

The American Idealism of John F. Kennedy

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John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1917 - 1963): 35th President of the United States

Recent Publications:

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Edward Bellamy: *Looking Backward* (Fall - 2006: The Center for Learning)

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www.orgsites.com/tx/ap-us-and-european-history/index.html

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John F. Kennedy



The administration of John F. Kennedy, famous for its youth and style, ushered in a period of hope, vigor, and commitment for the United States that would be cruelly cut short by Kennedy's assassination and more critically evaluated with the passage of time.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the youngest man ever elected president of the United States, was born in Brookline, Massachusetts on May 29, 1917 into a large, Irish Catholic family. His father, Joseph Kennedy, stressed self-improvement and public service in a spirit of competition and victory. Kennedy spent much of his childhood sick in bed surrounded by books due to a variety of illnesses. After illness forced him to drop out of the London School of Economics and Princeton University, he graduated from Harvard College in 1940. His senior essay, *While England Slept*, briefly became a best-selling book.

Kennedy tried to enlist in the army in 1941, but he was rejected because of a back injury he had sustained while playing football at Harvard. As a result of his father's influence, he managed to enlist in the navy. In 1943, after the PT boat he was commanding was sunk by a Japanese destroyer, he heroically saved the life of one of his crew members. In the process, however, he aggravated his back ailment and contracted—and almost died from—malaria. Painful complications from his war injuries plagued him for the rest of his life.

In 1946, Kennedy was elected as a Massachusetts Democrat to his first of three terms in the U.S. House of Representatives. In 1952, as a result of diligent campaigning and his father's money, Kennedy defeated the incumbent, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., for a seat in the Senate. The next year, he married Washington socialite Jacqueline Bouvier and, while recuperating from back surgery, wrote *Profiles in Courage*, a book of political sketches that won the Pulitzer Prize.

After an unsuccessful attempt to become Adlai Stevenson's vice presidential running mate in 1956, Kennedy's political career was buoyed by an exceptionally wide victory margin in his reelection to the Senate in 1958. He decided to seek the Democratic Party nomination for president in 1960. After defeating Hubert H. Humphrey in the primaries, and Lyndon B. Johnson and Stevenson at the convention, Kennedy was nominated to run against Richard Nixon. During the campaign, Kennedy faced the challenges of his young age (he was 43) and his Roman Catholic religion by openly confronting the concerns of voters in speeches and during four televised debates. He was narrowly elected by a margin of only 118,550 popular votes out of 68.3 million votes cast.

Kennedy brought a refreshing vigor, intelligence, and style to the presidency. In his inaugural speech, he inspired Americans to public service with the famous line, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." As president, he projected an image of a leader directly involved in formulating national and international policy.

Kennedy's rhetoric did not always match his actions. In reaction to the Cuban Revolution of 1959, he promised a new U.S. attitude toward Latin America based on trust and partnership through the Alliance for Progress, a program of U.S. aid calling for development and democracy. He also developed and promoted funding for counterinsurgency efforts, funneling millions of dollars to Latin American military forces that would play prominent roles in undermining democracy in the region. In a similar way, he opposed the use of American combat troops in Southeast Asia, yet he gradually increased the U.S. presence there until by the end of 1963 there were 16,732 military advisers in South Vietnam.

Relations with the Soviet Union were complicated by Kennedy's decision to increase defense spending for both conventional weapons and intercontinental ballistic missile development. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev misunderstood Kennedy's lack of commitment to the Bay of Pigs invasion as military weakness (rather than political cowardice) and precipitated confrontations in Berlin and Cuba. Khrushchev had been threatening to sign a separate peace treaty with East Germany, and when he ordered East Germany to build a wall in 1961 to cut off contact between East and West Berlin, Kennedy responded by calling up military reserve units and increasing defense spending. Khrushchev did not sign a treaty, and the crisis cooled.

