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978-1-107-04810-2 - The Cambridge Companion to: John F. Kennedy

Edited by Andrew Hoberek

Excerpt

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ANDREW HOBEREK

## Introduction: JFK and/as America

John F. Kennedy was born on May 29, 1917, at the Kennedy family home at 83 Beals Street in the Boston suburb of Brookline, forty-three years before becoming the first president of the United States born in the twentieth century. Lyndon Johnson (b. 1908), Richard Nixon (b. 1913), Gerald Ford (b. 1913), and Ronald Reagan (b. 1911) would all subsequently assume the office having been born earlier in the century than Kennedy, in part because Kennedy was – and remains – the second-youngest person to become president, and the youngest ever elected to the office. (Theodore Roosevelt was forty-two when he became president in 1901 following the assassination of William McKinley.) Youth was a major element of Kennedy's persona, both his own (by presidential standards) and that of the country whose leadership he rose to in large part by constructing a narrative of renewed vigor and purpose.

Kennedy's brief life and career can be sketched in a relatively short space. He was sickly as a child, and during long stints in hospitals and in bed at the family home he developed a taste for reading that set him apart from his businessman-turned-public-servant father, Joseph, and his more active older brother, Joseph Jr. He attended the preparatory school Choate and then, after a brief stint at Princeton that was interrupted by illness, matriculated at Harvard. During his undergraduate years he traveled to the United Kingdom with his ambassador father and wrote the senior thesis that he would publish as his first book, *Why England Slept* (1940), an account of British appeasement policy that his ambitious father promoted (despite its indirect criticism of Joseph Kennedy's own role in keeping England out of the war). Following college Kennedy made tentative stabs at a variety of careers, and then, after being declared unfit for army service because of his chronic health problems, joined (with the help of family connections) the navy. In the navy he first served on and then commanded a series of torpedo boats in the South Pacific. In August 1943, the boat he was then commanding, PT-109, was sunk by a Japanese destroyer, and Kennedy made

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by all accounts creditable efforts to keep his surviving crew together and obtain their rescue. The following year his brother Joseph died in a naval airplane explosion over the English Channel. JFK, after further active duty and a stint in a military hospital, received a number of commendations and became the subject of a magazine article by his friend and onetime romantic rival John Hersey that (again with help from his father) would help launch his political career. He worked briefly as a correspondent for the Hearst newspapers prior to running for, and winning election to, the U.S. House of Representatives as a congressman from Massachusetts. He served three terms in the House, from 1946 to 1952, and then entered the Senate. In 1953, he married the heiress Jacqueline Bouvier, and in 1956 he published his second book (cowritten with his aide Theodore Sorensen), the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Profiles in Courage*. Early in his second Senate term he decided to make a run for the presidency, and after defeating the other candidates for the Democratic nomination and selecting Texas senator Lyndon B. Johnson as his running mate, went on to defeat Vice President Richard Nixon for the office.

Kennedy's presidency got off to a promising start with his early establishment of the Peace Corps, but subsequently received a setback from the disastrous Bay of Pigs affair, when a group of CIA-backed Cuban rebels landed on the island and – after failing to receive air support from the United States – were killed or captured by Fidel Castro's forces. Shortly after the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy had a disappointing series of meetings with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna, and he clashed with Khrushchev over the divided city of Berlin, a dispute that threatened to escalate until Khrushchev ended it by building the Berlin Wall (thereby tacitly acknowledging the city's political division). In 1962, Kennedy sent troops to Mississippi to deal with violence that erupted when the African American activist James Meredith attempted to enroll at the state university. The year 1962 also brought what many consider the signal event of Kennedy's presidency, the Cuban Missile Crisis of October. During this fraught episode, the United States and the USSR hovered on the brink of nuclear war over the question of Soviet missiles in Cuba. Tensions deescalated when Soviet ships turned back from a U.S. blockade of the island, and the crisis ended when the Soviets agreed to remove the missiles in exchange for a U.S. pledge not to invade the island. (The administration also secretly agreed to remove some of the United States' own missiles from Turkey.) Toward the end of 1962, Kennedy gave an important speech announcing that the United States would seek to put a man on the moon, and in early 1963 he followed it up with another calling on Congress to enact civil rights legislation – two goals that would only be achieved under future administrations. Throughout his

