women's 1966 Statement of Purpose', written by Betty Friedan. <https://now.org/about/history/statement-of-purpose/> [accessed 11/8/22]

housewife, had epitomised the virtues of a wife who supported her husband and his career. Even her redesign of the White House interior was viewed as contribution to her husband's presidency, rather than her having an independent career of her own. The feminist challenge to well-established social roles naturally had its opponents, with attorney and Conservative Phyllis Shaffley representing many who felt uncomfortable with such a cultural shift, but the feminist movement was unstoppable.³² Not only had more women entered the workforce, but they had also become more politicised, and the feminist movement and the cultural shift it represented, contributed to the growing feeling of uncertainty in the country.³³

It had been only a few years earlier that Kennedy had inspired the nation with hope for change and a certainty of purpose. The hybrid appeal of Kennedy, who represented both traditional values but also a modernity and hope for the future, was missing in the melee of cultural changes that consumed the Johnson presidency. Those who believed in the American Dream and a work ethic felt that traditional American values were changing too fast, and not always for the better. The perception was that nobody was in control of the changes taking place. This shift in mood helps explain the perception of a 'good' and a 'bad' 1960s, and how it reflects on the Kennedy presidency.

For all the cultural challenges that unsettled post-Kennedy America, it was the Vietnam war that became the defining issue of the Johnson presidency. Kennedy had inherited Eisenhower's commitment to preserve an independent South Vietnam from the communist North Vietnamese, and he viewed Vietnam in Cold War terms, seeing this as an opportunity to stand firm against the spread of communism. At the time of Kennedy's assassination there were over 16,000 American personnel in Vietnam, but the war was not yet a priority for the news channels and the American public. This low public profile of the war in the early 1960s, together with post-hoc suggestions that Kennedy would have withdrawn from Vietnam if re-elected in 1964, have helped to make Vietnam Johnson's war rather than Kennedy's, in popular memory.³⁴

³² Phyllis Shaffley fought against feminism, arguing that the NOW organisation put an emphasis on women being in the work force and that many women were happy staying at home and being a housewife.

³³ 'Working Women and Political Participation, 1952-1972' Author(s): Kristi Andersen, Source: *American Journal of Political Science*, Aug. 1975, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Aug. 1975), p.443. Published by: Midwest Political Science Association Stable URL: [Accessed 25th Aug 2021]

³⁴ 'National Security Action Memoranda [NSAM]: NSAM 263, South Vietnam | JFK Library' <<https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKNSF/342/JFKNSF-342-007>> [accessed 16 August 2022].

Johnson's initial commitment to the war was reinforced when The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution gave him authority to 'take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression'.³⁵ Fully committed to the war, Johnson felt that if he 'let the Communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as a coward and my nation would be seen as an appeaser', not something viewed favourably since the events in Europe in the 1930s.³⁶ Yet in the end Johnson was not seen as a coward, but as a president lacking credibility. He deceived Congress over the Gulf of Tonkin attack, failing to disclose that the North Vietnamese attack had taken place during a South Vietnamese raid.³⁷ In the 1964 campaign, he portrayed himself as the peace candidate, all the while refusing to abandon South Vietnam. He then declared he would not bomb North Vietnam or send American boys to fight the war, both of which he did after the election.³⁸ By July 1965 he increased troops deployment from 75,000 to 125,000 while saying this did not 'imply any change in policy whatever'.³⁹ The American public had mostly supported the war in Korea, and the nation considered Kennedy a hero in standing up to Khrushchev over Cuba, but the war in Vietnam split opinion. The anti-war movement was overwhelmingly a youth movement, driven as much by anger towards the draft as by a counterculture rebellion, but polls showed there remained a significant although declining number of Americans who felt the war was not a mistake.⁴⁰ By 1966 however the war dominated the news, public support was beginning to falter, and the anti-war movement was strengthening. As reports from journalists in Vietnam suggested that the war was not going as well as government information would have them believe, evidence shows how Johnson's approval rating declined from a high of 84% in 1964 to 60% in 1966 and would

³⁵ 'Tonkin Gulf Resolution (1964)', National Archives, 2021 <<https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/tonkin-gulf-resolution>> [accessed 24 March 2022].

