CHAPTER ONE

Kennedy

If John Fitzgerald Kennedy is intrinsically identified with the early 1960s, it is also true that those years are linked with Kennedy. In public memory, the man and the age are entwined and inseparable. However, in democratic societies, where custom, institutions, and public opinion both compel certain directions and inhibit others, leaders shape their times less than they, or we, like to admit. Yet, even in a democracy, a leader is not just a representative of the public will but a force for the projection, articulation, and refinement of that will. The best leaders express the aspirations of their age and, by using democratic means to forge political combinations, are able to implement some version of their own particular vision. For a brief period, John F. Kennedy tried to do so, and to understand the United States in the early sixties, one must come to terms with Kennedy, his character, and his often opaque politics. Kennedy's sudden rise to power itself reveals much about the times. At the beginning of 1960, half of Americans had never heard of the senator from Massachusetts. Before the year ended, he had won the nation's highest office. Along the way, he invented media-oriented, televisual, celebrity politics. His remarkable inaugural address in January 1961 impressed many people who had not voted for

him; he instantly gained 69 percent poll approval. Ratings throughout his presidency generally remained either at that level or higher. He became the most popular president since polling began in the 1930s.[1]

When Kennedy began his quest for the presidency in 1960, Americans sensed that they were entering a promising time. The country had settled into its post-World War II norm: unprecedented prosperity; the Cold War; a peacetime draft; technological innovation, including computers, which were already producing large corporate profits and layoffs due to automation among unionized blue-collar workers; permanent high income taxes – the top bracket remained 91 percent in 1960 – combined with massive government programs, including the new interstate highway system designed, in large part, to enable commuters to speed from the new suburbs to work downtown; and a commitment to schooling that would make the baby boomers the best educated generation in history. This drastic reorganization of American life during and after the war had caused little comment. Although World War II pushed young men forward with unusual speed, including the election of John Kennedy, Richard Nixon, and 67 other veterans to Congress in 1946, older conservatives who thought and acted in prewar patterns still ran key institutions in the fifties. There was nothing modern or reform-minded about the Federal Bureau of Investigation's J. Edgar Hoover (1895–1972; ruled 1924–1972), Selective Service's Lewis Hershey (1893–1977; r. 1940–1973), labor's George Meany (1894–1980; r. 1952–1979), or the Catholic church's Francis Cardinal Spellman (1889–1967; r. 1939–1967). Each held power for many years and would remain both entrenched and feared for a long time.[2]

During the fifties these grandees' enormous power along with the inevitable ossification of their respective institutions had provoked little comment. If Americans were tranquil and complacent,

it was because the country was peaceful and prosperous. The standard of living, far above that of any other nation, was on its way to doubling in one generation. Despite automation, organized labor enjoyed steadily increasing real pay and benefits, unprecedented numbers of college graduates easily found good jobs, and corporate America, holding a near-monopoly on mass production of sophisticated goods for a global market, reaped record profits. This new wealth made Americans optimistic. "They are wonderfully confident . . . ," observed the British journalist John Calmann in a letter to a friend. Millions bought increasing numbers of shiny, chrome-bumpered cars and watched television in their new suburban tract houses. By 1960, one-quarter of all American homes had been built in the past decade. Nothing symbolized the good life better than the backyard cookout, even if President Dwight Eisenhower had to grill his thick, succulent steaks on the White House roof. Sometimes the fifties were called the Great Barbecue.[3]

By the end of the fifties, however, some partygoers grew restless. "We maunder along," complained the historian Eric Goldman, "in a stupor of fat . . . ." Many found Eisenhower's governance lethargic and lackadaisical. The philosopher Hannah Arendt privately declared Ike "senile," while Kennedy's young speechwriter Richard Goodwin considered the old president a "do-nothing." (One joke went: **Q.**: How does an Eisenhower doll work? **A.**: You wind it up, and it does nothing for eight years.) In a letter that expressed a frustration that was hard to state publicly, the liberal newspaper columnist Joe Alsop wrote that the federal government "resembles a dead whale upon a beach." In addition, many intellectuals, including Dwight Macdonald and John Kenneth Galbraith, found the crass consumerism of the fifties vapid. The twice-defeated Democratic presidential candidate, Adlai Stevenson, used a line written by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., to attack "public squalor and private opulence." As Americans' bellies overfilled, their heads and hearts

ached with emptiness. Eisenhower sensed this problem and ordered a panel to ponder the nation's goals. Another sign of restlessness in the late fifties came from African Americans, who began to protest discrimination more openly. Although the civil rights movement was small at the beginning of 1960, it served notice that not everyone had enjoyed the Great Barbecue.[4]