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presidency Kennedy had dealt with the legacy of the Eisenhower administration's Cold War maneuvers in Southeast Asia, reaching a tentative (and ultimately very fragile) peace agreement in Laos and increasing the number of U.S. advisers in Vietnam. One of the last actions of his administration was to approve the coup that deposed Ngô Đình Diệm, the unpopular president of South Vietnam, an action that was meant to defuse tension but probably only escalated the progress of what would become the Vietnam War. On November 22, 1963, Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, in circumstances that remain controversial. Shortly afterward, Johnson was sworn in as his successor.

Kennedy's actions as president were significant but do not alone explain his undeniable impact on both the United States in the early 1960s and all of American culture since then. JFK began his political career in 1946, and his terms in the House and Senate took place against the backdrop of a United States navigating a conspicuous national malaise. Postwar prosperity brought fears that the American middle class had been transformed from self-reliant strivers into soulless corporate drones and bored housewives; on the political front, the stifling of dissent during the anticommunist movement of the early 1950s gave way to the placid consensus symbolized by Dwight D. Eisenhower, an even-tempered but not particularly dynamic leader who, until Ronald Reagan beat him out in 1980, was the oldest man elected to the U.S. presidency.

Kennedy's rise, in this climate, was swift and unexpected but retrospectively unsurprising. Presidential elections were (most today would probably say mercifully) much shorter affairs then, and as W. J. Rorabaugh points out, "At the beginning of 1960, half of Americans had never heard of the senator from Massachusetts."<sup>1</sup> Criticized, as Barack Obama would be nearly a half century later, for his lack of experience, Kennedy turned his relative greenness into a strength at every turn, casting himself as the candidate of new ideas and approaches. When, on the eve of the 1960 Democratic Convention, the last Democratic president, Harry S. Truman, suggested that Kennedy might not be ready for the office, and should stand aside to let a more experienced candidate challenge the Republican nominee, Kennedy called a televised press conference to declare, "I do not believe the American people are willing to impose any such test, for this is still a young country, founded by young men 184 years ago today and it is still young in heart, youthful in spirit, and blessed with new young leaders in both parties, in both houses of Congress, and in governor's chairs throughout the country."<sup>2</sup> Truman also suggested that Kennedy's wealthy father, Joseph P. Kennedy, had played a role in his son's success in the Democratic primaries, and indeed this was not an

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insignificant factor: Kennedy was able, for instance, to massively outspend his opponents in the primaries. But his reply to Truman demonstrates a perhaps more important consideration, Kennedy's ability to flatter the nation's voters with a renewed sense of historical agency while positioning himself as the right candidate to take the reins of the reawakening nation. In his acceptance speech at the convention, itself held in the perfectly symbolic western outpost of Los Angeles, Kennedy evoked the phrase that would become the unofficial name of his administration, telling the assembled delegates and the national media audience that "we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier."<sup>3</sup> The author Norman Mailer, covering the convention for *Esquire*, recognized what was happening and went so far as to cast Kennedy as an existential superhero: arguing that Kennedy's experiences following the sinking of PT-109 had brought him face-to-face with the "lonely terrain of experience, of loss and gain, of nearness to death, which leaves [the hero] isolated from the mass of others." Mailer declared that Kennedy, in defiance of the "mass man" and his spokesmen who "would brick-in the modern life with hygiene upon sanity, and middle-brow homily over platitude," represented the principle "that violence was locked with creativity, and adventure was the secret of love."<sup>4</sup>