³⁶ Kearns, p.252

³⁷ A study entitled 'History of U.S. Decision-making Process on Vietnam Policy' became known as the Pentagon Papers. The New York Times later reported that the Pentagon Papers revealed how the Johnson administration lied to the public and to congress over the Vietnam war.

Apple, R. W. (June 23, 1996). '25 Years Later; Lessons from the Pentagon Papers'. The New York Times. [Accessed 27/5/22].

³⁸ C Vescovi, LBJ 'American Boys...', 2014 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1qj6MVGuX8E>> [accessed 27 May 2022].

³⁹ Paul L. Levine and Charalampos Papanastasiou, *America since 1945: The American Moment*, 2. ed (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).p.112.

⁴⁰ 'Digital History'

<https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/vietnam/vietnam_pubopinion.cfm> [accessed 26 March 2022].

continue to decline.⁴¹ American presidential credibility became another Vietnam casualty in the post-Kennedy decade.

1968

The year events came to a head.

If the challenges of the cultural changes and the war had not already disillusioned the American public, then events in 1968 would confirm that everything seemed to have gone wrong since Kennedy had died. On January 31st the Tet offensive launched by the North Vietnamese did not end the war, but it did end America's belief that they were winning the war. Walter Cronkite announced on CBS Evening News that, 'the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy and did the best they could.'⁴² Johnson had not lost the war, but he had lost credibility as president and his approval rating fell below 40%.⁴³ The war split public opinion, caused demonstrations and violence on the streets, and generated criticism and distrust of the government. It diverted Johnson's time and energy from his Great Society, as his 'War on poverty' became downgraded to a 'poverty program', and by his final State of the Union address, the Great Society was no longer the priority, Vietnam was. Even though the economy saw the percentage of families below the poverty level begin to fall from 13.9% in 1965 to 8.8% by 1973, Johnson was still held to account as the measures taken to address poverty were being blamed for new problems of increased illegitimacy and crime.⁴⁴ The political right considered those in receipt of welfare to have a sense of entitlement, and 'welfare' became a pejorative term as those families headed solely by females, now referred to as 'welfare queens', provided a new target for white conservative Americans.

When Senator Eugene McCarthy received 42% of the vote in the New Hampshire primary, the possibility that an anti-war Democrat could win the 1968 presidential

⁴¹ Gallup Inc, 'Presidential Approval Ratings -- Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends'.

⁴² 10 Tampa Bay, Walter Cronkite Gave First Op-Ed on Vietnam War 51 Years Ago, 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCdXVWsTpSM>> [accessed 21 November 2021].

⁴³ Gallup Inc, 'Presidential Approval Ratings -- Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends'.

⁴⁴ Poverty rate, Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1960 to 2020 Annual Social and Economic Supplements (CPS ASEC). Table 13. Number of Families Below the Poverty Level and Poverty Rate: 1959 to 2019

nomination increased.⁴⁵ When Robert Kennedy then threw his hat in the ring, Johnson realised that, 'The thing I feared from the first day of my Presidency was actually coming true. Robert Kennedy had openly announced his intention to reclaim the throne in the memory of his brother.'⁴⁶ Robert Kennedy's anti-war position made him popular with the working class and ethnic minorities, who made up a large percentage of the Vietnam draft. His argument for restraint in arms build-up, the placement of an international force to replace US forces, and a halt in bombing to enable negotiations to take place, offered a real alternative to Johnson's approach. Furthermore, he was a reminder of the Kennedy era. Johnson's announcement on March 31st that, 'I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President,'⁴⁷ was unexpected. If the Kennedy threat proved the final straw for Johnson, then timing was not on his side as events would show.