At the same time, America felt the press of children. Almost one-third of the country's 180 million people were baby boomers born after 1945. More were on the way, as the nation's population continued to grow, with only minor immigration, at the fastest rate in half a century. As dozens of children swarmed on every block, city and suburban schools overflowed. Educators struggled to cope and eyed the federal government as a source for new funds. In 1960, the oldest boomers were entering their teens with a hormonal surge that was about to inundate the country with youth music and their own version of popular culture. The country's institutions for handling adolescents, whether schools, churches, courts, or corporate employers, were stretched thin. In the five years after 1960, fast-growing California faced a 41 percent increase in the annual number of high school graduates. Where were they all to go? What were they to do? Neither businesses nor colleges appeared ready to handle the upsurge. Presidential hopeful John Kennedy's presentation of himself as a youthful candidate appealed to both youth-concerned adults and adolescents. Polls showed Kennedy ahead among those over age 18 but under 21 who, unfortunately for Kennedy, were not then eligible to vote.[5]

At a deeper level, the American problem was not about rapid population growth, suburbanization, unprecedented wealth, its maldistribution, nor Eisenhower's leadership. Intellectuals came closer to identifying the problem when they said that materialism had so overwhelmed society that the country had lost its sense of purpose. A vacuum existed, said intellectuals, because the United States had failed throughout the postwar years to generate new

ideas. Intellectuals traced this problem to Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's anticommunist smears in the early fifties."Intercourse is poisoned," publicly observed the legal scholar Zechariah Chafee, Jr., "if one never knows whether his fellow guest at dinner is going to report statements to the secret police." At one level, the problem was psychological. The need was not, as the old New Dealers of the thirties believed, to find policy prescriptions for social ills, nor was it to synthesize national goals. The problem was more subtle. For half a century liberals had generated most of the new ideas in American society; now they seemed uncertain. The left-liberal journalist Carey McWilliams came closer to the truth when he saw "moral discontents" amid a stagnant liberalism. "It lacks a radical dynamic," he lamented, "it cannot arouse enthusiasm." The destruction of the Left had cast liberalism adrift.[6]

The American problem was lodged deep in the nation's consciousness. In part, the Great Barbecue pressed hard upon that portion of the American psyche that, from the Pilgrim founding on, looked with suspicion upon worldly success as evidence of sin and spiritual failure. The more Americans enjoyed the economic boom, the more discomfort they felt: Life was not supposed to be this much fun. "I met many a soul," noted one observer in a letter, "wandering in the shining abyss of materialism between emptiness and nothing." "The whole country," complained the conservative writer Taylor Caldwell to a friend, "has become soft, whiney, whimpering, demanding, cowering, lip-licking, feeble – and stupid." The United States, thought the novelist John Steinbeck, suffered from "a creeping, all pervading nerve-gas of immorality." Underneath the unease about materialism lurked darker fears. The horrors of nuclear war and the fact that the United States had initiated the nuclear age had, by 1960, produced guilt and fear, along with denial. "No one has dared to speak of GUILT," noted the Catholic *Boston Pilot*. "The atom bomb," the old-line Democrat James Farley had observed at a prayer breakfast, "has more

or less brought people back to realize there is a God." The fifties brought an upsurge in religion, as the Cold War entangled the United States in the world in new, exasperating ways, and at any moment threatened thermonuclear death. "Sweetness and light," said Carey McWilliams, "are no longer the only notes to be sounded in our land."[7]

