

The Legacy of John Fitzgerald Kennedy

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John F. Kennedy remains a unique phenomenon in American political history. Relatively unknown even after more than 10 years in the House and Senate, his youth, handsome features, eloquent use of language and appeal to a new generation catapulted him over several other Democratic candidates and into the Presidency.

Kennedy's victory in 1960 was close and remains open to question. His political skills were also untested. Much of the Democratic establishment was sceptical. He tried to lessen the uncertainty by naming Lyndon Johnson as Vice President, but the two never really got along. Sadly, it was left to Johnson to push through passage of the Great Society measures conceived by Kennedy. Some doubt that Kennedy could have done it on his own.

But the vitality and he and Jackie Kennedy brought to the White House soon eclipsed whatever doubts might have existed about

his talents. Kennedy was the new generation which swept away the cobwebs of the post-war period and the aging Dwight Eisenhower. He was Bob Dylan and Peter Paul and Mary. He was Andy Warhol who thought soup cans could be sold as art. Above all, he was not the 1950's and the parents of the generation voting for the first time.

But in a certain way, Kennedy owed his victory to Nikita Khrushchev and a little round satellite. Launched on October 4, 1957, Sputnik was the first manmade object to orbit the earth. (I remember well reading it on my paper route).

Its success caused uproar in the United States. Paired with Khrushchev's aggressive military rhetoric and threats against Berlin, it helped create a massive scare that America was suddenly in danger.

"We will bury you," Khrushchev crowed after the Sputnik success. And Americans believed him. The reaction was immediate. More money for science and technology. More engineering scholarships. Increased attention to Russia area studies. But also more money for defense. And in the end, as announced by

President Kennedy on May 24, 1961, the first human space voyage to the moon.

Things came to a head in the famous Nixon-Khrushchev kitchen debate at a Moscow trade fair in 1959, just as Kennedy was planning his campaign. Surrounded by modern American appliances, Nixon probably got the best of the bargain. But just as in his first televised debate with Kennedy in 1960, Nixon probably lost the argument on the visual images. Khrushchev was a sort of Slavic Donald Trump. Always pushing, always being outrageous. Whether pounding his shoe on his desk at the UN Security Council or cancelling a summit with Eisenhower after the shooting down of Francis Gary Powers. Khrushchev always seemed to be on the attack. And in the hands of an old and sick President, America appeared to be in retreat.

Kennedy's advisors saw an opening against both other democrats and Nixon, the likely Republican nominee. The missile gap was born. Kennedy was relentless in his campaign of criticism against the weakness of Eisenhower in allowing the Soviets to gain a military advantage. None of this was true and Kennedy knew it wasn't true. Relatively soon after Kennedy was elected,

it was confirmed that American military strength was much greater than the Russia. But the mentality continued. Bay of Pigs , Vienna Summit in 1961 and Berlin Wall all fed an atmosphere of crisis which led Kennedy to commit some major mistakes.

By the time he met Khrushchev in Vienna in June, 1961, , Kennedy looked worn down and uncertain. It is said that Khrushchev's recognition of Kennedy's weakness was one of the reasons he decided to go ahead with building a Wall around West Berlin and perhaps to station missiles on Cuba.

Whatever the truth, the news continued to get worse until during the Cuba missile crisis in September –October 1962, the world came closest to suffering a second nuclear war.

By the beginning of 1963, Kennedy seems to have concluded that it was time to turn down the flame. He chose as a vehicle a commencement speech delivered at American University in Washington on June 10, 1963.

The speech demonstrated the height of Kennedy's rhetorical powers and widely considered one of his most powerful speeches. It reflected a basic decision to turn from a policy of confrontation of the Soviet Union to an effort to reduce tensions through practical arrangements. The President presented a well thought out program, much of which was ultimately realized.

Kennedy not only outlined a plan to curb nuclear arms, but also "laid out a hopeful, yet realistic route for world peace at a time when the U.S. and Soviet Union faced the potential for an escalating nuclear arms race." [3] In the speech, Kennedy announced his agreement to negotiations "toward early agreement on a comprehensive test ban treaty" (which resulted in the Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty) and also announced, for the purpose of showing "good faith and solemn convictions", his decision to unilaterally suspend all US atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons as long as all other nations would do the same.