On 4 April, Martin Luther King Jr. was shot by escaped convict James Earl Ray. Robert Kennedy announced King's death to a crowd of supporters, and in empathising reminded the crowd that his brother was also killed by a white man.⁴⁸ In aligning himself with the feelings of African Americans, a Kennedy once again made political capital out of the race issue. He beat McCarthy in both the Indiana and Nebraska primaries and then in California, his appeal to the black and Mexican American voters gave him an important victory. Winning 46% of the votes compared to 42% for McCarthy, the Californian primary, with 174 delegate votes, was a crucial indicator of his potential to win the democratic nomination, although he acknowledged the nomination was not yet sewn up.⁴⁹ In his speech afterwards could be heard echoes of his brother's rhetorical style as he announced, 'We are a great country, an unselfish country, and a compassionate country, I intend to make that my basis for running'.⁵⁰ Johnson's fears of a Kennedy resurgence appeared to be coming true, but on

⁴⁵ Johnson won the primary with 48% of the vote but the level of support for McCarthy, who was almost unknown in New Hampshire before the primary, came as a surprise to Johnson. The McCarthy vote was driven by anti-war supporters and those dissatisfied with the Johnson administration.

⁴⁶ Kearns, p.343.

⁴⁷ Lyndon Baines Johnson, Transcript of Presidential Speech, March 31, 1968: Remarks on Decision not to seek re-election. UVA Miller Center, Presidential Speeches

⁴⁸ Robert F. Kennedy, Statement on Assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Indianapolis, Indiana, April 4th, 1968, Papers of Robert F. Kennedy. Senate Papers. Speeches and Press Releases 1965-1968, Box 4, "4/1/68 - 4/10/68." John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

⁴⁹ Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 2007).p.388.

⁵⁰ June 5, 1968: Robert F. Kennedy's last speech <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/video/June-1968-robert-kennedys-speech-55585335>

exiting the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, Robert was shot three times by Sirhan Sirhan, a Jordanian whose hatred for him was based on Robert's support of Israel during the Six Day War.⁵¹ Robert Kennedy's bid for the presidency did not only impact on Johnson, it raised the hopes of those seeking a renewal of what Kennedy had represented. Robert Kennedy's death effectively refuelled the grief that the nation had felt since 1963. The Kennedy name was once again associated with the loss of what might have been, and furthermore, it highlighted the dissatisfaction with the current administration.

The 1968 Democratic presidential nomination was split between McCarthy and Humphrey, reflecting the pro and anti-war feelings within the party. This split, together with the issue of reducing the voting age to 18, provided the backdrop to a Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Disagreements and bad tempers within the convention hall were matched by Mayor Daley's heavy-handed use of police force and the National Guard outside. In confronting a demonstration organised by the Youth International Party (Yippies) and other anti-war groups, Daley vowed that he 'would never permit a lawless, violent group of terrorists to menace the lives of millions of people'.⁵² The resulting television coverage of the use of tear gas and clubs on demonstrators did little for the Democratic party, instead it emphasised the issue of increasing lawlessness. Humbert Humphrey won the nomination, but the divisions within the party and the events in Chicago held the door open for the 1968 election of Republican nominee, Richard Nixon, who commented, 'It seemed as if the Democrat's convention was confirming every indictment of their leadership that I had made in my campaign speeches.'⁵³ The turmoil at the convention after Robert Kennedy's assassination was a microcosm of the 1960s after Kennedy's death in Dallas.

The Conservative resurgence

The backlash against the turmoil of the sixties.

Post-Kennedy, a culture had developed of increased personal rights, civil unrest, and the increased questioning of governmental authority. Conservatives who believed in stable institutions, individual self-reliance and a strong moral sense, believed that the liberalism of

⁵¹ Inside Edition, Sirhan Sirhan Reveals Why He Killed Bobby Kennedy in 1989 Interview, 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ma_RpEcm7NY> [accessed 26 March 2022].

⁵² Isserman & Kazin, p.245.

⁵³ Nixon. (1990) p.317.

the 1960s had contributed to an America in turmoil. James Reston of the *New York Times* commented that, 'The main crisis is not Vietnam itself, or in the cities, but in the feeling that the political system for dealing with these things has broken down'.⁵⁴ Johnson's loss of credibility over Vietnam, combined with a changing culture that challenged middle-American values, left many seeking the sense of leadership that Kennedy had once provided.

