Kennedy and the Promise of the Sixties

The book explores life in America during that brief promising moment in the early sixties when John F. Kennedy was president. Kennedy's Cold War frustrations in Cuba and Vietnam worried Americans. The 1962 Missile Crisis narrowly avoided a nuclear disaster. The civil rights movement gained momentum with student sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and crises in Mississippi and Alabama. Martin Luther King, Jr., emerged as a spokesman for nonviolent social change. The American family was undergoing rapid change. Betty Friedan launched the Women's Movement. The Beat authors Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg gained respectability. Joan Baez and Bob Dylan revived folk music. Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol produced Pop Art. Ginsberg, Aldous Huxley, Timothy Leary, and Ken Kesey began to promote psychedelic drugs.

The early sixties were a period of marked political, social, and cultural change. The old was swept away, and the country that the United States became began to be born.

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For Kurt and Gladys Lang

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Introduction

It was a promising time. In January 1960 Americans were hopeful and optimistic. Having lived through the "fabulous fifties," they looked forward to the "soaring sixties," a phrase that evoked the coming of the space age. Enjoying peace abroad and prosperity at home, they envisioned a future national bounty that accommodated both private luxury and public expenditure. Americans expected fatter paychecks, suburban ranch houses, and color television. Families planned to explore faraway places, such as the new Disneyland theme park in California, in their 22-foot, gas-guzzling automobiles equipped with grand trunks and rocket-like tail fins, or they might travel abroad on Boeing's new commercial jet planes. Scientists might cure most illnesses, including cancer and heart disease, just as polio had been licked in the fifties. There was enormous confidence in government. Urban planners were preparing to demolish decayed neighborhoods in older cities to pave eight-lane freeways – 12 for the Dan Ryan Expressway in Chicago – and to build 20-story high-rise public housing for the poor. Unprecedented numbers of young people would be able to attend ever-expanding public colleges, and many of those who did not do so could obtain high-paying jobs in unionized industries.

Affluence made the sixties promising. Prosperity opened tantalizing possibilities for building anew, for curing injustice, and for remaking American society and culture. Harnessing change, however, required leaders capable of setting priorities and making choices. A youthful, dynamic, optimistic, and self-confident John Fitzgerald Kennedy offered to play that role. More than most political figures, he understood that the United States both faced difficult challenges and enjoyed unusual opportunities that rarely come to any nation. In 1960 he ran for president out of a strong conviction that he could seize the moment, shape the country, and change the world. Born to great wealth, superbly educated, and well-traveled, Kennedy had devoted his life to public service. Unlike many other politicians, he understood the United States and other countries from close personal observation. He also exuded the supreme self-confidence commonly found only in the upper class. Few doubted that patriotism and his perception of the national interest drove his ideas and plans. Serious, witty, demanding, inquiring, restless, and impatient, he spurred others to greater efforts as he sought to mold his country and its history. In no sense was he self-aggrandizing. Upbeat by nature, he was both a unique figure and a true representative of his times. Kennedy put such a stamp upon the early sixties that one can scarcely talk about those years without discussing him.

At the same time, the era was "promising" in two distinct ways. In one sense, the sixties, despite Cold War tensions, promised not only continued peace and prosperity, as we have suggested, but also new technology and major new government initiatives to improve the quality of life, as Kennedy advocated. In this sense, "promising" was about *fulfillment* of promises. In a second sense, however, "promising" meant that Americans sought more than could be obtained. They were hooked on hope. This second definition was about *making* promises, and it posed problems. The society ran the risk of becoming overextended in trying to carry out aspirations, or Americans might stumble by embracing unrealistic, exaggerated,

or utopian schemes. Far too often, plans that were proposed in the sixties bore little relationship to goals that could actually be accomplished. In this "promising" time an aura of unreality sometimes prevailed, and the political, social, and cultural atmosphere too often bordered on euphoria. Not only was the increasing affluence of the fifties projected forward on a rising trajectory that admitted no possibility of a future slowdown, but the can-do spirit and exuberance with which Americans addressed all problems did not bode well when an issue arose, such as Vietnam, that called for a discerning eye to tell the difference between a situation that might be ameliorated and a difficulty that could not be solved. The coldly calculating Kennedy, had he lived, might have been able to tell the difference. Others failed to do so.