In constructing this outsize, mythological version of Kennedy, Mailer was only catching up with Kennedy himself. This helps to explain why Kennedy is such an appropriate subject for this Cambridge Companions volume, which seeks to assess the thirty-fifth president's relationship to U.S. art and culture as well as politics. There are, of course, numerous biographical and historical accounts of Kennedy and his presidency, beginning with the memoirs written by his advisers like Sorensen and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. after his assassination and continuing to the present day.<sup>5</sup> But as U.S. literary and cultural critics turn their attention to the post-1945 period, it becomes increasingly clear that Kennedy played a crucial role in the nation's culture, as well. Kennedy features as a prominent player, for instance, in both Sean McCann's 2008 study of the relationship between twentieth-century literature and the presidency and Michael Szalay's 2012 account of the transformation of the Democratic Party around the literary and cinematic exploration of cross-cultural hipness.<sup>6</sup> If the early 1960s was, as Rorabaugh notes, "important because it was an in-between time" of tremendous change between the 1950s and the late 1960s (which generally overshadow it in cultural histories of the twentieth-century United States), then "Kennedy put such a stamp upon [the period] that one can scarcely talk about those years without discussing him."<sup>7</sup> This volume devotes itself to addressing the numerous ways that Kennedy was shaped by – and, even more importantly, shaped – the early 1960s and what came after.

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As John Hellmann argues in his brilliant 1997 study, *The Kennedy Obsession* – a book that belongs on the shelves of anyone interested in post-1945 U.S. culture – Kennedy’s great talent was as a shaper of narrative, a role in which he drew on existing cultural narratives to create what was arguably the most influential story of the twentieth-century United States. As a sickly child, Hellmann writes, the young John Kennedy escaped into a heroic world of British history and literature that later provided the ideal of public service he offered to an American public anxious for a renewed sense of historical agency. Kennedy promoted this ideal not only as the author or coauthor of *Why England Slept* and *Profiles in Courage*, but even more importantly as the protagonist of his own heroic narrative, constructed in conjunction with figures like Hersey, his campaign staff, and his presidential advisers. As the nation’s chief executive, Kennedy used his narrative skills to shape not only his image but his actions and policies: as Hellmann notes, Kennedy “typically responded to specific problems by shaping them into crisis situations,” in the process allowing himself to shape difficult situations “according to his preferred plot and position himself as hero figure.” Kennedy’s propensity for constructing himself as larger-than-life laid the groundwork, unsurprisingly, for his elevation to mythic status by others – beginning with his wife, Jacqueline – after his assassination.<sup>8</sup>

Kennedy’s talent for narrative no doubt underlies his reputation, to which all the contributors to this volume to some degree or another speak, for elevating “style” over “substance.” With the possible exception of George Washington, the most celebrated American presidents are the ones who combined practical politics with deep cultural engagements, although the nature of these engagements has, of course, changed over time. Kennedy was not an Enlightenment polymath like Thomas Jefferson, or a brooding moral philosopher like Abraham Lincoln. Rather he was – in ways anticipated by Teddy and Franklin Roosevelt and equaled only by Ronald Reagan – a master of the twentieth-century mass media and their capacity to mirror back to the nation an idealized image of itself. The historian Alan Brinkley, in a piece for the special *Atlantic* issue commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Kennedy’s assassination, links the ongoing mismatch between public appraisals of his presidency and historians’ more measured evaluations to Kennedy’s status as “a powerful symbol of a lost moment, of a soaring idealism and hopefulness that subsequent generations still try to recover.”<sup>9</sup> While Ronald Reagan was able to capture the Kennedy magic despite his many political differences from his predecessor,<sup>10</sup> Barack Obama largely disappointed hopes that he might become a new JFK. This may have as much to do with the new media environment of the early twenty-first century as with Obama himself – a media environment good at mobilizing the so-called

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netroots for a national election but bad at enabling anyone, even the president, to impose a single coherent narrative onto a host of competing political passions.

