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Pols 318: The Presidency

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Professor Day

Kennedy: Ideas That Live On

On election night in 1960, John F. Kennedy went to bed still not knowing whether he had won the Presidency because it was considered to be such a close election. He feared that Nixon would call for a recount in certain areas. He was woke up the next day by his daughter, Caroline, saying “Good Morning, Mr. President”( Loviny). Many people considered him one of the best presidents and were loved by many people too. Not only did John F. Kennedy capture the hearts and minds of America and much of the world but so did his family. Jackie Kennedy was thought to be a goddess and was worshiped by many in India. Everyone often wanted to see her more than the President. Although, John F. Kennedy was considered one of the most influential presidents of all time and was known to be a very charismatic person. Whenever we are in times of crisis, we often rally behind the authorities; so, is his support because of times of crisis or his actual decisions?

The general public doesn’t know very much about his Presidency because most people have researched and focused on his death. This could be because there is still a lot of confusion and mystery that still surrounds his death. However, the focus should not be on the tragic history of John F. Kennedy but the good that he did in while in office. He had a lot of hard decisions and made many major programs that still effect the nation today. He had to overcome many issues and made many precedents.

First thing to look at is what were the background events that went into Kennedy’s decisions? Family is always an important factor in whom we become and the way we make decisions. However, John was never the favorite in the family, the favorite was always Joe; in fact when they were tested on IQ’s and John’s came back higher than his older brother’s score, no one could believe it. Their parents went to the school to fight about them mixing up the scores. Despite not being the favorite, John still had a lot of support. He had many siblings and always had strong support from his younger brother, Bobby.

Another important factor is education. John went to Choate Boarding School. He was never seen as a model student but he was very well known for being clever and independent minded. When he graduated, he went to Harvard. He always showed a great interest in politics and especially international relations. He also helped his father in many foreign affair matters. It seemed to be a family thing to be in politics; his grandfather was a governor and his brother a senator. Although, he was never expected to achieve high goals, there were letters from his father saying that he didn’t expect much but to please try. Kennedy did prove many wrong after he got out of college and by holding offices. He brother, Bobby, was always right by his side, pushing him to go further and supporting him.

Even though Kennedy was born into politics and had held offices, he had big hurdles to get over in the minds of the public when he was running for presidency. He was young, inexperienced, a Roman Catholic and very rich. He strategically used televised appearances to change how the public viewed him. In these appearances he would be with people who were liked by the people and he answered questions intelligently and within reason.

He made several speeches about religion. His speeches were well thought out. His speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association stated that what church he believed in should only matter to him but that he believed in America. He believed in America where the separation of church and state are absolute. That no public funds would go to support any church or church school. He believed that no man should be denied an office because his religion is different. That America should not be Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish. No official should request the advice from the Pope or any other ecclesiastical source. He also stated that no Catholic had ever been president. And in other speeches he stated that no one asked him if he was Catholic when he joined the Navy. He also said “I was denied the right to be president on the day I was baptized.” His statements hit hard with the public.

When he debated with Nixon, he came across to the people that he would make a good president. This televised event had 70 million viewers. According to Charles Kenney, in 1950 only 11 percent of American households had televisions, and just ten years later 88 percent have them. Kennedy was the first President to have that much coverage. Some say that they debated the issues pretty much the same and that it really came down to appearance. Kennedy visited the set the day before the debate. He found out what the background of the set was going to look like where the cameras were going to be placed. Kennedy was very charismatic and appealing, while Nixon was sickly looking against the background. Kennedy looked at the cameras when he answered questions which made the people at home feel like he was talking to them, whereas Nixon looked at Kennedy. He also studied questions that might be asked about Khrushchev, which made him look confident about handling foreign affairs.

During the presidential debates Kennedy could critique past decisions, but when he took office he claimed that he inherited all the nation’s problems. One of the first major issues that President Kennedy had to deal with was the CIA’s invasion of Castro’s Cuba. He was looking out for America’s best interests. Cuba, a communist state, is under a hundred miles away from the United States. At that range, missiles could easily reach the United States. He wanted a non-communist government that would be friendly to the United States. It would be better if it looked like the Cuban exiles were the ones to over throw Castro not the United States starting another world war. Cuba had ties with the other world leader, the Soviet Union. If it was learned that the United States was involved with the exile of Castro, then the Soviets might take their aggression out on Berlin. It would also cause problems with the United States’ European allies. It could also have invoked an invasion on United States soil. Kennedy was always thinking about strengthening relationships around the world.

He wanted our country to stay strong, free and independent. President Eisenhower and Vice President Nixon both supported military dictators, which made relations with Latin America difficult. President Kennedy wanted to make the relations better and proposed the Alliance for Progress. Every Latin American republic signed on to the alliance except for Cuba.