In 1962, however, U.S. intelligence discovered sites in Cuba being prepared for the installation of Soviet intermediate-range ballistic missiles. Kennedy informed Khrushchev that the United States would not allow the missile sites to become operational and announced a naval arms blockade of Cuba. For 13 days, the world waited for Khrushchev's reaction as Soviet ships loaded with missiles steamed toward the island. Finally, the Soviet ships began to turn around; and on October 27, Kennedy and Khrushchev reached an acceptable compromise. The United States promised not to support any further invasions of Cuba and to remove some intermediate-range missiles in Turkey, and the Soviet Union agreed to dismantle the missile sites.

The Cuban missile crisis, once regarded as Kennedy's "finest hour," has led to sharp criticism by historians astonished at Kennedy's

willingness to risk war. Both Khrushchev and Kennedy seemed to have been humbled by the crisis. This led in 1963 to the first thaw in the cold war, when Great Britain and the Soviet Union joined the United States in banning nuclear weapons tests in the atmosphere, in outer space, and underwater. Kennedy's foreign policy idealism is perhaps best remembered, however, for his creation of the Peace Corps and his decision to commit the United States to a race with the Soviet Union to put a man on the moon by 1970.

Domestic politics were dominated by the economy and the civil rights movement. Kennedy endorsed the use of tax cuts and increases in government spending to stimulate the economy. By 1964, the unemployment rate had dropped from 8.1% to 5.2%. Because Congress was dominated by a coalition of conservative Southern Democrats and Republicans, Kennedy's initial civil rights focus was on executive rather than legislative action. The importance of the lily white South to the Democratic Party made civil rights a difficult issue for Kennedy, as it had for Franklin D. Roosevelt. His principal ally was his brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. Both men were driven faster on this issue than they might otherwise have gone, by the activism of such African-American leaders as Martin Luther King Jr., who resolved not to wait for the approval of the national government before pressing for civil rights. Beginning in 1962, with the desegregation of the University of Mississippi, the Kennedy administration finally began to act, issuing an executive order ending discrimination in federally funded housing, the establishment of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, the extension of the right to vote for African Americans, the appointment of an unprecedented number of African Americans to public office, and the filing of proposals for more complete civil rights legislation.

On November 22, 1963, while riding in a motorcade in Dallas, Texas, Kennedy was shot and killed. The magnitude of the tragedy and the speed with which the Warren Commission (headed by Earl Warren) was forced to work in determining the cause of Kennedy's death left many people in the United States unsatisfied with the commission finding that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, shot Kennedy.

Internet Source: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents/jk35.html>

JFK Presidential Library and Museum: <http://www.jfklibrary.org/>

ABC-CLIO American History: <http://www.americanhistory.abc-clio.com/home/default.aspx>

Dallek, Robert and Golway, Terry. *Let Every Nation Know: John F. Kennedy in His Own Words*. Illinois: Sourcebooks Media Fusion, 2006.

Sorensen, Theodore C. (Editor) *Let the Word Go Forth: The Speeches, Statements, and Writings of John F. Kennedy*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1988.

Instructional Strategy: The Interactive Lecture*

I usually do not lecture in my classes. However, I will occasionally lecture to my classes - when I do, I employ the teaching strategy known as the Interactive Lecture. The Interactive Lecture is a spin on the "oldie but goodie" lecture method - it incorporates active learning into the lesson.

The Interactive Lecture:

Phase I: Prepare

Use a hook to build connections to past knowledge.

Use a bridge to build connections to new content.

Phase II: Present and Collect Information

Use a visual organizer to record information.

Phase III: Deep Process Information

Use various presentational techniques (auditory, visual, kinesthetic, emotive, etc.).

Phase IV: Elaborate and Review

Periodically review information on visual organizers using questions in the four learning styles.

Phase V: Synthesize and Evaluate Lesson

Apply learning to a new and different context to demonstrate understanding.

Evaluate and reflect on knowledge of content.

Evaluate and reflect on learning process.

Principles of Memory:

Connecting

Organizing

Deep Processing

Elaborating

* Silver, Harvey F. et al: *The Interactive Lecture*. The Thoughtful Education Press, LLC, 2001.

