

John F. Kennedy and His Effect on America's Political Sphere

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Abstract

This paper explores the life and policies of late President John F. Kennedy and analyzes them in terms of their legacy in American politics and society. One word unequivocally characterizes Kennedy's presidential term: incomplete. In its less than three years, he faced trouble passing all the needed legislation for his New Frontier program due to a reluctant Congress and foreign entanglements. And when he was finally starting to figure it out, he was assassinated in 1963, dramatically cutting his life short. Although he wasn't in office for a complete term, Kennedy's effect on American politics was profound and many of its effects are noted today. This article explores Kennedy's immediate political legacy regarding how he played a role in shaping his successor's policies and his lasting impact on the role of image in political debate and campaigning. In further analysis, in which many of the ideas present were gathered posthumously by scholars, it examines the Camelot myth as well as the Warren Commission and how they impacted and still affect the expectations and sentiments of the American public. It then dissects the 1960 Democratic Party's platform position, the one Kennedy ran under, and discusses how that and Kennedy's politics influenced democratic leaders and presidents after the assassination. In short, this paper aims to convince the reader that although cut short, John F. Kennedy's political career profoundly affected Americans at the time, in the decades that followed his murder, and even through the 21st century.

Methods

The origin of my interest in John F. Kennedy arose in my AP U.S. History class. Due to the shortness of his presidential term and the fast pace of the course, we spent only one day learning about him. Although I felt that this contradicted how people felt and still feel about him, being that to me, he seems to be a pretty big deal. Why did I only learn about him for one day in history class when he almost tops every list of US presidents in terms of well-likeness and popularity? (YouGov, 2021). I knew that there had to be something more at play. To find the answer to my question, I began to research him. I had already learned about his presidency, assassination, and immediate political legacy in terms of Lyndon Johnson's politics, so I searched for more outside-the-box ideas. I began to discover other reasons for his likeability and popularity, like his mystifying and idealistic aura. I read various articles and research papers to fully grasp this and began realizing its true effect in the modern 21st century. So, I started doing more research on what contributed to the long-lasting nature of his legacy. As stated, I found that one of these factors is his personality, but I also noticed some of his other effects, like his influence on the media, mainly seen in the Nixon-Kennedy debates, the impact on America's trust in government after he was assassinated, as well as his influence on the current and past democratic leaders. To gather evidence for these claims, I researched a variety of databases to find papers and articles that either corroborated or modified my views. I then personally analyzed these and compiled them into this review paper.

JFK's Life and Presidency

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was born on May 29th, 1917, in Brookline, Massachusetts. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). Born into a large, wealthy family, with his father being a key stock market player and the U.S. ambassador to Great Britain, Kennedy was raised in a setting of fierce intellectual competition and complexity. Kennedy received a Bachelor of Science from Harvard University in 1940 and went to the South Pacific to serve with the U.S. Navy in 1943. He returned home with a U.S. Navy and Marine Corps Medal for heroism due to a life-altering incident when the Japanese sunk the torpedo ship he was commanding in the Solomon Islands. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). He also came back to learn that his brother, Joe, had passed away at war; his main inheritance was the political pressures of the family to run for office. In 1946, Kennedy campaigned for Congress as a democrat in Massachusetts' 11th district and won against his conservative opponent. His individual achievements are less than significant, and in 1952, he ran for the Senate position against the incumbent, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., once again achieving victory. Domestically he supported the opening of St. Lawrence Seaway, labor reforms, civil rights, and the abolishment of the Electoral College. Internationally, he advocated for the influx of aid into developing countries in Africa and Asia. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

It is around 1956 that Kennedy started to make his national political splash. In an oral interview, federal employee Joseph F. Dolan stated that one man thought he would make a good vice president, which was a big deal for the at-the-time Senator. Since then, Kennedy made visits, given that he was in good health, every six or eight months to Denver to deliberate with the Democratic Convention. He additionally started his campaign around the country, mainly in key states like New York, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. (Dolan Oral Interview- JFK #1). Dolan remarked that he knew Kennedy's ascension to the presidency would be inevitable when he visited Arizona, and spoke eloquently to an enthusiastic crowd of 8,300, even after arriving late due to weather delays. However, a large blockade to his political success was the Colorado Democratic Party, who adamantly stood against Kennedy on the basis of inexperience, that he was from the East, and that he was a leaning conservative. During the grace period before the Democratic National Convention, he campaigned many times in the Colorado area, assiduously working to sway the hearts and minds of stubborn officials as well as remove the religious prejudice against him, as he was a Catholic. (Dolan Oral Interview-JFK #1).

