

THE POLITICS OF JOHN F. KENNEDY

Edmund S. Ions

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POLITICAL SCIENCE



THE POLITICS OF JOHN F. KENNEDY

By

EDMUND S. IONS

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JOHN F. KENNEDY

The Politics
of
John F. Kennedy

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General Editor's Preface

The World Studies Series is designed to make a new and important contribution to the study of modern history. Each volume in the Series will provide students in sixth forms, Colleges of Education and Universities with a range of contemporary material drawn from many sources, not only from official and semiofficial records, but also from contemporary historical writing and from reliable journals. The material is selected and introduced by a scholar who establishes the context of his subject and suggests possible lines of discussion and enquiry that can accompany a study of the documents.

Through these volumes the student can learn how to read and assess historical documents. He will see how the contemporary historian works and how historical judgements are formed. He will learn to discriminate among a number of sources and to weigh evidence. He is confronted with recent instances of what Professor Butterfield has called 'the human predicament' revealed by history; evidence concerning the national, racial and ideological factors which at present hinder or advance man's progress towards some form of world society.

Mr. Ions has made an ingenious blend of what the man, Kennedy, actually said as President and what others said about him before and after his assassination. Perhaps the greatest value of these documents lies in the opportunity they afford the reader to observe steadily and distinctly the difference between person and office during the Kennedy regime.

The selection of documents provides clues to an understanding of that White House incumbent, whose humanity is comparable in interest with Abraham Lincoln's.

JAMES HENDERSON

Volume Editor's Preface

The President of the United States is inevitably a subject of world interest today. Whoever he is and whatever his policies, the effects of his personality and his views reach out to every corner of the globe. Some Presidents of the United States have ranked with the great men of history. Others have been judged mediocre. It is too early to say whether history will include John Fitzgerald Kennedy's name among the truly great Presidents. What is beyond doubt is that his Presidency was one of the most eventful and significant in American history. The readings in this book help to illustrate and explain why this is so.

The book is divided into seven Parts:

Parts One and Two examine the ideas and policies which Kennedy brought with him to the White House when he was elected to the Presidency.

Part Three describes the talented group of men surrounding President Kennedy as his chosen administrators and aides, and also explores Kennedy's method of conducting his high office. *Parts Four and Five* deal with the complex problems which tested Kennedy's qualities of leadership at home and overseas, and his response to those problems.

Part Six explores various aspects of the Presidency and further discusses Kennedy's conception of the office.

Part Seven presents three appraisals of the Kennedy Presidency from three different perspectives.

NOTE—In many of the documents in this book readers will encounter American spellings, as all documents are presented in their original format.

E. S. I.

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The book is divided into seven parts in order to distinguish various aspects of a large subject. However, documents and articles appearing in one part may be quite relevant to topics occurring elsewhere in the readings. References in the Introduction are to the numbered documents in the main text of the book. The Editor's references in the documents are numbered and given at the end of each reading.

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Introduction

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was President of the United States for two years, ten months, and two days. His term of office was cut short by assassination on 22 November 1963. Under the American Constitution, a President's term of office lasts four years, and he will normally count on a further term in order to realize many of his policies and legislative proposals. John Kennedy was denied this opportunity by the assassin's act at a time when his re-election for a second term was virtually certain.

During the comparatively short period of his Presidency, however, Kennedy made a remarkable impact. He kindled an extraordinary degree of enthusiasm and a sense of purpose in the American people. He also earned genuine respect not only from the people he led, but all around the world. The explanation for this lay chiefly in the sense of new beginnings and fresh approaches he seemed to bring to old problems. This was allied to the professional competence shown by his Administration in Washington.

The new spirit brought in by the Kennedy government was known collectively as the 'New Frontier' spirit. It was made up of a large number of factors, some of them highly diverse, and care is needed in using the term. There were disappointments in Kennedy's Presidency as there always are in high elective offices which depend on a number of variable factors for sustained success. Kennedy fired the imagination of the American people, but he did not inspire the federal legislature, the United States Congress. It was left to his successor, President Johnson, to realize many of Kennedy's legislative proposals. Again, Kennedy had some notable successes in the conduct of foreign policy, but there were also severe setbacks. There is even an air of paradox in the contrast between Kennedy's remarkable popularity in America and his legislative performance as President. The reasons for

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this lie in the complex relationships which exist between the President's office and the powers of Congress.

It is not the purpose of the present book to analyse the relationship between Kennedy and the United States Congress during his term of office, but it should be borne in mind that American government is largely a dialogue between the President, the Executive branch of the government, and Congress, the legislative branch. Each has certain well defined powers under the Constitution and guards them jealously. Congress in particular is jealous of encroachments by the Executive branch of the government, and this sets limits to the amount a President can achieve, whatever his appeal or popularity (see Document 27).

With these cautions in mind, however, it remains true that John Kennedy captured the imagination of the American people and went on to gain world-wide esteem for his conduct of affairs as President of the United States of America.

How President Kennedy formulated the ideas and policies summed up in the term 'the New Frontier', how he pursued those policies and how he came to earn a world reputation as a leader is the subject of this book. Documents and extracts have been selected to illustrate these themes. Together, they go some way towards explaining the deep sense of shock felt by many millions of people when the news came that President Kennedy had been assassinated.