One problem with a "promising" time, in other words, is that hope will get so far ahead of experience that the gap will bring hope itself crashing to the ground. Some of the turmoil in the later sixties can be understood as the result of frustration that was derived from that kind of disappointment. In the early sixties the budding civil rights movement lived on hope, which enabled participants to make sacrifices and endure enormous hardships. The pinnacle of that movement's optimism came when Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington in August 1963, but that dazzling spectacle of affirmation did not explain how rights advocates ought to proceed in order to realize all their aspirations. The peace movement, too, enjoyed bouyancy in the early sixties, although supporters' optimism was rooted less in fact amid some of the Cold War's worst crises, including the Cuban Missile Crisis, than in a growing desire for peace. In an optimistic time, desire perhaps counted for more than did reason. In popular culture, folk musicians in the early sixties called for both peace and civil rights, but group singing did not create peace, even if it did generate solidarity among young Americans and put them in a frame of mind to make love rather than war, a fact that no one

in power took into account when launching the Vietnam War in 1965.

Throughout American history intensely hopeful periods such as the Progressive Era, the New Deal, and the sixties have invariably, if not inevitably, ended in disappointment, as reformers have discovered that the political, social, or cultural changes which they tried to make were far more difficult to accomplish than they had expected. Here is the paradox: A general mood of optimism is necessary to launch any period of reform, but the prevalence of that very mood causes reformers to push for changes that go well beyond the society's capacity for change in a short period of time. In the early sixties gaps between hopes and realities were not always clear, since one characteristic of a "promising" time is that these discrepancies can be explained, even with little evidence, as problems about to be solved quickly. As the decade proceeded, however, and as promises remained unfulfilled, the discrepancies between aspirations and performance became more glaring, more painful, and more frustrating. Even before Kennedy's assassination in 1963, some Americans felt strong doubts about progress concerning peace and race. Rising doubts, which were an undercurrent rather than a main theme during the early sixties, are an enemy to any promising time.

Another trait of the early sixties concerns dark undercurrents. On the surface, Americans were eager to marshal resources and energy to address the hard problems of the Cold War and race relations. Although families were in crisis and women were beginning to question their role in society, the era's overall optimism obscured emerging difficulties about gender and sexuality. At the same time, American culture was also beginning to undergo major upheaval. Under the surface, however, Americans showed fear of nuclear war, anxiety about race relations, bewilderment over decomposition of the traditional family, and unease at unsettling cultural experimentation that threatened to dissolve longstanding mainstream mores. Respect for tradition, which had been strong in the fifties, rapidly eroded. At this deeper level the age was anything

but "promising," and much of the emphasis on the country's bright future may have been an attempt to hide undercurrents of anxiety and doubt. Strident insistence upon a "promising" future inhibited discussion of darker truths that Americans wished to ignore. Incessant "promising" to solve problems, even when unrealistic, kept the focus optimistic and further obscured the society's dilemmas.

In the early sixties Americans preferred to ride on the surface, just like the California surfers in the Beach Boys' popular tunes. Although Kennedy's approach to the Cold War was not simple-minded, the administration rarely penetrated to the deepest levels of insight about the human condition. Perhaps the most important consequence of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 was that it forced high officials to do a certain amount of soul-searching. The civil rights movement did reshape race relations, and Betty Friedan raised questions that started what was later to become the women's movement. The most profound challenges to superficial thinking, however, came in the cultural realm from a number of new practitioners. The Beat writers Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, both of whom gained increasing respectability in the early sixties, the great songwriter Bob Dylan, and the pop artists Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol collectively destroyed an already decayed mainstream culture that was largely left over from the late nineteenth century. Dylan and Warhol, in particular, used irony, parody, and satire in new ways to juxtapose the overt surface against the culture's hidden underside. As we shall see, in the early sixties American culture, society, and politics showed many ambiguous qualities that suggest that the period was an in-between time that partook both of aspects that predominated in earlier years and of aspects that prevailed afterward.

Also evident in the early sixties are tensions between public expressions and private thoughts. While printed materials, including magazines and newspapers, provide a rough guide to the period, letters not intended for publication by both famous and ordinary people reveal more. Letters avoid the propagandistic excesses

of the published word and better capture the period's flavor at a more introspective level. These private thoughts, which are quoted extensively in this book, both reinforce and somewhat alter our understanding of events. Letters show that Americans' two main concerns in the early sixties were the Cold War and race. At the time few were totally candid about either subject in public. In the case of the Cold War, public rhetoric, including Kennedy's, was tough. Private letters much more frequently expressed fear of nuclear war, which most people hesitated to state publicly. No one wanted to be called a communist sympathizer. In 1960, the era of Senator Joseph McCarthy's repression of dissent was a living memory. The difference between public expression and private thought about race is narrower and more subtle. While public talk about race often emphasized support for abstract rights in opaque ways, many white Americans' private views showed bewilderment about black demands as well as fear of an uncertain future in which race relations would have to change in ways that were yet to be worked out.