The CIA was formed in 1947 which most of the members had college backgrounds like Kennedy, so he fit in very well and respected them. The CIA was pressuring Kennedy; he had trusted the CIA and knew they had previously succeeded, so he authorized the invasion (Bay of Pigs). Almost 1,200 Cuban exiles surrendered and more than 100 were killed (Sidey).

He soon had learned not to trust anyone else with major decisions other than himself. It was a lesson well learned and was good that it was learned early. If this didn’t happen when it did the United States could have been very different. After this the President was determined to make Cuba a non-communist state. Kennedy almost overnight devised a counterinsurgency policy with Bobby Kennedy working on making this happen.

Kennedy put people around him that he could trust. He also used a diversified group of people, not depending on one group. One group he relied heavily upon was the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (the INR) which is a part of the State Department. With all of these people around, he could make better decisions.

Kennedy wanted world peace but he also thought that he needed to keep one step ahead of the enemy, which at the time was the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union’s military budget was in question, but they were secretly increasing it. The budget was so secretive that to this date we don’t know how much they had. The figures vary greatly; some say that only a few know the true figures and some say that no one knows them. This makes it very difficult to know where your enemy stands if you do not know what they are capable of. It was about showing who had the most money and power even if that meant deception. Intelligence was the major key, but also building up strong relationships around the world was a major key in the plan for peace.

Before Kennedy was President, Latin America was getting aggressive towards the United States. They had felt that they had helped the United States during World War II and then America was now helping Europe and Japan. With the Alliance for Progress, ten year program, Kennedy was strengthening the Latin America republic so that it would be stronger to fight off communist leadership. It was a very expensive program but Kennedy thought it was worth it, helping the Latin Americans achieve better living conditions and education that would promote democracy.

In 1962, Kennedy’s intelligence had secretly taken pictures of the Soviets building nuclear missile sites in Cuba. It was a thirteen day stand-off. Kennedy went to the Americans through television and told them about the threat. Most thought this was the start of a nuclear war, but instead Kennedy reached an agreement with the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev. They would remove Cuban missiles and the United States would not invade Cuba. Cuba could be a major turning point in the future of the United States. Kennedy knew how important it would be to have Cuba as a friendly ally, but the Soviets knew how important Cuba was too.

Kennedy with his advisors came up with different ways to handle the situation. A few of the suggestions were to bomb the nuclear site or have a full out war on Cuba. The President chose a different option and surrounded the island with navy ships so that Khrushchev could not get any more nuclear weapons into Cuba and then gave him an ultimatum, to remove the nuclear weapons.

The Soviets, on the other hand, had missiles pointed at them from Western Europe and Turkey, if they could get their own missiles pointed at the United States that would give them some leverage. This worked in his favor when Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis agreed to removing missiles from Turkey which was kept secret for 25 years. He also hoped that it would keep the United States from invading Cuba. Khrushchev then removed his nuclear weapons from Cuba.

The Soviets and Americans were getting along better but each was putting more emphasis into their military. They established a “Hotline” from the Kremlin to the White House and signed a Nuclear Test Ban treaty.

After World War II, the nuclear race was on. United States, Great Britain and the Soviet Union were all conducting nuclear tests for weapons to control each other. Nuclear weapons were the ultimate control power. It caused fear among the people, even if it was not used. The more nuclear weapons you have in your arsenal the more power you have. In 1959, radioactive fallout was found in the United States. People began finding out about the dangers of this and decided something needed to be done. In 1961, the Soviet Union began atmospheric testing again. In 1962, the United States began atmospheric testing again, too. They tested 31 nuclear weapons and one of the biggest bombs that were 4,000 more destructive than the bomb that we dropped on Hiroshima (“Treaty Banning . . .”). Kennedy challenged Khrushchev “not to an arms race, but a peace race”. This did not work, but it showed what kind of a person Kennedy was.

Five weeks after the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy met with Khrushchev. Khrushchev told Kennedy that he was going to cut off western access to Berlin. He also said that if the United States tried to stop him, we would go to war. Kennedy did not interfere and Khrushchev built the wall in one day. In 1962, Khrushchev built another wall behind the first wall. There were 260 people who died trying to get to the West.

For eight years the United States wanted the Soviet Union to sign a test ban agreement and on August 5, 1963 they signed the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty along with the United States and the United Kingdom. This basically ensured that they would not execute any nuclear explosions in the atmosphere, in space or under water. They could, however, do them underground with some exceptions.