More than he ever let on publicly, President Eisenhower understood the country's mood in the fifties. A master of deception, the old general concocted meaningless, ungrammatical answers at press conferences and took innocent drives in the country, prescribed by his physician, to make secret visits to his closest adviser, his brother Milton. Behind the famous wide smile, Ike was ruthless. A credible military commander, he had ended the Korean War by threatening nuclear war. Other results of his activity could be seen elsewhere. The Shah of Iran reappeared, Guatemala's Left-leaning government disappeared, and Ngo Dinh Diem appeared as the pro-American ruler in South Vietnam. Quietly and unobtrusively, Ike moved all over the world. As 1960 dawned, he remained popular, and had he been eligible for a third term, he would have won in a landslide. The Constitution, however, required Ike to step down, and he looked upon potential successors with deep doubt. Lyndon Johnson had no support outside the South, John Kennedy was too young and inexperienced, and Vice President Richard Nixon, the designated Republican heir, did not inspire confidence. At a press conference, Ike was asked to name one contribution Nixon had made to the administration. "If you give me a week, I might think of one. I don't remember," opined the old general. Later, he apologized to Nixon and called his remark flippant. His flippancy is doubtful.[8]

Following two terms in the House of Representatives, Nixon had moved to the Senate in 1950, after defeating Helen Gahagan Douglas, whom he accused of being "pink right down to her underwear." Two years later Nixon became Ike's vice president. In 1960,

he was the first sitting vice president nominated by a major party for the presidency since Martin Van Buren in 1836. Despite strong support from party loyalists, Nixon was not an ideal candidate. Although no one doubted his intelligence or hard work, he was widely hated. Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn, a conservative Texas Democrat, neither shook Nixon's hand nor looked at him nor spoke with him whenever the vice president came to the House for Ike's State of the Union speeches. In the early sixties, former President Harry Truman privately called Nixon "a shifty-eyed, goddamn liar." In a letter the British journalist John Calmann described Nixon as "a real middle-class uneducated swindler with all the virtues of a seller of fountain-pens in Naples." Years later, the conservative Republican Barry Goldwater recalled Nixon as "the most dishonest individual I ever met in my life." A brilliant tactician but a poor strategist, the vice president, like many other Americans adrift during the fifties, lacked any moral compass. "I feel sorry for Nixon," John Kennedy observed privately, "because he does not know who he is, and at each stop he has to decide which Nixon he is at the moment, which must be very exhausting."[9]

John F. Kennedy formally declared for the presidency on January 2, 1960. Although he challenged others to join the contest, no one did so at that time. Professional politicians felt it too early to begin an open campaign, which would expose the frontrunner to sniping attacks from all directions. Kennedy understood that problem, but his own inexperience, as well as the hostility of party elders, forced his decision. To have any chance of being nominated, he had to run openly, to campaign actively, and to use television to create an attractive public image. He would try to excite the masses, to confront the vague anxieties that Americans felt by tapping the country's hopeful yearnings about itself, and to present himself as the person best equipped to lead Americans into a promising future. He projected an infectious optimism. Few took Kennedy seriously.

The press, inclined to see 1960 as a Republican year due to Ike's success, greeted the announcement with skepticism. Reporters, like Democratic professionals, considered Kennedy's declaration as the beginning of a campaign for the vice presidency. Throughout the spring, Kennedy insisted that under no circumstances would he leave the Senate for second place. At a dinner party Jackie Kennedy declared, "I will slash my wrists and write an oath in blood that Jack will never run for vice president!"[10]

Wise men doubted Kennedy's chances largely because of his youth. If he won at age 43, he would be the youngest person ever elected. "That kid needs a little gray in his hair," said Senator Lyndon Johnson of Texas. The Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev fretted, "He's younger than my own son." To win the nomination, Kennedy turned the argument upside down. He insisted that his youth was an advantage, because the nation required a leader with energy and new ideas. "It is time," said Kennedy in speeches throughout 1960, "to get this country moving again." In a triumph of style over substance, he was short on specifics. A promising time did not necessarily require a candidate to make promises. The contrast with Eisenhower, however, was clear. Ike, about to turn 70, would leave office the oldest president in history. (Ronald Reagan later broke that record.) Politicians' complaints about Kennedy's youth were primarily worries about his inexperience. He had never been a governor nor held any executive post. In neither the House of Representatives nor the Senate had he been impressive. "He's smart enough," said Johnson, "but he doesn't like the grunt work."[11]