The relationship between private thought and public expression also underwent a significant transformation in these years. Elite control of culture declined, formal censorship began to collapse, and it became possible, even fashionable in avant-garde circles, to voice publicly what had previously been said only privately. Following the lead of *Playboy* magazine, entertainers such as Lenny Bruce discussed Sex on the public stage for the first time. As matters which had previously been private now became public, or as the distinction between that which was private and that which was public was increasingly blurred, the frankness and candor associated with private views began more and more to be heard in public settings. The Beat writers, avant-garde filmmakers, and pop artists attacked the hypocrisies that governed polite society, although a full flowering of this trend would not occur until the counterculture emerged in the later sixties. Stripping society of its protective armor, however, by giving public expression to private thought not only increased honesty, but it also coarsened discourse, offended many

Americans, and raised so much disharmony that it threatened the public cohesiveness necessary to see the era as a promising time.

These are the main themes in this book. As a larger goal, the book explores the intersection of politics, society, and culture during a relatively brief period marked by upheaval and significant change. At the political level, the book begins with Kennedy's remarkable, tone-setting election in 1960, moves through several Cold War crises, and ends with Kennedy's assassination in 1963. In the early sixties, however, politics was clearly less important than social and cultural upheaval. At the social level, the book considers the civil rights movement's explosive upsurge: the southern student sit-ins in 1960; the Freedom Rides of 1961; the white riot against James Meredith's admission to the University of Mississippi in 1962; and the March on Washington in 1963. In the early sixties families were also in crisis. The number of working women grew quickly, the first of the baby boomers born after 1945 became teenagers, sexual mores started to change, and Betty Friedan launched the women's movement. At the cultural level, changes were profound. In the fifties, the Beat writers had already attacked middle-class values. At the beginning of the sixties new folk musicians, including Bob Dylan, advocated social and political change, and pop artists redefined art in a way that announced the arrival of postmodernism. As early as 1960, a handful of visionaries that included Aldous Huxley, Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, and Ken Kesey plotted to change the culture through psychedelic drugs.

Why should we examine the early sixties in so many different dimensions? Why should we look at this thin slice of time in such detail? First, the political, social, and cultural aspects during these years are interrelated in complex and fascinating ways. John Kennedy pledged to obtain better results in the Cold War with the Soviet Union. At the time, Americans perceived their country to be faring poorly. The Cold War required the United States to seek alliances with nonwhite nations, especially Japan, and civil rights leaders calculated, correctly, that they could gain federal support

in their challenge to white supremacy. The rights movement not only presented ideals that encouraged others who felt dispossessed, including a number of women, to organize, but it also adopted new strategies and tactics that enabled the powerless to confront unjust power. This bottom-up, grassroots attack on the status quo is a key aspect of those years. At the same time, the cohesiveness of the Kennedy family and the public projection of that image appeared to offer reassurance about family as a source of stability at a time when many families faced redefinition, if not crisis. A waning white elite's stodgy, narrow definition of culture also came under attack. Cultural experimentation in the early sixties challenged traditional ideas about power, race, and gender. Indeed, without cultural change, social and political change might well have proved impossible at that time.

Second, this combination of cultural, social, and political change was greater than the sum of its parts. Not only did new literature, music, and art break down cultural barriers and open possibilities for further artistic exploration, but the very act of cultural reconceptualization encouraged Americans to liberate the *self* from social and political constraints. Similarly, civil rights activists found that their revivalistic movement was personally transformative. Although often initially drawn to action by idealism, most participants learned that a period of intense activism, sometimes risking jail or violence, left them emotionally exhausted. Accompanying the sense of burnout was a feeling of profound personal change: They felt their souls transformed and their values, having been sorely tested, affirmed by the testimony of their lives. They emerged stronger, shrewder, tougher, and more willing to challenge other forms of injustice. It is no accident that women active in civil rights later became prominent feminists. The Cold War, too, affected Americans emotionally. Both ordinary people and top administration officials who lived through the near-nuclear war of the Cuban Missile Crisis emerged determined to avoid further crises of that type. The will to resist war grew, as a burgeoning peace movement sought new