Republican nominee Richard Nixon ran for the presidency on the issue of law and order. This resonated with the 'silent majority', the ordinary citizens whom Nixon had identified as those who had had enough of civil and social upheaval. Nixon's slogan, 'Bring us together again', not only aimed to unite Americans, but also reminded them of his association with the calmer Eisenhower years. In this way Nixon elicited a nostalgia for the simpler times of the 1950s. A time when America was deemed an economic success, a time before cultural changes began to emerge and alter society, and a time before the assassination of Kennedy shocked the nation and made people question what was happening in their own country. Nixon had stated that the greatest tribute to Kennedy would be to 'reduce the hatred that drives men to such terrible deeds'.⁵⁵ Now he offered himself as a harbinger of peace, furthermore, he implied that he had a secret plan to end the war in Vietnam. His appeal to a confused and war-weary nation is easy to understand, and Nixon seemingly won the presidential race easily, with 301 electoral college votes to Humphrey's 191, but the popular vote was much closer, reflecting a nation still split over Vietnam.⁵⁶

Nixon was a difficult and complex personality who liked to keep things to himself. Prone to a paranoia about the press, Ivy Leaguers, and the north-east establishment, he had few friends outside of government and few confidantes within. Like Kennedy, he could play the statesman on the big stage, but lacking Kennedy's easy charm, he struggled to find the usual bonhomie of politicians, preferring to spend time on his own. Intelligent and hard-working, he 'had no patience with the mindless rioters and professional malcontents',⁵⁷ a

⁵⁴ William Edward Leuchtenburg, *A Troubled Feast: American Society since 1945*, Updated ed (Boston: Little, Brown, 1983).

⁵⁵ Helmer Reenberg, November 23, 1963 - Former Vice President Richard M. Nixon's Statement on President Kennedy's Death, 2021 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l80Q4LhUz7s>> [accessed 8 August 2022].

⁵⁶ National Archives, Electoral College, 1968 Results, <https://www.archives.gov/electoral-college/1968>.

The popular vote gave Nixon 43.04% of the vote compared to 42.7% for Humphrey.

⁵⁷ Nixon, (1990) p.353.

man whose values were the antithesis of the 1960s counterculture. He did not promise a New Frontier or a Great Society, but he promised to bring openness and honesty to the White House, to end the war in Vietnam and unite the country. Such promises offered a calming presence after the upheaval of the Johnson years, if not the excitement and inspiration of the Kennedy years.

Nixon's presidency started well, associating himself with the successful Apollo 11 mission in 1969. Speaking to the astronauts while on the surface of the moon, he made 'the most historic telephone call ever made from the White House'.⁵⁸ Domestically Nixon inherited an economy that was beginning to slow, but this meant that students were beginning to look for jobs rather than for something to protest. Many black Americans returned south where Johnson's civil rights legislation had had the biggest impact, allowing some to take up roles in local politics. Consequently, the civil rights movement was, for now, quieter. Nixon also promised a review of the welfare system, replacing the Aid to Dependent Children programme that many believed generated large, single mothered families, with the Family Assistance Plan.⁵⁹ It must have seemed that the promised calm after the Johnson years had arrived. Furthermore, his foreign policy initiatives were successful. Nixon secured Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) with Russia and he became the first United States president to visit the Peoples Republic of China, opening diplomatic channels after 25 years. Nixon then played off the communist giants against each other to gain leverage for his main problem, Vietnam.

Nixon needed to continue the war until he could extract some semblance of victory but meanwhile, he had to convince an increasingly anti-war America that he was reducing United States involvement in Vietnam. This contradictory approach reveals much about Nixon. On announcing, 'In this administration, we are Vietnamizing the search for peace',⁶⁰ Nixon put the onus on the South Vietnamese for fighting its own battles, which gave him the opportunity to start troop withdrawals. Yet he then threatened Ho with 'measures of great consequence', nurturing a madman theory that suggested to the North Vietnamese that he

⁵⁸ CBS News, President Nixon Talks to Apollo 11 Astronauts on the Moon, 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLyJ9FHDO-c>> [accessed 3 July 2022].

⁵⁹ Family Assistance Plan – for each household receiving assistance, the head of the household had to work or register for job training.