Noteworthy are his comments that the United States was seeking a goal of "complete disarmament" of nuclear weapons and his vow that America "will never start a war". The speech was

unusual in its peaceful outreach to the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War, and is remembered as one of Kennedy's finest and most important speeches foreign policy.

Its lasting legacy could be seen in Western efforts at détente with the Soviet Union after Kennedy's death, whether the Harmel Report, the Brandt Ostpolitik, a series of arms control agreements or ultimately the Helsinki Final Act – all can be traced to the ideas Kennedy set forth in June, 1961 in Washington and Europe.

The trip to Europe came only two weeks later. It was the first step in what was to be a major campaign to jump start détente with the Soviet Union.

There were five stops – Rome, Frankfurt, Berlin, Bonn and London. Paris was omitted, because De Gaulle was at that point committed to building France's own independent nuclear force and was clearly not interested in disarmament or even a cessation of testing.

The goal was to convince skeptical allies of the logic of this course. President Kennedy's visit to Germany in particular came at a time when the West was uncertain of its ability to meet the challenges of complicated world. The most difficult stop was to be Bonn, where Konrad Adenauer was still demanding full confrontation with Russia.

Frankfurt and Berlin were added to provide context for Kennedy's plans. In Frankfurt Kennedy set forth a peaceful vision of the future, based on the ideas contained in the American University speech. Berlin was designed to calm Adenauer by demonstrating America's clear commitment to the freedom of Germany.

The remarks at Rathaus Schöneberg were almost an afterthought, added at the urging of Willy Brandt in order to keep up the spirits of the Berliners. The formal speech in Berlin took place in front of the Henry Ford Bau on the afternoon of June 26. Carefully crafted by Kennedy's speechwriters, it was intended to provide a philosophical appeal to German youth. It fell somewhat flat and is hardly remembered.

With one single sentence: “Ich bin ein Berliner,” his 1963 speech set the agenda for the ultimate victory over totalitarianism in Europe.

Egon Bahr described to me several times, the hurried and often chaotic drafting of the few minutes of remarks delivered at Rathaus Schöneberg. The basic text was drawn from a speech Kennedy had delivered in New Orleans a year earlier. Kennedy practiced the main German phrases in Washington before leaving. I am pleased to note that his tutor for these sessions was Margarete Plischke, a German teacher at the Foreign Service Institute, who a year later also became my tutor in German. She regaled her students with stories of the hectic preparations, but of course was never satisfied with Kennedy poor accent in German.

For all of their informality, the remarks have gone down in history, while the FU speech has been forgotten. But the address to which Kennedy attached the most importance was the speech delivered at the Frankfurt Pauls Kirche on June 25.

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He began with a basic vision for the future:

As we look steadily eastward in the hope and purpose of new freedom, we must also look--and evermore closely--to our trans-Atlantic ties.... The Atlantic Community will not soon become a single overarching super state. But practical steps toward stronger common purpose are well within our means....

Our partnership is not military alone. Economic unity is also imperative-not only among the nations of Europe, but across the wide Atlantic.

President Kennedy was years ahead of his time in defining economic as well as military integration of the Atlantic nations as the foundation of our freedom. When others were consumed by scenarios for possible East-West conflict, he set forth a detailed vision for winning the cold war through democratic development, close economic cooperation between Europe and the United States and a common sense of purpose among the world's democracies.

The future of the West lies in Atlantic partnership--a system of cooperation, interdependence, and harmony whose peoples can jointly meet their burdens and opportunities throughout the world.

Kennedy Legacy

On this hundredth anniversary of his birth, Kennedy's legacy is still being debated. Those of us who experienced his brilliance and charm, yearn for the type of inspirational leadership which seems to have been lost in a modern technological world.

His one thousand days in office were often consumed by crisis and confrontation. Not only abroad, but at home. the civil rights movement reached its peak, fights over health care and workers's rights were just as angry then as they are now. But his vision of East-West detente alone, set things in motion for the ultimate end of the Cold War. for this achievement alone, Kennedy should be considered

among the geatest of American Presidents. But he di much more. After his tragicially early death, the nation struggled for years to find the sort of comfortable vision of itself which he had provided.

There is a tendency to glorify the past. Since Kennedy's li-
ke was cut tragically short, it is difficult to separate fact
from legend or even fiction. But one thing is cettain, we
will not see another JFK for a long time to come, if ever.