A discussion of the 'New Frontier' can be approached through the career and character of John F. Kennedy himself. In many ways, John Kennedy was trained for the Presidency from birth. For two generations on either side of the family, the tradition was one of active participation in politics. Kennedy's maternal grandfather was mayor of the city of Boston and three times elected a United States Congressman. The paternal grandfather, Patrick Kennedy, was closely identified with the political 'bosses' who controlled politics in Boston, and an influential member of the Democratic Party in the same city. Patrick Kennedy's son Joseph, the father of the late President of the United States, maintained the family connection with the Party and counted among his many influential friends President Franklin Roosevelt. By careful investment and speculation,

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Joseph Kennedy amassed a large fortune on the stock market and in real estate. Undoubtedly his great wealth eased the path of his sons, John, Robert and Edward, when each in turn sought preferment in national politics. Although he did not enter practical politics himself, Joseph Kennedy was very anxious that at least one of his sons should do so.

The identification of the Irish with politics in America is one of the most interesting parts of American history. It belongs to the social as well as to the political history of the nation, for it can be argued that many, if not most, of the Irish immigrants who sought power, fame, or fortune in American politics were spurred by social aspirations as well as by political ambitions. The two are inextricably bound up in the history of a family like the Kennedys. A brief historical digression will underline the significance of this and provide some insights into the drive and ambition shown by John Fitzgerald Kennedy in his path to the Presidency. It will also provide some clues to the intriguing character John Kennedy presents to the student of politics.

When, towards the middle of the nineteenth century, the Irish began to emigrate to America in large numbers, they tended to congregate in the larger cities of the eastern seaboard of America. Boston, on the north-east coast, received an ever-increasing tide of immigrants. From the first, the Catholic Irish were marked out by their speech, their visible poverty and of course by their religion from the old established families of Protestant orthodoxy and genteel sensibility. The Bostonians often showed an open contempt for the Irish labourers who thronged the waterfront bars, ready to accept the meanest jobs in the city. Like many other immigrant families, the Kennedys of the late nineteenth century often saw job advertisements which stated: 'No Irish need apply'.

In this situation, the Irish knew, or could discover by painful experience, that Boston society and its avenues of advancement were not open to them. Yet in a democracy which gave the vote to every naturalized American citizen, the individual immigrant held a tiny source of power. Moreover (as their natural gregariousness soon demonstrated at election times), Irish immigrants voting together held potential sources of real power. Politics became a possible road to personal advancement. As more and more immigrants swarmed in, those who had already

witnessed elections in the wards of cities like Boston recognized the value of political organization.

At the same time, the older established Protestant families of Boston were less and less inclined to play their traditional role in political affairs, which seemed to them increasingly distasteful. Over a period, they largely deserted active politics, especially at the level of the city or the ward, where elections were won and lost. This was the gap which men like Patrick Kennedy were more than ready to fill towards the end of the nineteenth century. If their methods of organizing the vote to win elections in the wards were not always admirable or honest, this was chiefly because in the rough and tumble of ward politics there was little give and take.

Fresh waves of immigration near the end of the century brought further competition from those who sought the same positions of power and influence at the city hall or the state house. By the beginning of the present century, Italian, German, Greek and Jewish immigrants were competing in ward politics in the larger cities of the east coast.

As part of the first big wave of immigrants in the nineteenth century, the Irish were well placed in what became to some degree a fight for survival. The stakes in the game were largely connected with favours the city hall could dispense, especially jobs in the rapidly expanding cities. The ability to influence, or better, to determine, the election result in a particular city or even in a ward was crucial. Here, assisted by their numbers, their knowledge of the language and their natural gregariousness, the Irish eventually dominated the politics of many cities.

A local Irish politician could often satisfy his political ambition at the level of alderman or perhaps with the mayoralty of the city. As their control of local politics extended, however, many Irish immigrants looked towards national politics for the realization of their ambitions. Thus, although John Kennedy's grandfather was proud to be Mayor of Boston, it was as a United States Congressman in Washington that he found greater satisfaction and enjoyed more esteem and influence. These political skills and the instincts developed with them were passed on in the Kennedy family from father to son.

Joseph Kennedy, the father of the late President, used his wealth to give his sons the best education which money, and

some influence, could buy. John Kennedy was educated at an expensive preparatory school in New England and then at Harvard, the most illustrious university in the United States.

At first, the young John Kennedy showed little enthusiasm for his studies. Following his father's advice, however, he spent a short time at the London School of Economics, where the brilliant and provocative socialist Harold Laski was lecturing and where other radical thinkers could influence his mind. With the advent of war in Europe, John Kennedy returned to Harvard with a new enthusiasm for studies in politics and history. He was also interested in economics, though he never performed well in the subject. He graduated with honours and wrote a highly commended undergraduate thesis dealing with the British policy of appeasement towards Hitler in the thirties. The thesis was later published under the title *Why England Slept* (see p. 223) and became a best seller on both sides of the Atlantic.

When America entered the European war in 1943, Kennedy was initially debarred from active service by a back injury he suffered at school whilst playing football. When conscripted, he held a number of sedentary jobs in United States naval bases, but by combining his personal initiative with his father's influence in high places he finally realized his ambition to be called for active service. He became commander of a torpedo boat in the Far East and saw a good deal of action there. When the torpedo boat he commanded was rammed by a Japanese destroyer Kennedy showed outstanding heroism in rescuing his comrades and bringing those who survived to safety. He was subsequently decorated for his action.

The war over, his steps turned to journalism, and he reported news from Britain and Europe on a variety of political events. In 1946, he decided to enter politics, and in that year stood for election to the United States House of Representatives in one of the poorest Congressional Districts in Boston. This gave his father immense satisfaction as it continued the family tradition. The father's hopes had earlier centred on his eldest son Joseph, but those hopes ended when Joseph was killed in the war of 1939-45.

The 1946 election was the first to be fought by the twenty-nine year old John Kennedy, and the professional politicians in

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