As the Democratic National Convention of 1960 rolled on, John F. Kennedy was able to handily accept the presidential nomination, due to his persistent campaigning and sanguine spirit. His idealistic spirit was epitomized in his acceptance speech when he invoked his "New Frontier", which in his words, "is not a set of promises- it is a set of challenges. It sums up not what I intend to offer the American people, but what I intend to ask of them". (Excerpt, Democratic National Convention, 15 July 1960). To elaborate on his vision, he slammed his conservative opponent, Richard Nixon. He spoke of separation of church of state, government aid for marginalized and impoverished groups, universal human rights, space exploration, and the extirpation of communism, in a packed stadium to the tune of clapping hands.

When elected in the latter part of 1960, John F. Kennedy went to the presidency with the New Frontier at the forefront of his mind. However, although his grand aspirations were planned assiduously, the Kennedy administration actually failed to push through any grand legislative program due to a stubborn, conservative Congress- a product of separation of powers and polarized politics. (Carleton). Even with a cabinet that many attributes to being keener than Franklin Roosevelt's iconic brain trust, his administration could not sway Congress to pass key points of legislation pertaining to civil rights, education and farm funding, and tax reform. Perhaps his hallmark bill was the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, which sought to improve American welfare as it pertains to foreign policy through the creation of intercourse agreements. (Carleton). Although, he did strive to make the American lunar expedition come to fruition. In 1961, in the midst of the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion and hefty Soviet scientific advances, he set the lofty goal of sending a man on the moon and returning him

safely to Earth by the decade's close. He was met with optimism from NASA but controversy from any government officials who questioned his motives and chided his expedition to be too expensive. (Jordan) Nevertheless, he commenced the groundbreaking Apollo 11 program.

In office, John F. Kennedy's foreign policy, in the midst of a supposed dying Cold War, is somewhat of a blurred line. In many ways, he respected the Soviet status quo in Eastern Europe and did not push for the taking down of the Berlin Wall. He also decided that there should be no nuclear weapons in West Germany. (Carleton). However, he contradicted this lenient approach to the Soviets and ultimately expanded the Cold War. He ramped up United States defense weapons and nuclear armaments and spoke of the state of the union as one in danger. Many started making makeshift nuclear bunkers and the nation joined NATO to encourage security (Carleton). He supported the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion of Cuba, where he sent Cuban exiles to the country's coast to hopefully stir a rebellion and oust the dictator, Fidel Castro. However, the president received worldly praise for his work in the Cuban Missile Crisis, condemning Khrushchev's covert intercontinental missile operation in Cuba, using force to escalate the conflict to the brink of nuclear war, and only receding when the Soviets bowed out. (Kennedy and Cohen). This made the prospects of nuclear war, in which unequivocally no side wanted, slim. Regarding anti-colonialism, Kennedy was a large proponent of it, and sent copious amounts of foreign aid to underdeveloped countries, like the Congo, established the Peace Corps, and saved the United Nations from bankruptcy, while using its power to enforce international order. (Carleton) Another minor foreign achievement concerns that of southeast Asia, where is sent approximately 16,000 military advisers, ensure the peace in South Vietnam and protect it from the Viet Cong's guerilla warfare.

However, Kennedy's master plans for global peace and a domestic New Frontier were abruptly halted on November 22nd, 1963, in Dallas Texas, at 12:30 pm. He was riding in an open ceiling convertible next to his wife, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, on a campaign trip, when shots were fired from the sixth story of a nearby building, striking him in the back, head, and neck. He was pronounced dead thirty minutes later. ("November 22, 1963: Death of the President").

Immediate Political Effect

To preface, the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy on November 22nd, 1963, in Dallas, Texas, having been fatally shot by Lee Harvey Oswald, was above all, a grave tragedy. In the modern day, one will hear those who were alive during that time reminiscing the sanguine idealism of President Kennedy, and how his death was shocking to them. The American public watched in dismay as Jacqueline Kennedy refused to take off her dress with her slain husband's blood on it. (Kennedy and Cohen). Kennedy's vice president, Lyndon B. Johnson, was sworn into office not long after the assassination and vowed first and foremost to fulfill his predecessor's legacy. (Kennedy and Cohen). This study will treat the Great Society as a continuation of John F. Kennedy's New Frontier, thereby as a direct representation of his legacy, since President Kennedy's presidency was arguably "incomplete" due to the assassination.

Lyndon Baines Johnson and the Great Society

Lyndon B. Johnson strove to continue filling out Kennedy's program in "perfecting America", though this time naming it the "Great Society", primarily aimed at alleviating poverty, providing more funding for education and the arts, instating Medicare and the Medicaid programs to aid the elderly and impoverished in paying their medical bills, as well as contribute to the overall beautification of the country with countless environmental projects. (Kennedy and Cohen). In this area, he was largely effective. Armed with a coercive personality and a convincing Lady Bird, he was able to obtain undeniable support from the Great Society Congress, which funded this massive progress, and was able to cut poverty by around 30%, the number of libraries increased, schools

were being funded better, and he was named by *National Geographic* as the “greatest conservation president”, adding over four million acres of prime land to the public domain. (Haskins).