ways to soften the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Third, this particular slice of time is a crucial formative period. Most accounts of the sixties have focused on the turmoil and tumult from 1964, beginning with the Free Speech Movement at the University of California, to 1969, when the Black Panthers swaggered and the Weather Underground raged violently in the streets. It is possible to argue that the sixties did not begin until 1965, when African Americans rioted in Watts and when large numbers of American combat troops were sent to Vietnam, and did not end until 1974, when Richard Nixon resigned, or even 1975, when the North Vietnamese marched into Saigon. Compared to the years between 1964 and 1969, the period from 1960 through 1963 has drawn much less attention. Today, many Americans believe that the United States during Kennedy's presidency was an idyllic society, some sort of Camelot. If only Kennedy had lived, runs this sentiment (it can hardly be called an argument), then the terrible violence and chaos of the late sixties would never have occurred. It is certainly true that Kennedy's death, as shown in this book, did jar the nation. A promising time ended, as the assassination in Dallas killed both a popular president and many of the hopes that he represented. At the very least, Kennedy's death proved sobering, and the years that followed lacked a certain joy and innocence that Americans had felt in the early sixties.

If it is easy, due to the assassination, to draw a distinction between the Kennedy years and the less promising time that followed, it is more difficult to fix precisely the beginning of the early sixties. One could start with Kennedy's inauguration in January 1961, when the new political administration began. On the other hand, Kennedy's rise from obscure contender to president-elect during 1960 also is part of the story. Kennedy was an underdog who won a narrow victory, a fact that deeply affected his presidency. The Cold War began more than a decade before Kennedy's election, and it lasted for a generation after his death, but critical crises occurred

during the early sixties: The demoralizing Bay of Pigs invasion and the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961; the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962; and the coup against Ngo Dinh Diem in Vietnam in 1963. By contrast, Eisenhower's presidency in the fifties was relatively tranquil. The civil rights movement can be traced to the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, during 1955 and 1956, but although that event made Martin Luther King, Jr., famous, it did not spawn other large-scale demonstrations until southern black students began to protest against discrimination at lunch counters with sit-ins in early 1960. The movement then accelerated from 1961 to 1963. Changes in family life and culture, however, occurred more gradually.

One key to understanding the early sixties and how it differed markedly from the fifties is to think in terms of tone. Throughout the fifties a sort of conservatism and placidity predominated. Even though one can find contrary trends, as a number of astute historians have recently noted, advocates for change in those years, including the Beat writers, were often considered by mainstream Americans to be odd or offputting. In other words, while every decade has had its rebels, what sets the fifties apart from the sixties is that rebels in the fifties attracted few followers, because most Americans at that time prided themselves on conformity. Although conformity was always less widespread in practice during the fifties than the image of conformity would suggest, the country's atmosphere was not conducive to experimentation. McCarthyism cast a long shadow, and even in New York and San Francisco, the two cities at the heart of the fifties Beat subculture, the number of Beats was measured in the hundreds, not thousands, and harassment by police, thugs, media, and public opinion was constant. Only in the late fifties did the country begin to change. In an important development, censorship eased, and an establishment with waning power and self-confidence imposed fewer norms. Americans became more tolerant of difference, and restlessness amid the mainstream produced a rising interest in avant-garde experimentation.

The early sixties, then, is important because it was an in-between time, a short space lodged between a more conservative, cautious, and complacent era that preceded it and a more frenzied, often raucous, and even violent era that followed. It is easy, as scholars of the sixties know, to show the connections between the early sixties and the latter part of that decade. The saber-rattling of the Kennedy years, including the coup against Ngo Dinh Diem in Vietnam, encouraged the later American war in Vietnam. The civil rights movement, drained of its idealism, ended with demands for Black Power and urban riots. When one examines primary sources generated during the early sixties, however, one finds that these connections between the decade's earlier and later years, although real, are somewhat exaggerated. For example, when Students for a Democratic Society, which became a major antiwar organization late in the decade, drafted its crucial document, "The Port Huron Statement," in 1962, it had only about 500 paid members. At that same time a conservative group, Young Americans for Freedom, had 20,000 members. Scholars of the sixties give more importance to SDS than to YAF because SDS became the more significant organization during the course of the decade, but YAF counted for more in 1962. This book's intense exploration of the early sixties allows us to gauge more closely connections between the decade's earlier and later years.