Kennedy's family proved useful. Jack's father, Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr., was reputed to be worth at least $200 million, one of the country's largest fortunes. The money mattered. Before World War II he had been ambassador to Great Britain, until isolationism forced his resignation. Jack's mother Rose, the daughter of Boston Mayor John "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald, was a brilliant campaigner. A devout Catholic who attended daily mass, Rose was also a tightwad who

made the household staff pay for cups of coffee that they drank. Jack's brothers and sisters helped, too. Sister Patricia, wife of the actor Peter Lawford, introduced Jack to Hollywood donors and superstars Frank Sinatra and Marilyn Monroe. Brother Robert ran Jack's 1960 campaign. Bobby, as he was generally known, was brilliant, ruthless, and feared. "He has all the patience of a vulture," said one observer, "without any of the dripping sentimentality." The journalist Igor Cassini thought Bobby was tough enough to have been in the Gestapo. "He hates the same way I do," said Joe Kennedy. Lyndon Johnson offered a different insight about Bobby. "He skipped the grades," said Johnson, "where you learn the rules of life." Friends praised Bobby's "heart" and loyalty, but numerous enemies cited his temper and arrogance.[12]

Jack Kennedy was a complicated man, more so than his relatives. At Harvard he was one of the first Catholics to be admitted to an exclusive club (Spee). This was less a comment about declining prejudice than proof of his charm. His gift, Senator Clinton Anderson recalled, was lifting people's spirits. In 1960, Kennedy's optimism matched the public mood. As a child, Jack suffered frail health, became a bookworm, and, aided by perfect recall, developed a taste for history. This intellectual side, while by no means dominant, asserted itself at Harvard. He spent school vacations in England with his father, then the ambassador, traveled around the continent, and returned to Harvard to write a stimulating senior thesis on why England failed to prepare for World War II. It was a timely and important topic, and Kennedy's warning that the United States ought to be better prepared put the youth in opposition to his isolationist father. The ambassador arranged for publication through a friend, the *New York Times* columnist Arthur Krock. *Why England Slept* became a bestseller. With his profits, Jack bought a flashy red Buick. In 1955, while convalescing from a back operation, Jack produced, with considerable help from his assistant Theodore Sorensen, *Profiles in Courage*. This book not

only was a bestseller, but also, with Krock's aid, won the Pulitzer Prize.[13]

World War II showed another side of Jack Kennedy. After failing an Army physical, Kennedy talked his way into the Navy. Assigned to intelligence, he became involved with Inga Arvad, a woman wrongly suspected of being a German spy. J. Edgar Hoover personally followed the case; the 700-page file later guaranteed the FBI director his job during Kennedy's presidency. (Asked why he was keeping Hoover, President Kennedy replied, "You don't fire God.") To end the romance, Jack was reassigned to captain a PT boat in the South Pacific. Small PT boats tried, with little success, to torpedo much larger, faster Japanese ships in an area the enemy controlled. On a foggy night a Japanese destroyer sliced Kennedy's PT109 in two. The PT109 sank, but Kennedy and ten of twelve crew members swam to a nearby island. With a strap held in his teeth, Kennedy towed one badly burned man. His strength and endurance, developed on the Harvard swimming team, paid off, as did his confidence, instilled by the ambassador as a family trait. Kennedys never quit. Virtually abandoned by the U.S. Navy, which erroneously concluded that there were no survivors, Kennedy rescued his men by sending out a message carved on a coconut. As president, he displayed the coconut in the Oval Office.[14]

In 1946, when Kennedy won a seat in Congress from a working-class district in Boston, being a war hero helped. So did his liberalism, his unpretentious charm, and the fact that his grandfather had been the mayor of Boston. Six years later, after defeating the incumbent Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Kennedy cultivated new constituencies by hiring Theodore Sorensen, a half-Danish and half-Jewish Unitarian from Nebraska. Ted was a brilliant speechwriter. That same year Robert Kennedy went to work for Wisconsin's anticommunist Senator Joseph R. McCarthy. A fellow Irish Catholic, McCarthy was a Republican who had dated Jack's sisters Patricia