⁶⁰ UVA, Miller Center, PRESIDENTIAL SPEECHES | RICHARD M. NIXON PRESIDENCY November 3, 1969: Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/november-3-1969-address-nation-war-vietnam> [accessed 26/10/21].

was capable of anything. At home, he appeared to be closing the war by bringing home some troops, but then expanded the war into Cambodia, ordering B52 bombers to attack North Vietnam's supply routes through the country. Nixon eventually secured a Vietnam peace deal in January 1973, but his approach had extended the war by four years, during which time another 20,000 American troops died. It would be hard to fully assess the impact the war had on America during the post-Kennedy decade. The war took the lives of over 58,000 American personnel, split the nation, destabilised the economy and lost the United States its international prestige, having failed to establish a viable independent South Vietnam. The war changed America, deepening distrust in executive judgement and honesty, and this was levelled at Johnson and Nixon, not Kennedy.

Watergate

How Nixon undermined the prestige of the presidency.

During the 1960s the changing culture had generated not only a society more questioning of authority, but also a media more investigative and revelatory than Kennedy had experienced. This change, together with Nixon's character, contributed to the events that led to Watergate and its aftermath.⁶¹ Coverage by The Washington Post of the Watergate break-in, together with the ensuing Congressional investigation, linked the burglars to the White House, and revealed the involvement of Senior White House staff. Nixon's obfuscation and denial of any knowledge or involvement in the attempted cover-up, only made his downfall harder. It is the lie that drained his presidency of all credibility. Nixon should be remembered for his successful foreign policy initiatives in Russia and China, yet it is Watergate with which he is immediately associated, and which revealed the true nature of the Nixon presidency. In 1974 Congress voted to impeach the president which pushed Nixon to resign. Nixon's paranoia that people were out to get him, especially the media, undermined his skills as a politician and rendered him incapable of determining when he had exceeded the law. Nixon believed that,

⁶¹ The event known as Watergate was a break-in at the DNC National Headquarters in the Watergate building on June 17th, 1972. Five burglars, part of a special investigations unit instigated by Nixon known as 'The Plumbers', had been ordered to bug the phones and steal documents to help boost Nixon's re-election chances in 1972.

a presidential act cannot be illegal, that there are times when a president must move beyond the law, and interpreting the Constitution is not the sole province of the court - presidents too can interpret the meaning of the Constitution.⁶²

The proposed impeachment of Nixon in 1974 was necessary to try to restore the public's trust in their system of government, a trust that had been challenged by Johnson and broken by Nixon. Before his election in 1968 Nixon had announced that 'the long dark night of America is about to end',⁶³ yet his administration made the public even more cynical of authority, more critical of the executive branch, widening the divide between Congress and the President. After Kennedy's death, America's faith in the presidency declined and the credibility gap changed American politics, as modern media increasingly held the executive to account.

This change in the prestige of the presidential office contributes to the perceptions of the 1960s as good or bad, referred to at the beginning of this chapter. Using the definitions of the 'good 1960s' as the Kennedy and early Johnson years, and the 'bad 1960s' as the later Johnson and Nixon years, proves useful in two ways. It shows how the post-Kennedy decade of turmoil, 'the bad 1960s' provided a distinct contrast to the 1950s, and it also helps frame the Kennedy presidency as a unique time of hope for America. We can see how such definitions are implied in President Bill Clinton's frequent use of a photo of himself and Kennedy to suggest that he also would embody the idealism of the early 1960s. President Ronald Reagan, who designated the later 1960s as bad, openly used this for his argument against the liberal welfare state. He also used Kennedy's tax cut which had been passed in 1964, as a good example of how to generate growth, and so promote his own tax cut.⁶⁴ President George H. Bush accused the Great Society of the later Johnson years of having done more harm than good, claiming also that his victory in the 1991 Gulf War had put an end to the 'Vietnam syndrome' that had emerged from the bad 1960s. Any invocation of the good or bad 1960s generates a comparison that reflects well on Kennedy.

⁶² Michael A. Genovese, *The Watergate Crisis*, Greenwood Press Guides to Historic Events of the Twentieth Century (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1999), p.70.