The Hook: What is our fascination with JFK?

Background of JFK



Listening Selection One: Acceptance Speech, Democratic National Convention, July 15, 1960

Text:

. . . For I stand tonight facing west on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretch three thousand miles behind me, the pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their own lives to build a new world here in the West. They were not the captives of their own doubts, the prisoners of their own price tags. Their motto was not "every man for himself" but "all for the common cause." They were determined to make that new world strong and free, to overcome its hazards and its hardships, to conquer the enemies that threatened from without and within.

Today some would say that those struggles are all over - that all the horizons have been explored - that all the battles have been won - that there is no longer an American frontier.

But I trust that no one in this vast assemblage will agree with those sentiments. For the problems are not all solved and the battlers are not all won - and we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier - the frontier of the 1960's - a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils - a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils, a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats. . . .

But I tell you the New Frontier is here, whether we seek it or not. Beyond that frontier are the uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus. It would be easier to shrink back from that frontier, to look to the safe mediocrity of the past, to be lulled by good intentions and high rhetoric - and those who prefer that course should not cast their votes for me regardless of party.

But I believe the times demand new invention, innovation, imagination, decision. I am asking each of you to be pioneers on that New Frontier. My call is to the young in heart, regardless of age - to all who respond to the Scriptural call: "Be strong and of good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed."

Question:

Kennedy called his program the 'New Frontier', how would you describe his vision for America? How did he see himself and his presidency in a different context from those that came before him?



Listening Selection Two: Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, Sept. 12, 1960

Text:

. . . I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish--where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the Pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source--where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials--and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all.

For while this year it may be a Catholic against whom the finger of suspicion is pointed, in other years it has been, and may someday be again, a Jew--or a Quaker--or a Unitarian--or a Baptist. It was Virginia's harassment of Baptist preachers, for example, that helped lead to Jefferson's statute of religious freedom. Today I may be the victim--but tomorrow it may be you--until the whole fabric of our harmonious society is ripped at a time of great national peril.

Finally, I believe in an America where religious intolerance will someday end--where all men and all churches are treated as equal--where every man has the same right to attend or not attend the church of his choice--where there is no Catholic vote, no anti-Catholic vote, no bloc voting of any kind--and where Catholics, Protestants and Jews, at both the lay and pastoral level, will refrain from those attitudes of disdain and division which have so often marred their works in the past, and promote instead the American ideal of brotherhood.

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This is the kind of America I believe in--and this is the kind I fought for in the South Pacific, and the kind my brother died for in Europe. No one suggested then that we may have a "divided loyalty," that we did "not believe in liberty," or that we belonged to a disloyal group that threatened the "freedoms for which our forefathers died."

Question:

Kennedy argues that America has a strong heritage of religious freedom - to what extent is this true and do you agree with his assessment? What made religion such an important issue to Kennedy? Is this still relevant today?



Listening Selection Three: Address to the General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Jan. 9, 1961

Text:

. . . For fourteen years I have placed my confidence in the citizens of Massachusetts--and they have generously responded by placing their confidence in me.

Now, on the Friday after next, I am to assume new and broader responsibilities. But I am not here to bid farewell to Massachusetts.

For forty-three years--whether I was in London, Washington, the South Pacific, or elsewhere--this has been my home; and, God willing, wherever I serve this shall remain my home. . . .

During the last sixty days, I have been at the task of constructing an administration. . . . But I have been guided by the standard John Winthrop set before his shipmates on the flagship *Arbella* three hundred and thirty-one years ago, as they, too, faced the task of building a new government on a perilous frontier.

"We must always consider," he said, "that we shall be as a city upon a hill--the eyes of all people are upon us."

Today the eyes of all people are truly upon us--and our governments, in every branch, at every level, national, state and local, must be as a city upon a hill--constructed and inhabited by men aware of their great trust and their great responsibilities. . . .

Courage--judgment--integrity--dedication--these are the historic qualities of the Bay Colony and the Bay State--the qualities which this state has consistently sent to this chamber on Beacon Hill here in Boston and to Capitol Hill back in Washington.