The Great Society marked the expansion of modern American liberalism. (Kennedy and Cohen). It demonstrated the vast capabilities of the government and how it could help the people, but many scholars also recognize that it also showed the things that big government could not solve. It could serve as the panacea to all of America’s ills in the 1960s, and many citizens were actually left feeling dissatisfied by not benefitting enough from the program. Perhaps this is one of the largest fulfillments of former President Kennedy’s work. Johnson’s Great Society demonstrated what the government could do for the people, as well as what the people must do for their government, nation, and for themselves to better their situations, as echoed in Kennedy’s iconic inauguration speech.

By the end of his term, John F. Kennedy was closely acquainted with the King family and was an apparent supporter of civil rights, even calling on Congress to act in favor of them in a speech a little before his passing. President Johnson revitalized his sentiments, passing the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, 1965, and 1968. This sought to make racial discrimination in the job market, in schools, in the housing market, and at voting polls illegal under federal law. (Bornet)

Although his progressivist outlook saw a lot of positive changes in America, President Johnson’s success was vitiated by the war on communism insinuated by the ongoing Cold War with the Soviet Union. Under the Kennedy administration, Kennedy vied ardently for a world order in which western capitalism remained dominant while going to extreme lengths to do it. There were also occasions in which President Kennedy wanted to refrain from harsh retaliation to ensure the safety of Americans everywhere, as the nuclear threat was so high. Kennedy had commenced the crusade to preserve the autonomy of a democratic and capitalistic Saigon, in Vietnam, and Johnson made sure to continue it. In his mind, he was helping the Cold War by avoiding thermo-nuclear war with the Soviet Union and preventing Chinese involvement, as was seen in the Korean War. However, he really just augmented the conflict after the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution gave him a “blank check” to deploy what he saw fit in southeast Asia. (Bornet). America watched on television as its young men went into the crusade against North Vietnamese communism, and they were in horror as the number of casualties steadily rose. Many felt like they had been duped into entering a pointless, unwinnable war, hence Johnson’s credibility gap. In response to the war and the social ferment caused by the rapid change of the time, drug use increased, a youth counterculture developed, sexual freedom was expanded, and universities across America roared in defiance. (Bornet).

The Space Race

It was President John F. Kennedy who molded America to be a leading power in space, as part of his vision to be the global leader in international security as well as to one-up the Soviet Union in the ever-growing Cold War. In a dramatic and histrionic speech at the State of the Union in May 1961, Kennedy asserted that space pioneering would be a primary priority of the United States, and announced the lofty goal of sending a man to the moon and bringing him back to Earth safely by the closing of the decade. (Jordan). His ideals of American greatness were consistent with his New Frontier and boosted the nation’s morale. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration, or NASA, was actually passed into law by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in the late 1950s, but Kennedy is credited with expanding its influence in his commitment to becoming the leading space-faring nation and in his vow to bring a man in orbit safely back, whereas Eisenhower before had just vied to place a man into space. (Jordan).

President Lyndon B. Johnson sedulously carried out NASA’s functions and vehemently called for a man to be put in space, which often ran against popular belief among the scientific community that an unmanned flight would be more efficient in garnering sufficient information on the spatial realm. (Koman). Under him, the program saw the commencement of three major missions, Mercury, Gemini, and the heftiest, Apollo. The

most prized expedition among these was the Apollo 11 walk, where Neil Armstrong strutted across the surface of the moon in astronautical bling and was greatly brought back to Earth, finally fulfilling the wants of the late President Kennedy. (Jordan). This boosted American morale even as the Vietnamese Tet Offensive brought greater stress to the Vietnam conflict by crushing the American soldiers. However, many note how the Vietnam War and the Space Race were at odds here, being that they both required a lot of federal spending. Unfortunately, this meant that NASA, despite using billions of dollars for its programs, was sometimes underfunded, which led to careless accidents, such as the sudden fire of the 1967 Apollo 2 expedition, which killed three astronauts. (Koman). However, it's important to note that by the ending of the Apollo program in 1972, America was a leading spacefaring nation, and still is to the modern-day, due in part to the extravagant goals set by the idealistic President John F. Kennedy, that was fulfilled by his predecessors, in honor of his legacy. (Koman).

