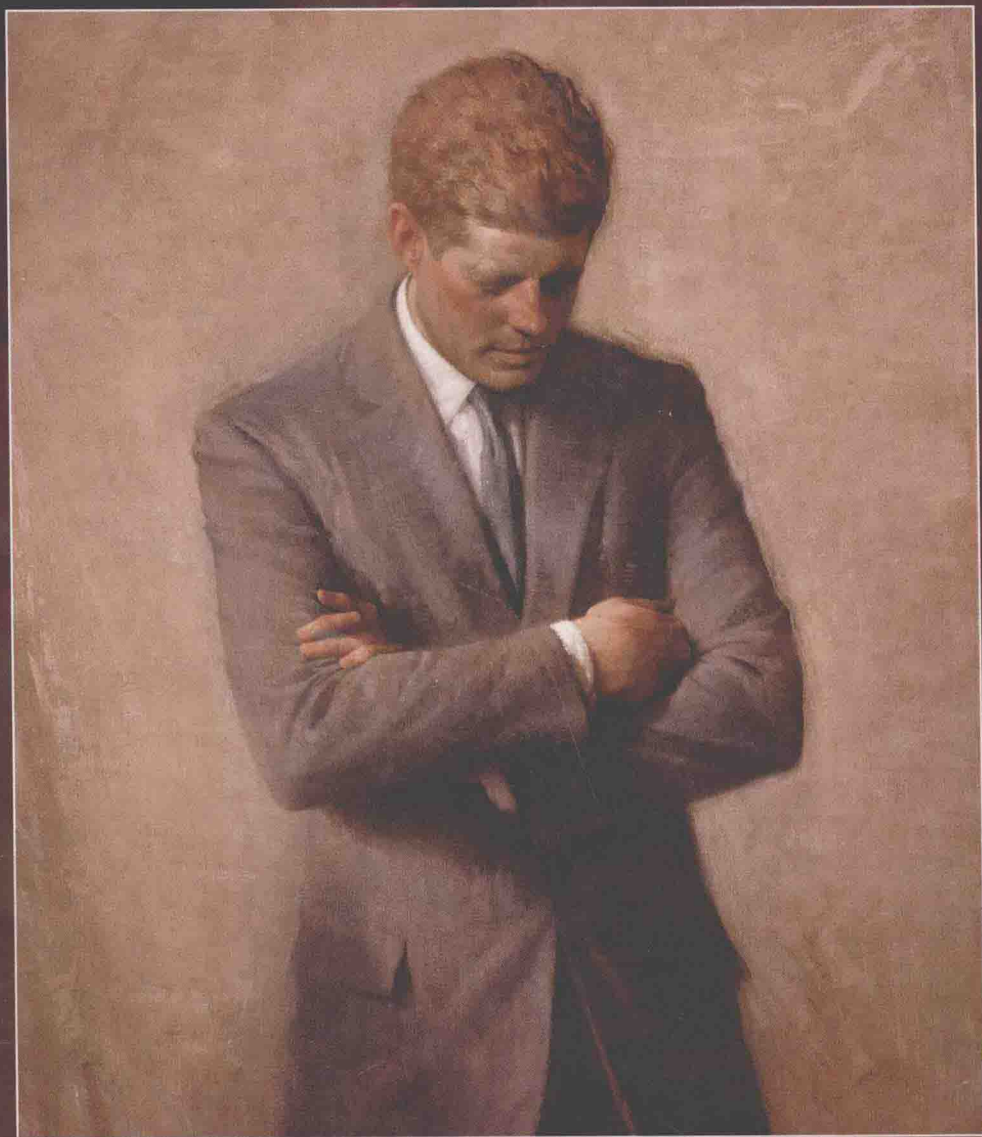


THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO

JOHN F. KENNEDY

EDITED BY ANDREW HOBEREK



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University of Missouri



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CHRONOLOGY OF KENNEDY'S LIFE

- 1917 John Fitzgerald Kennedy is born to Joseph Kennedy Sr. and Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy on May 29 in Brookline, Massachusetts. He will become the first U.S. president to be born in the twentieth century.
- 1920 Kennedy contracts scarlet fever and is hospitalized for more than two months at Boston City Hospital.
- 1927 The Kennedy family moves to Riverdale, the Bronx, New York, where John attends the Riverdale Country School.
- 1931-35 Kennedy attends the Choate Boarding School in Connecticut.
- 1934 Kennedy is hospitalized at Yale-New Haven Hospital, then admitted to the Mayo Clinic, where he is diagnosed with colitis.
- 1935 Kennedy travels to England with his parents and sister, but he cuts the trip short because of health problems. He enrolls at Princeton but drops out shortly thereafter after becoming ill.
- 1936 Kennedy transfers to Harvard.
- 1937 President Franklin Roosevelt names Joseph Kennedy Sr. ambassador to Great Britain.
- 1938 Kennedy accompanies his father and his elder brother Joseph Kennedy Jr. to England.
- 1940 Kennedy graduates from Harvard University. He publishes his senior thesis as the book *Why England Slept*. Kennedy attends business school at Stanford.
- 1941 After health problems prevent him from joining the army, Kennedy enlists in the U.S. Navy.