Kennedy was a great motivator. In his speeches, he made the people feel the unity of coming together for peace and to help each other out of bad situations. He challenged college students to go abroad and help developing countries, this lead to the formation of the Peace Corps in 1961. The Peace Corps was another of Kennedy’s way to combat communism. The Peace Corps was recruiting college students to use what they had learned and help developing countries. This in turn would show the people how to take care of themselves and not fall under dictatorships. Kennedy was very much against communism and was trying to solve world problems peaceably instead of resorting to force. He wanted the world to be a better place for everyone because if everyone helps each other, then we can have a peaceful earth. The Peace Corps was originally a part of the State department but in 1981 it became an independent agency.

The Peace Corps has to be invited to work in a country, they decide who is going to best benefit from their services and the volunteers must be safe. Volunteering is very challenging. They live in the same poor conditions as the people and may not speak the same language. The volunteers do not get a salary; their living expenses are paid for but are the bare minimum. Volunteers work within the community, a trust develops because they are helping the people to learn how to do many things like farming the land to produce crops that they can eat. Over 200,000 volunteers have served in over 139 countries (“JFK in History”). They have also learned over 200 languages and dialects. The Peace Corps still continues its work as it did from the beginning. The volunteers tend to be older and more experienced in their trade. It is also a good way for people in other countries to see Americans at their best, caring for others, trying to solve problems in a peaceful way.

Kennedy also faced problems in the United States. Americans had their own problems. African Americans were not being treated fairly in the North and the South but worse in the South. Civil rights were a big issue that he supported. In 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education* was the start of the civil rights movement. African Americans wanted to be treated the same as Caucasians. Many of the public areas were restricted from African American use. There were different schools for them to attend and they were not treated fairly in the court system. Civil rights protests were on the rise. Many southern states refused to listen to the courts and treat the African Americans fairly.

In 1960, sit-ins and protests happened in 65 cities in the south and around 50,000 people protested (Major Features). Civil rights was one of the main issues in Kennedy’s presidential election. Just weeks before the election, Martin Luther King, Jr. was protesting in Atlanta, Georgia; he was arrested. Kennedy called Coretta Scott King, even after being advised that he might lose southern votes. John and Bobby Kennedy helped to secure her husband a safe release. Kennedy showed the people that he was going to make decisions that he felt was right.

To help the civil rights movement, Kennedy appointed African Americans to high positions within the government. He also worked with the Civil Rights Commission to try and strengthen it. He also used the television in an address to the people to treat every American the same no matter what their race is. Kennedy also pushed for civil rights legislation. After Kennedy’s death, his successor President Lyndon Johnson signed into law, the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It basically banned discriminatory practices in employment and out-lawed segregation.

Kennedy viewed space as a way to show power, which his predecessor Eisenhower did not see the need for a space program. It also meant if we can put someone on the moon, what else can we do? It left the enemy wondering how far our capabilities were. The space program not only made the rest of the world think about what we could do but also what we would do. In 1962, John Glenn, Jr. became the first American to orbit the earth and in 1963 Scott Carpenter, Walter Schirra Jr., and Gordon Cooper orbited it too. It wasn’t till after the death of the President in 1969 that the Apollo 11 astronauts, Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins, and Edwin “Buzz” Aldrin Jr., landed on the moon and had a safe return.

Before Kennedy became President, there was little done for the mentally handicapped. Funding for scientists to do research and facilities to take care of them was not seen as an issue. Kennedy had a soft spot for everyone; he also had a sister, Rosemary who was developmentally disabled. He wanted others to have a caring heart like his, to promote peace and take care of the ones who cannot take care of themselves. Determined to resolve the problem, the President appointed a 27 member panel that had about a year to do research and find the best way to approach it federally. He brought up to Congress a different way of looking at the problem. Using the panels ideas, there were new programs that could help. In 1963, Kennedy signed the Maternal and child Health and Mental Retardation Planning Amendment to the Social Security Act. It allowed increased funding for prevention including maternal care and child care. Within a few more days, more legislation was passed to fund research centers and to train teachers who work with the handicapped children.

Kennedy was President for a very short time, but he was the first president in a technological world where information is instant and goes out around the world. All eyes were literally on Kennedy. He influenced people and changed how they viewed others. He created options and learned in the process. He made mistakes and learned from them. He was very motivational getting society to think as one and to promote peace, being very family oriented. He did not want society to leave people behind, they are all created equal. He incorporated God but did not single out a religion. His values were morally based. He showed that you need to look at how you are being viewed by the people. In television, he took in how he was going to be perceived by the public by what he wore, that it would stand out in the background. He knew the camera placement, so that when he talked, he talked into the camera which made it seem like a one on one conversation rather than directly at his opponent. He realized that television was a means to talk personally to a vast majority of people and the way you are perceived will decided the outcome of what you are wanting to accomplish.

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