



### **JOHN F. KENNEDY**

John Fitzgerald "Jack" Kennedy, commonly referred to by his initials JFK, was an American politician who served as the 35th President of the United States from January 1961 until his assassination in November 1963.

#### **Synopsis**

Born on May 29, 1917, in Brookline, Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy served in both the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate before becoming the 35th president in 1961. As president, Kennedy faced a number of foreign crises, especially in Cuba and Berlin, but managed to secure such achievements as the Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty and the Alliance for Progress. On November 22, 1963, Kennedy was assassinated while riding in a motorcade in Dallas, Texas.

#### **Early Life**

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was born on May 29, 1917, in Brookline, Massachusetts. Both the Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys were wealthy and prominent Irish Catholic Boston families. Kennedy's paternal grandfather, P.J. Kennedy, was a wealthy banker and liquor trader, and his maternal grandfather, John E. Fitzgerald, nicknamed "Honey Fitz," was a skilled politician who served as a congressman and as the mayor of Boston. Kennedy's mother, Rose Elizabeth Fitzgerald, was a Boston debutante, and his father, Joseph Kennedy Sr., was a successful banker who made a fortune on the stock market after World War I. Joe Kennedy Sr. went on to a government career as chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission and as an ambassador to Great Britain.

John F. Kennedy, nicknamed "Jack," was the second oldest of a group of nine extraordinary siblings. His brothers and sisters include Eunice Kennedy, the founder of the Special Olympics; Robert Kennedy, a U.S. Attorney General; and Ted Kennedy, one of the most powerful senators in American history. The Kennedy children remained close-knit and supportive of each other throughout their entire lives.

Joseph and Rose Kennedy largely spurned the world of Boston socialites into which they had been born to focus instead on their children's education. Joe Kennedy in particular obsessed over every detail of his kids' lives, a rarity for a father at that time. As a family friend noted, "Most fathers in those days simply weren't that interested in what their children did. But Joe Kennedy knew what his kids were up to all the time." Joe Sr. had great expectations for his children, and he sought to instill in them a fierce competitive fire and the belief that winning was everything. He entered his children in swimming and sailing competitions and chided them for finishing in anything but first place. John F. Kennedy's sister Eunice later recalled, "I was twenty-four before I knew I didn't have to win something every day." Jack Kennedy bought into his father's philosophy that winning was everything. "He hates to lose at anything," Eunice said. "That's the only thing Jack gets really emotional about — when he loses."

Despite his father's constant reprimands, young Kennedy was a poor student and a mischievous boy. He attended a Catholic boys' boarding school in Connecticut called Canterbury, where he excelled at English and history, the subjects he enjoyed, but nearly flunked Latin, in which he had no interest. Despite his poor grades, Kennedy continued on to Choate, an elite Connecticut preparatory school. Although he was obviously brilliant —

evidenced by the extraordinary thoughtfulness and nuance of his work on the rare occasions when he applied himself — Kennedy remained at best a mediocre student, preferring sports, girls and practical jokes to coursework.

His father wrote to him by way of encouragement, "If I didn't really feel you had the goods I would be most charitable in my attitude toward your failings ... I am not expecting too much, and I will not be disappointed if you don't turn out to be a real genius, but I think you can be a really worthwhile citizen with good judgment and understanding." Kennedy was in fact very bookish in high school, reading ceaselessly but not the books his teachers assigned. He was also chronically ill during his childhood and adolescence; he suffered from severe colds, the flu, scarlet fever and even more severe, undiagnosed diseases that forced him to miss months of school at a time and occasionally brought him to the brink of death.

After graduating from Choate and spending one semester at Princeton, Kennedy transferred to Harvard University in 1936. There, he repeated his by then well-established academic pattern, excelling occasionally in the classes he enjoyed, but proving only an average student due to the omnipresent diversions of sports and women. Handsome, charming and blessed with a radiant smile, Kennedy was incredibly popular with his Harvard classmates. His friend Lem Billings recalled, "Jack was more fun than anyone I've ever known, and I think most people who knew him felt the same way about him." Kennedy was also an incorrigible womanizer. He wrote to Billings during his sophomore year, "I can now get tail as often and as free as I want which is a step in the right direction."

Nevertheless, as an upperclassman, Kennedy finally grew serious about his studies and began to realize his potential. His father had been appointed Ambassador to Great Britain, and on an extended visit in 1939, Kennedy decided to research and write a senior thesis on why Britain was so unprepared to fight Germany in World War II. An incisive analysis of Britain's failures to meet the Nazi challenge, the paper was so well received that upon Kennedy's graduation in 1940 it was published as book, *Why England Slept*, selling more than 80,000 copies. Kennedy's father sent him a cablegram in the aftermath of the book's publication: "Two things I always knew about you one that you are smart two that you are a swell guy love dad."