⁶³ 'Richard M. Nixon 1968 Presidential Nomination Acceptance Speech' <<http://www.4president.org/speeches/nixon1968acceptance.htm>> [accessed 14 July 2022].

⁶⁴ Their use of tax-cuts differed, however. Kennedy's tax cut was a demand-side cut, putting money in the hands of consumers, thus creating a govt deficit. The greater spending power would generate tax to cover the deficit. Reagan's tax cut was supply-side, putting money in hands of producers to help spur investment.

After the assassination of Kennedy, Johnson could not hope to compete with the psychological impact his predecessor had made on the nation. He did however represent a safe pair of hands, and was astute enough to capitalise on the aftermath of Kennedy's death. His early legislative success, combined with a wave of goodwill and an untimely right-wing opponent, gave him a landslide victory. The result gave Johnson his own mandate, allowing him to step out of the Kennedy shadow. The brief honeymoon period Johnson enjoyed saw a raft of legislation that promised a Great Society, but a war in Vietnam divided the country, and cultural changes that had begun during the Eisenhower years, and simmered in the hope of the Kennedy years, now flourished. The changes generated by feminism, the New Left, the hippie-movement, and a growing sense of rights entitlement, generated a society more willing to question the status quo, challenge authority and the credibility of the presidency. Only five years after his death, the hope of the Kennedy era had been transformed into anxiety and uncertainty. Commitment to the Vietnam war and the changing culture had rendered the United States barely recognisable from that of the 1950s and early 1960s. The resulting backlash facilitated a conservative resurgence that elected a president who is remembered more for his duplicity in the Watergate affair than for his foreign policy initiatives in Russia and China. The loss of presidential prestige brought about by Johnson and Nixon, serves to make the Kennedy years shine even brighter.

In retrospect, the Kennedy presidency could be viewed as the bridge between the 1950s and the 1960s, with his promise to address the issues of the Dwight D. Eisenhower years providing a sense of hope for the future. However, this cultural review shows how the Kennedy presidency eluded many of the issues of cultural turmoil sown in the 1950s, allowing Kennedy to be more readily associated with foreign crises that gave him hero status. It is the Johnson presidency that is seen as the era of civil riots, the rise of feminism, the Vietnam war, hippies, and the anti-war movement. It is Nixon who expanded the presidential credibility gap. Furthermore, the negative associations generated by the Johnson and Nixon years enhance how we remember Kennedy, broadening the range of associations with him, and reinforcing the retrospective positioning of the Kennedy era as part of the 'good 1960s'.

CONCLUSION

The disparity between the iconic status of John Fitzgerald Kennedy and historians view of his time in office can be attributed to more than the creation of an effective Kennedy image. To uncover the full range of associations that Kennedy holds for us, this exploration of the broader cultural context helps conjure up the atmosphere of the times to reveal how he came to represent more than a manufactured political image, why his tragic death had such an impact on America, and what associations he holds that extend beyond the events of his presidency. In so doing, this thesis reveals how American culture contributed to the creation of Kennedy the man and the politician, and how Kennedy himself influenced American culture and society.

The Kennedy biography has been well covered in the available literature, and provides an understanding of how his childhood ill-health, and the dynamic within the family, contributed to the developing Kennedy psyche. It is only within the context of pre-war America that we appreciate the status of the Kennedy family, and the unique opportunities Kennedy used to gain some understanding of a world outside of the United States. We see how his experience of Europe in the late 1930s ignited his interest in foreign affairs and influenced his belief in a nation maintaining its armaments in line with its commitments. As Americans rushed to enlist after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Kennedy's determination to play his part and the resulting events of the PT109 story reveal much about his character. We also see the value of his heroism in entering politics after the war. The exploration of the post-war American culture highlights how Kennedy and his political image were influenced by the late 1940s and 1950s, and how he leveraged these values and beliefs to appeal to his electorate.