At the same time, the fifties have thus far been insufficiently studied; to the extent that Americans in the early sixties continued to adhere to traditional values, many derived from pre–World War II culture, a close scrutiny of the early sixties will help shed light on customs that prevailed then but that were swept away during or after the upheavals of the later sixties. As suggested above, much change was already underway on a modest scale in the late fifties, so that the continuation of those trends and the acceleration of the rate of change were visible in the early sixties. Here again, private correspondence is valuable in suggesting the ambivalence that

often surrounded change. Public expressions often either rigidly defended the status quo or trumpeted the new in hyped fashion. Private thoughts were more likely to express hesitation or ambivalence or to offer nuanced opinion about the meaning of new ideas and practices and how they related to other ongoing or new institutions or arrangements. A certain amount of puzzlement can be seen as matters were sorted out. In the end, cultures evolve and accrete. So do societies. And so do nonrevolutionary political entities. In the early sixties private letters often expressed surprise at innovations; change was occurring faster than many Americans could easily absorb, and letter writers frequently expressed apprehension or fear. Behind the glittering facade of Camelot as a promising time lurked an awful anxiety.

The more one thinks about the early sixties as a slice of time the more one is forced to focus on the curious figure of John Kennedy. As enigmatic a political personality as the United States has ever produced, he projected charm derived from a self-generated aura of mystery. When asked questions, Kennedy often replied with questions rather than with answers, preferred listening to talking, deflected the unwanted probe with quick wit, refused to make decisions that would disappoint some of his followers, and interposed himself between two people who disagreed with each other by leaving the impression with each that he agreed with that person. He was two-sided. Although these techniques along with his mastery of television guaranteed his popularity, which remained unusually high throughout his presidency, they did not enable him to accomplish much as president. To understand this preference for theatrical politics, we must remember that the early sixties was an in-between time partaking in part of the conservatism of the fifties and in part of the restlessness of the later sixties. Kennedy sensed this bifurcated mood and built his popularity upon it. Thus, he appealed to the country's already rising restless spirit by talking change, but, carefully watching how conservative southern Democrats reacted, he proved cautious by rarely engaging in action. The point of his

televised political theater was to meld and reconcile those two halves while increasing his own celebrity.

In the end the early sixties, like any other era, has to be understood on its own terms. The years that preceded and followed were different, not only in tone, but in substance. This ambiguous, in-between quality is this short era's most important characteristic. Like all transitional periods, it truly did partake both of what had come before and of what would come after. Much of the anxiety expressed about both the Cold War and race was no doubt a misplaced psychological projection of a larger fear that all the old verities were crumbling. The cultural change was real, dramatic, and profound. People responded to this situation in quite different ways. Conservatives, in particular, felt threatened, believed that the country was changing beyond recognition, saw no way to rally the public to their side, and became helpless as they sank into insignificance. Despite the upsurge of the new Right, the early sixties was in no sense a conservative age. In this promising time, liberals responded to the perceived challenges by embracing change with enthusiasm, and because the problems looked like they could be solved, Americans as a whole during these years shifted from a more customary moderation toward liberalism. Boundless optimism and affluence helped sustain this outlook. Generational experience also played a role in this shift. Kennedy and other World War II veterans tended to have a more upbeat view about the future than did those Americans who had come of age before the war.

As in any other era where profound cultural changes take place, it was easier in the early sixties to see the breakup of the old order than to predict the complete shape of the new one. Many welcomed the decline of a stodgy elite culture, enforced by official censorship, that had predominated. The old order's destruction could be exciting, even exhilarating, particularly for creators of new literature, music, and art. At the same time, while such a cultural vacuum might enable visionaries to fantasize all sorts of tomorrows, which was another characteristic of the early sixties, the era's uncertain

nature made it hard for anyone to plan for the prosaic future that was bound to follow upon the actual upheavals of the times. In other words, a certain yeastiness prevailed. The early sixties, however, offered other lessons. The Cuban Missile Crisis taught Americans and Russians that nuclear war was so dangerous that peaceful coexistence ought to be attempted. As the civil rights movement snowballed, it became clear that the racial crisis was going to be difficult to solve and that legalistic solutions, inevitably involving compromise, could not contain pent-up black energy. In 1963, the future of the women's movement was uncertain. In the long run, the political, social, and cultural changes that took place in the early sixties profoundly affected the way the United States evolved during the last third of the twentieth century.

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John Kennedy accepts the presidential nomination at the Democratic Convention, Los Angeles, July 15, 1960.

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