Shortly after graduating from Harvard, Kennedy joined the U.S. Navy and was assigned to command a patrol torpedo boat in the South Pacific. On August 2, 1943, his boat, *PT-109*, was rammed by a Japanese warship and split in two. Two sailors died and Kennedy badly injured his back. Hauling another wounded sailor by the strap of his life vest, Kennedy led the survivors to a nearby island, where they were rescued six days later. The incident earned him the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for "extremely heroic conduct" and a Purple Heart for the injuries he suffered.

However, Kennedy's older brother, Joseph Kennedy Jr., who had also joined the Navy, was not so fortunate. A pilot, he died when his plane blew up in August 1944. Handsome, athletic, intelligent and ambitious, Joseph Kennedy Jr. had been pegged by his father as the one among his children who would some day become president of the United States. In the aftermath of Joe Jr.'s death, John F. Kennedy took his family's hopes and aspirations for his older brother upon himself.

Upon his discharge from the Navy, Kennedy worked briefly as reporter for Hearst Newspapers. Then in 1946, at the age of 29, he decided to run for the U.S. House of Representatives from a working class district of Boston, a seat being vacated by Democrat James Michael Curly. Bolstered by his status as a war hero, his family connections and his father's money, Kennedy won the election handily. However, after the glory and excitement of publishing his first book and serving in World War II, Kennedy found his work in Congress incredibly dull. Despite serving three terms, from 1946 to 1952, Kennedy remained frustrated by what he saw as stifling rules and procedures that prevented a young, inexperienced representative from making an impact. "We were just worms in the House," he later recalled. "Nobody paid attention to us nationally."

One of the first things President Kennedy did was to create the Peace Corps. Through this program, which still exists today, Americans can volunteer to work anywhere in the world where assistance is needed. They can help in areas such as education, farming, health care, and construction. Many young men and women have served as Peace Corps volunteers and have won the respect of people throughout the world.

President Kennedy was also eager for the United States to lead the way in exploring space. The Soviet Union was ahead of the United States in its space program and President Kennedy was determined to catch up. He said, "No nation which expects to be the leader of other nations can expect to stay behind in this race for space." Kennedy was the first president to ask Congress to approve more than 22 billion dollars for Project Apollo, which had the goal of landing an American man on the moon before the end of the decade.



President Kennedy had to deal with many serious problems in the United States. The biggest problem of all was racial discrimination. The US Supreme Court had ruled in 1954 that segregation in public schools would no longer be permitted. Black and white children, the decision mandated, should go to school together. This was now the law of the land. However, there were many schools, especially in southern states, that did not obey this law. There was also racial segregation on buses, in restaurants, movie theaters, and other public places.

Thousands of Americans joined together, people of all races and backgrounds, to protest peacefully this injustice. Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the famous leaders of the movement for civil rights. Many civil rights leaders didn't think President Kennedy was supportive enough of their efforts. The President believed that holding public protests would only anger many white people and make it even more difficult to convince the members of Congress who didn't agree with him to pass civil rights laws. By June 11, 1963, however, President Kennedy decided that the time had come to take stronger action to help the civil rights struggle. He proposed a new Civil Rights bill to the Congress, and he went on television asking Americans to end racism. "One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free," he said. "This Nation was founded by men of many nations and backgrounds...[and] on the principle that all men are created equal." President Kennedy made it clear that all Americans, regardless of their skin color, should enjoy a good and happy life in the United States.

### The President is Shot

On November 21, 1963, President Kennedy flew to Texas to give several political speeches. The next day, as his car drove slowly past cheering crowds in Dallas, shots rang out. Kennedy was seriously wounded and died a short time later. Within a few hours of the shooting, police arrested Lee Harvey Oswald and charged him with the murder. On November 24, another man, Jack Ruby, shot and killed Oswald, thus silencing the only person who could have offered more information about this tragic event. The Warren Commission was organized to investigate the assassination and to clarify the many questions which remained.

### The Legacy of John F. Kennedy

President Kennedy's death caused enormous sadness and grief among all Americans. Most people still remember exactly where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news. Hundreds of thousands of people gathered in Washington for the President's funeral, and millions throughout the world watched it on television.

As the years have gone by and other presidents have written their chapters in history, John Kennedy's brief time in office stands out in people's memories for his leadership, personality, and accomplishments. Many respect his coolness when faced with difficult decisions--like what to do about Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962. Others admire his ability to inspire people with his eloquent speeches. Still others think his compassion and his willingness to fight for new government programs to help the poor, the elderly and the ill were most important. Like all leaders, John Kennedy made mistakes, but he was always optimistic about the future. He believed that people could solve their common problems if they put their country's interests first and worked together.

*'Forgive your enemies, but never forget their names' – a famous quote given by him*