- 1942-43 Kennedy serves on a series of torpedo boats in the South Pacific, eventually rising to command several. A Japanese destroyer rams his boat PT-109 in August 1943. Despite suffering injuries that aggravate his chronic lower back condition, Kennedy performs bravely in leading his crew to their eventual rescue. He is awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Medal and the Purple Heart.
- 1944 Joseph Kennedy Jr. dies on August 12 when his plane explodes during a mission in Europe. The *New Yorker* publishes John Hersey's article "Survival," based on JFK's experience with PT-109, in May; *Reader's Digest* prints a condensed version (at the urging of Joseph Kennedy Sr.) in August.
- 1945 Kennedy is discharged from the navy and becomes a correspondent for the Hearst newspapers.
- 1946 Kennedy runs for Congress and is elected representative for Massachusetts' Eleventh Congressional District.
- 1947 While on a trip to England, Kennedy is diagnosed with Addison's disease, although the public will not learn of his condition until after his election to the presidency.
- 1948 Kennedy's sister Kathleen dies in a plane crash. JFK is elected to a second term in the House.
- 1950 Kennedy is elected to a third term in the House.
- 1952 With his younger brother Robert as his campaign manager, Kennedy defeats the incumbent, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., to become a Massachusetts senator.
- 1953 Kennedy marries Jacqueline Bouvier.
- 1954 Kennedy undergoes spinal surgery to address his chronic back pain.
- 1956 Kennedy publishes *Profiles in Courage*, written with his speechwriter, Theodore Sorensen. At the Democratic National Convention, Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver defeats JFK to become Adlai Stevenson's running mate in the upcoming presidential election.
- 1957 Kennedy is awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *Profiles in Courage*. His daughter, Caroline, is born. He obtains positions on

the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and on Harvard University's Board of Overseers. In July, he delivers a speech in Congress supporting Algeria in its struggle for independence from France.

- 1958 Kennedy is elected to a second term in the Senate.
- 1960 Kennedy publishes *The Strategy of Peace*. He wins the Democratic nomination for president and chooses Lyndon Johnson as his running mate. During the campaign he participates in the first-ever televised presidential debates with Richard Nixon. He telephones Coretta Scott King when her husband, Martin Luther King Jr., is jailed in Birmingham, Alabama, and Robert Kennedy works behind the scenes to obtain King's release. Kennedy defeats Nixon in a very close election. Shortly thereafter Kennedy's son, John Jr., is born. Kennedy delivers his inaugural address featuring the famous line, "My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."
- 1961 Shortly after being sworn in as president, Kennedy appoints his brother Robert as attorney general and establishes the Peace Corps by executive order. In April, his administration backs an attempted invasion of Cuba that ends in disaster at the Bay of Pigs when the invaders are captured by Fidel Castro's forces. In May, Kennedy sends Lyndon Johnson to meet with President Ngô Đình Diệm of South Vietnam about combating the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev hold a summit in Vienna in June. Kennedy and Khrushchev clash over the status of divided Berlin, ending when Khrushchev authorizes the construction of the Berlin Wall. The United States and Latin American nations join in the Alliance for Progress, a program designed to forestall future communist revolutions such as Cuba's through development aid.
- 1962 CBS and NBC simulcast *A Tour of the White House with Mrs. John F. Kennedy* on Valentine's Day, garnering a then-record audience of 56 million viewers. In April, US Steel executives renege on an understanding, reached during negotiations with the United Steelworkers, to not raise prices in exchange for concessions from the union; Kennedy pursues a variety of strategies (including canceling government

contracts and having the FBI harass steel executives) to win a reversal. Responding to cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin's 1961 feat of becoming the first man in space, Kennedy proposes a U.S. mission to the moon. In September, Robert Kennedy sends 400 federal marshals to the University of Mississippi to facilitate the enrollment of the black student James Meredith; JFK commits 3,000 U.S. troops when violence erupts. The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 14-28 begins when the United States obtains photos of Soviet nuclear missiles on the island. The tense stalemate between the United States and the Soviet Union ends when the Soviets agree to remove the missiles and the United States promises never to invade Cuba (and secretly agrees to dismantle some of its own missiles in Europe). Kennedy proposes cuts in income and corporate taxes to spur economic growth.

1963

In June, Kennedy gives a speech calling on Congress to enact civil rights legislation. He also during that month establishes the Advisory Council on the Arts, the forerunner of the National Endowment for the Arts, and travels to West Berlin (where he delivers his famous "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech), Ireland, and the Vatican. In August, Kennedy's son Patrick is born and dies after just two days from a lung condition. At the end of August, Martin Luther King Jr., other civil rights leaders, and 100,000 others participate in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. In September the United States, the USSR, and the United Kingdom sign a treaty banning nuclear testing aboveground, in the air, and underwater. A November coup undertaken with U.S. approval deposes Ngô Đình Diệm. Kennedy is assassinated in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963. Lyndon Johnson is sworn in as president on Air Force One, as it sits on Love Field.

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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

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

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."¹ 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."² 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

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."³ 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."⁴

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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."⁷ 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.