A review of contemporary newsprint, literature, film, and television helps set the cultural scene experienced by Americans in the 1950s, and in which the Kennedy persona became a rising star. As we see this culture gradually change, revealing the emerging tensions within society, it helps explain how Kennedy came to represent more than just the traditional values. He became the symbol of a modern president with his style, youth, and good looks. We can not only appreciate how his resolute anti-communism resonated with America and its red-scare culture, but we can see how he represented change for those seeking social reforms. For the consumer society he was the ultimate salesman of the New

Frontier, spurring America on to face challenges that offered a fresh sense of hope after the 1950s. It is only in viewing Kennedy within the cultural complexity of 1950s America that we see the importance of the hybrid appeal he developed, representing both tradition and modernity. This insight contributes to our understanding of why the Kennedy presidency was so unique.

Against the backdrop of the 1950s we can appreciate how the Kennedy presidency, with its mix of youth, glamour, and culture, presented such a distinct contrast to those seen before. The combination of a White House that became a beacon of culture and a centre for the arts, and a young Kennedy court of the brightest and best, represented a fresh and exciting start to the new decade. Kennedy, having been moulded by the culture of the 1950s, had a unique style and persona that made him the man for the 1960s. Kennedy and his wife Jackie were admired and emulated not only in America but around the world, and so became modern-day influencers. In addition, our awareness of post-war culture reveals why Kennedy was deemed a hero in standing up to Khrushchev in Berlin and Cuba. Consequently, we can better understand how the assassination of such a hero, who had come to inspire and represent Americans at their best, devastated the nation.

In reviewing the events and cultural turmoil of the post-Kennedy decade we see how America changed after Kennedy's death. Johnson struggled to fill the Kennedy shoes but having won his own mandate, his presidency was consumed by a war in Vietnam and cultural change. These changes left middle America wondering what had happened to their country and help explain the ensuing political conservative resurgence and the election of Richard Nixon. Nixon promised to bring calm to a troubled nation but is remembered more for Watergate and the loss of presidential credibility than for securing a peace deal in Vietnam.

Taking a broad perspective, we can see the sweep of cultural change from the late 1940s to the early 1970s, showing how the Kennedy presidency escaped the apogee of cultural turmoil of the later 1960s, allowing him to remain associated with the civil rights movement and foreign policy heroics rather than domestic riots, demonstrations, and the Vietnam war. Furthermore, the distinct comparison between the culture of the 1950s and later 1960s helps frame the Kennedy presidency as something more than just a bridge between the two decades. It emphasises the Kennedy era as something uniquely different, a moment in time that Jackie Kennedy suggested was Camelot, and in so doing, underlines

the importance and relevance that Kennedy had for Americans at that time. Echoes of such relevance had an impact on the later 1960s, as the Kennedy phenomenon hinted at a resurrection in the form of his brother Robert. Today, mentions of Kennedy are used to suggest a unique era of America at its best, and the Kennedy phenomenon has survived the revelatory biographies of the 1970s which threatened to destroy the reverence in which he is held.

Setting Kennedy within the context of his cultural era not only helps explain the man and his actions, but it also helps us conjure up the atmosphere of the time. Immersion in this atmosphere allows us to understand his relevance, showing how the Kennedy psyche was in tune with America in the 1950s, and explaining why he was revered by the nation. We see how Kennedy evolved during the 1950s to represent something different from the old-style politicians and why this was important. It explains why the Kennedy White House was so special and why Kennedy, portrayed as a hero, resonated with so many Americans. We also perhaps appreciate more the trauma experienced by the nation on his death when we understand how different a president Kennedy was at that time. While his short tenure of the White House does not absolve him from involvement in events that are associated with the later 1960s, in the public's perception, his inspirational rhetoric and heroic association with international crises override his critics. By comparison with the 1950s we realise how much the culture of the 1960s changed America, and how this, in retrospect, has helped position the Kennedy presidency as a unique time in political history.

In adding context to the histories, biographies and critiques of Kennedy, this cultural perspective expands the scholarship by adding nuance to our understanding of Kennedy, helping to explain why he has come to represent so much more than a presidency. Immersing ourselves in this cultural atmosphere of the era, we can begin to understand the full range of associations inherent in our recollections of the man. Kennedy represents more than a manufactured image, he represents a time, and a place, and a feeling that all contribute to him remaining an American icon to this day.

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