This fragmented political environment is apparent in many of the pieces published on the anniversary of the assassination, which deployed Kennedy's legacy in the service of a range of often conflicting political positions. A number of pieces associated Kennedy, unsurprisingly, with the idealism of the 1960s left. Bill Clinton, for instance, contributed a brief piece to the *Atlantic* heralding Kennedy's role as a proponent of civil rights for African Americans,<sup>11</sup> while JFK's nephew Robert F. Kennedy Jr. wrote an article for *Rolling Stone* portraying his uncle as a pacifist who worked with Khrushchev to draw down the Cold War and sought to withdraw Americans from Vietnam.<sup>12</sup> In both cases, there is some evidence for these claims. Kennedy "grew on the job," as Clinton puts it,<sup>13</sup> with reference to civil rights, eventually coming to champion them out of a mixture of opportunism, pragmatism, and principle. And while Kennedy campaigned and governed as a foreign policy hawk, there is general consensus that his experience with the Cuban Missile Crisis convinced him of the necessity to seek peace and led to the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty ending U.S., Soviet, and British aboveground nuclear testing.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps less expected than Clinton and RFK Jr.'s encomia, however, were the raft of essays by conservatives claiming Kennedy for the right.<sup>15</sup> While these writers' arguments tended to cherry-pick evidence such as Kennedy's support for a reduction in income tax rates – a move that was in fact recommended by Kennedy's Keynesian advisers and encountered conservative opposition<sup>16</sup> – and are fairly easily rebutted by historians,<sup>17</sup> they demonstrate the way that public memory of the Kennedy administration has floated free of the actual facts and come to express nostalgia for political agency per se. Even a piece like John Dickerson's *Slate* essay on Kennedy's failure to pass Medicare during his presidency (Johnson would eventually sign it into law in 1965<sup>18</sup>) describes this failure in order to provide an implicitly hopeful forerunner of Obama's struggles to uphold the Affordable Care Act: Kennedy fought with Congress and the AMA and was unable to pass Medicare, a fact that "led to the kind of appraisals that President Obama now faces as his approval ratings and personal ratings hit new lows"; eventually, however, Medicare became law and Kennedy achieved his "vigorous reputation and vibrant legacy."<sup>19</sup>

Dickerson's account of Kennedy's efforts to pass Medicare through a combination of public outreach and backroom political maneuvering does, however, get us closer to a fuller picture of his presidency than the frequent tendency to associate him with achievements – such as the 1964 Civil Rights

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Act and the 1969 moon landing – that only came about after his assassination. Irving Bernstein's history, *Promises Kept*, similarly focuses on the difficult behind-the-scenes negotiations responsible for not only Kennedy's real presidential accomplishments, such as the Peace Corps, but also the initiatives that were not successful in his lifetime and others that are no longer widely remembered, such as his tax cut. Bernstein's account at times feels more like a description of the Obama presidency than of (our image of) Kennedy's, with members of Congress obstructing legislation or forcing byzantine compromises, and interest groups such as white southerners and (in the case of Medicare) the American Medical Association doing all they could to block the president's initiatives.

What distinguishes the Kennedy era from our own, however, is that Kennedy's opponents, who included Southerners in his own party as well as Republicans, did not believe that their role was to block the operations of government per se. This also marks the fundamental difference between Kennedy's conception of governance and that of Reagan. Insofar as Kennedy posed his new model of American civic agency in opposition to the organization man whose suburban lifestyle and meaningless corporate employment dominated U.S. cultural criticism and literature during the 1950s,<sup>20</sup> Kennedy certainly anticipates the extreme critique of institutions that links both the 1960s Left and the post-Reagan Right. But Kennedy and his acolytes, unlike these later figures, remained committed to the possibilities of working within institutions. Rorabaugh concurs that Kennedy's experiences in the navy played a major role in shaping his subsequent persona, but argues that they provided something more complicated than a romantic model of frontier or existential individualism:

Kennedy's success was generational. It represented the coming to power of the junior officers of World War II. The war had both enabled and forced that generation to break down stereotypes and class barriers, and its officers had devised ways to promote collective achievement. Exceptionally meritocratic, they measured each other mainly in terms of competence, and yet they (unlike the baby boomers) also respected hierarchy as necessary to provide leadership for large, powerful organizations . . . Their style was aggressive. Attacking the political structure directly, they seized command from below.<sup>21</sup>

Kennedy and his acolytes, unlike the counterculture generation whose rebellion against institutions may well have made them susceptible to Reagan's antigovernment message, remained committed to the possibilities of working within organizations. They distinguished themselves from organization men not on the grounds of total rejection but on the basis of their desire to infuse bureaucracies with forms of charismatic agency capable of reanimating American individualism.



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Two fictional naval officers of the 1960s, *Star Trek*'s Captain James T. Kirk and the naval commander/MI-6 spy James Bond (the latter a Kennedy favorite), are classic figures of the Kennedy era in that, as action heroes who work within the chains of command of large organizations, they balance obedience to orders with manly individual initiative. Kennedy's fascination with a certain version of the military capable of harmonizing obedience and initiative is evident in his support of the Green Berets and counterinsurgency more generally,<sup>22</sup> but a similar model of organizational agency also shapes such nonmilitary initiatives as the Peace Corps. As Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman notes in her history of the group, "The notion of the existential act was implicit in the Peace Corps, from the Kennedy and [Sargent] Shriver emphasis on the act of going ('you will be the personification of a special group of young Americans,' Kennedy told volunteers) to the organizational unwillingness to plan the volunteer assignment in detail lest such plans hamper the moment of epiphany in which individual meaning was realized."<sup>23</sup> What Thomas McCormick identifies as the Green Berets' and Peace Corps' shared status as "youthful elites" is a version of youth culture that we do not generally think of when we think of the 1960s,<sup>24</sup> and indeed the failures of U.S. policy in Vietnam dealt it a significant blow. But in fact it remained a significant component of post-JFK U.S. culture for quite some time.

More than just the thirty-fifth president, then, Kennedy embodied and rewrote American identity at a crucial transitional period. At a time when Americans feared that their traditional individualism was threatened by the increasing size and scale of organizations, Kennedy made it possible to reimagine forms of individualism within such enormous organizations as the government and the military. But although Kennedy shared the Democratic Party's post-New Deal faith in government as an agent of positive change, his investment in style as a medium of individual agency, while directed at the time toward getting things done within institutions, laid the groundwork for more thoroughgoing forms of anti-institutionalism that would later dominate the U.S. Left and, more recently, the U.S. Right.

Of course, while this transformation lies at the center of Kennedy's life and legacy, his place in U.S. culture goes well beyond it. The fact that he came onto the scene at such a charged moment in U.S. culture, and played such an instrumental role in shaping what would come, helps to explain why the keynote in accounts of JFK is so often ambiguity. Born into a politically and socially disadvantaged ethnic and religious group, JFK came to exemplify both the mainstreaming of that group and the transformation of white ethnicity into a source of affirmative pride. A committed Cold Warrior who defended his fellow Irish Catholic Joe McCarthy in the 1950s, he became a hero of the peace-loving counterculture even as its



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members condemned the war he helped start. A beneficiary on numerous levels of white, male privilege, he helped expand American identity, and in some cases actual American institutions, to include those – young people, people of color – who had previously been excluded. The authors of the chapters that follow take up Kennedy’s richly transformative role in accounts that address themes central to his background, his administration, and his legacy. The chapters collectively make a case for Kennedy’s interest to literary critics, historians, and general readers alike by highlighting his role as beneficiary, proponent, or both of enormous changes in U.S. society and culture. Many of these changes are associated with the decade of the 1960s that Kennedy early came to embody, and the volume emphasizes Kennedy’s relationship to this decade: both the later countercultural period and the early 1960s that have currently become a renewed source of fascination thanks to the popularity of *Mad Men*. But the contributors also relate Kennedy to numerous other changes, not tied to a specific decade, in twentieth-century U.S. culture: changes in racial demographics, changes in Americans’ relationship to their government, changes in the public status of intellectuals. Finally, the authors emphasize Kennedy’s engagement with, and role in shaping, global events – the Cold War, of course, but also the global anticolonial revolutions that Kennedy, more than any president, helped make central to U.S. foreign policy.