And these are the qualities which, with God's help, this son of Massachusetts hopes will characterize our government's conduct in the four stormy years that lie ahead. . . .

Question:

How strong is the imagery of the "city upon a hill" phrase - do you think he achieved this goal? What does this say about his belief of the role of government, how did his administration achieve or fail to achieve this goal?



Listening Selection Four: The Inaugural Address, Washington, D.C., Jan. 20, 1961

Text:

. . . We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom--symbolizing an end as well as a beginning--signifying renewal as well as change. For I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago.

The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe--the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.

We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans--born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage--and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty. . . .

To those peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required--not because the communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich. . . .

All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin. . . .

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility--I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it--and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country.

Question:

Kennedy wanted to match the Inaugural Address of FDR; do you think he was able to do that? Why is this considered to be one of the most powerful inaugural addresses given by any president; if you had to rank them, where would you put it? What are the main points of this speech, which do you think is the most important and why?



Listening Selection Five: Speech at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, July 4, 1962

Text:

. . . In most of the old colonial world, the struggle for independence is coming to an end. Even in areas behind the Curtain, that which Jefferson called "the disease of liberty" still appears to be infectious. With the passing of ancient empires, today less than 2 percent of the world's population lives in territories officially termed "dependent." As this effort for independence, inspired by the American Declaration of Independence, now approaches a successful close, a great new effort--for interdependence--is transforming the world about us. And the spirit of that new effort is the same spirit which gave birth to the American Constitution. . . .

But I will say here and now, on this Day of Independence, that the United States will be ready for a Declaration of Interdependence, that we will be prepared to discuss with a united Europe the ways and means of forming a concrete Atlantic partnership, a mutually beneficial partnership between the new union now emerging in Europe and the old American Union founded here 175 years ago. . . .

In urging the adoption of the United States Constitution, Alexander Hamilton told his fellow New Yorkers "to think continentally." Today Americans must learn to think intercontinentally.

Acting on our own, by ourselves, we cannot establish justice throughout the world; we cannot insure its domestic tranquility, or provide for its common defense, or promote its general welfare, or secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity. But joined with other free nations, we can do all this and more. . . .

Question:

What does Kennedy mean by interdependence and intercontinentally - is this vision of American foreign policy new or old? What would be the advantages for America to think of themselves as interdependent? What are the disadvantages?

Historians have argued that Kennedy is really the last president to consciously incorporate history into his speeches, do you agree - why did he do this so much?



Listening Selection Six: Address on Space Travel, Rice University, Sept. 12, 1962

Text:

. . . There is no strife, no prejudice, no national conflict in outer space as yet. Its hazards are hostile to us all. Its conquest deserves the best of all mankind, and its opportunity for peaceful cooperation many never come again. But why, some say, the moon? Why choose this as our goal? And they may well ask why climb the highest mountain? Why, 35 years ago, fly the Atlantic? Why does Rice play Texas?

We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.

It is for these reasons that I regard the decision last year to shift our efforts in space from low to high gear as among the most important decisions that will be made during my incumbency in the office of the Presidency. . . .

Many years ago the great British explorer George Mallory, who was to die on Mount Everest, was asked why did he want to climb it. He said, "Because it is there."

Well, space is there, and we're going to climb it, and the moon and the planets are there, and new hopes for knowledge and peace are there. And, therefore, as we set sail we ask God's blessing on the most hazardous and dangerous and greatest adventure on which man has ever embarked.

Question:

Where would you rank this speech and why? The topic of this speech deals with the broader issue of challenges and how America should deal with them - do you agree or disagree with Kennedy's opinion? Did he deal with challenges in an effective way - what challenges did he deal with effectively / ineffectively?



Listening Selection Seven: Robert F. Kennedy's Tribute to John F. Kennedy, Aug. 27, 1964



Listening Selection Eight: Edward Kennedy's Tribute to Robert F. Kennedy, June 8, 1968