Eoin Cannon’s chapter “Kennedy, Boston, and Harvard,” begins the volume by placing Kennedy in the context of the early twentieth-century revolution in American ethnicity and class, and the particular forms it took in Boston and Cambridge. Beginning with the local, national, and international influence wielded by Kennedy’s maternal grandfather, John Francis Fitzgerald, and his father, Joseph Kennedy, and continuing through Kennedy’s own coming-of-age and ascent to the presidency, Cannon tells a dual tale: of the transformation of Irish Americans from powerful but socially excluded others to members of the mainstream white middle class, and of Harvard’s reconfiguration, under the presidency of James Bryant Conant, to a new vision of elite American status. Kennedy, who rose to the presidency through a calculated combination of effacing and emphasizing his ethnic background, both benefited from and helped cement these massive changes.

Paul Giles’s “Kennedy and the Catholic Church” looks more closely at a major aspect of Kennedy’s ethnic background, his Roman Catholic religion. Giles addresses Kennedy’s struggle with the perception among many voters that he would do the bidding of the Vatican rather than promote U.S. interests, and the way in which his presidency, by allaying these fears, helped transform Catholicism into a mainstream American religion. Giles also

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discusses Kennedy's relationship to the Catholic intellectual tradition, illuminating the subtle but important differences between Kennedy's thought and that of the mainstream Protestant tradition central to U.S. thinkers before and since, including Martin Luther King.

In "The Kennedy-Nixon Debates: The Launch of Television's Transformation of U.S. Politics and Popular Culture," Mary Ann Watson takes up the chestnut that Kennedy won the 1960 election because he was a better television debater than Richard Nixon, using it as an entrée point to discuss the transformations in U.S. politics and culture wrought by the new mass medium. Noting that "sometimes folktales carry truth and conventional wisdom is right on the money," Watson addresses Kennedy's commitment not only to style more generally but to a specific kind of style more suited to television broadcasts than to traditional political venues. She also discusses Kennedy's role in shaping the medium through his influential appointment of Newton Minow as chairman of the FCC, and the way in which entertainment as well as news programming responded to the Kennedy presidency.

While these opening chapters consider major transformations in U.S. culture that paved the way for Kennedy's ascent to the presidency, Sean McCann's "Investing in Persons': The Political Culture of Kennedy Liberalism" turns to the transformations in U.S. government and politics that JFK himself wrought. Using Philip Roth's 1959 novella, *Goodbye Columbus*, specifically its protagonist's desire to escape the constraints of bureaucracy and find a fulfilling career, as a backdrop, McCann discusses how Kennedy reimagined government service as a form of "guerrilla" activity within institutions. In doing so, McCann points out, Kennedy promoted a cult of disinterested national service over – and thereby broke the power of – interest groups like unions. The "desire to rise above the routines of ordinary life and to escape the bargaining of conventional politics," McCann notes, left many of the accomplishments of the New Deal era "without grounding in powerful interest groups, and thus vulnerable to retrenchment when they met conservative opposition." By the late 1960s, he argues – turning to Roth's more cynical take on public service in his 1969 *Portnoy's Complaint* – "the Kennedy era's vision of elite cultural leadership" was fading away, to be replaced by a more sweeping distrust of institutions in general.

The expansion of civil rights for African Americans is often considered one of the major achievements of the Kennedy administration, and in "JFK and the Civil Rights Movement" Douglas Field offers a richly detailed analysis of Kennedy's ambiguous legacy on this front. Focusing this chapter through James Baldwin's understandably suspicious attitude toward the administration, and describing subsequent historiographic debates over whether JFK