Media and Presidential Campaign Debate and Advertising

The 1950s and 60s marked the true rise of television in mainstream American culture. Almost every middle and upper-class family had one in their houses to watch things like the news and shows that romanticized the current suburban frenzy that was taking the nation by storm. Noting the widespread nature of television, the device also profoundly affected America's political sphere. Candidates now debated on live, national television, and people watched these debates and thus made their opinions based on these televised hearings. John F. Kennedy, in many ways, was able to obtain the support of the American population due to his presence on TV. This section will focus on the Kennedy-Nixon Debates as a precursor to Kennedy's election win and also its implications for presidential campaigning.

The Kennedy-Nixon Debates and Long-Term Implications

James N. Druckman led a study based on an assignment given to his students at the University of Chicago, where he had some students in the class watch the first Kennedy-Nixon debate of 1960, while others just listened to an audio version of it. Participants came in with little prior knowledge of the debate itself but were informed of important background information and historical context to understand it better while viewing.

The study was based on a variety of variables that Druckman observed on a numerical scale, and the data is extrapolated from a survey given to participants after either listening or watching the debates. He took multiple factors into consideration to account for bias, such as the participant's political ideology, their prior knowledge of either the Kennedy or Nixon presidency, whether they were a Catholic, and their gender. To account for this, Druckman's research is more based on the relative judgment of certain factors provided by the debates, rather than students' forthright opinions on the candidates.

When examining the data on a candidate's integrity and leadership effectiveness, the study showed that the majority of television viewers took into great account both of these things, while the audio listeners took a greater look at leadership effectiveness only. This is due in part because analyzing one's personal integrity and honesty is based on a lot of nonverbal factors, such as latent comfortability, relaxation, eye contact, and body language, among other attributes that can only be seen. Leadership effectiveness is based more so on the impression of one's speech, persuasive ability, and the communication of their ideas. As appearance could not be judged by audio listeners, integrity was taken less into account. Therefore, the television viewers gave more political credibility to John F. Kennedy due to his composed face and figure compared to Nixon's innate insecurity, which can only be perceived when one watches his aggravated facial expressions and tense gestures. This contrasts with the experience of the audio listeners, who might have thought Nixon won the debate due to the cogency of his verbal arguments.

Additionally, those who viewed the debates on television were more likely to pay less attention to issue agreeability than the candidate's image. In many instances, the candidate's presentation trumped the issue

effect. As Kennedy was bronzed to perfection, had stage make-up on, was smiling with glimmering, white teeth, and was a conventionally attractive guy, the viewers generally preferred him in the debate when compared to Nixon, who “looked like death”, according to the president of CBS in 1960, Frank Stanton. (Druckman). It is true that he was recently hospitalized due to a knee injury and reinjured it again while walking on stage, so he came feeling rather ill. The viewers' stress on image and beauty significantly contrasts the listeners' interest in political issues, when the candidate's position aligned with their own, they were likely to favor that candidate.

The participants' sentiments in the study remain consistent with the overall perception of the American public in 1960. Before the debates, Nixon was projected to win by six net points, but after, Kennedy was shown to have a slight lead. (NCC Staff). This foretold his win over Nixon in the election of 1960 by a slight margin in the popular vote. Their thoughts and feelings are also manifested in the opinions of two political figures of the time as well. Henry Cabot Lodge, Nixon's running mate, first said that Nixon had lost the election for the GOP based on this initial impression. Kennedy's running mate, Lyndon B. Johnson, said the same, but in terms of the Democratic Party. The difference was that Lodge watched the debate on television, whereas Johnson listened to it on the radio.

Ultimately, Kennedy's aura and image was a key reason why he won the election, which presents important implications for presidential campaigning. Gerald Ford made it a new staple to have televised presidential debates in 1976, and Ronald Reagan used this to his advantage by delivering a stunning live performance a week before the election of 1980, later winning comfortably over Jimmy Carter. (NCC Staff). Since Kennedy, one's image has remained an important point of judgment for the American public in choosing their candidate to ultimately become the next president of the United States. In 1960, much of the power of elections was shifted to the living room, where ordinary Americans could watch and make their decision. This has since shifted to accommodate new technological developments, such as computers and phones, where people can watch debates and campaign videos, conduct quick research using search engines like Google, and even post their own opinions on social media, effectively influencing others.

The power of the Kennedy image effect manifests itself repeatedly throughout United States presidential election history. Ronald Reagan won the election of 1980 much due to his grandfatherly appearance and sharp, Hollywood-worthy facial features. (Law). Barack Obama was the first African American president, resonating with many black Americans, and also was an adept speaker and comfortable behind the podium. Even former president Donald J. Trump, who defeated Hillary Clinton in 2016, won the election a lot due to his flagrant and histrionic hand gestures, stances, movements, and voice inflections, despite being ridiculed across the media as an “orange man”. These men's visual appearance on stage was a large part of their winning the election.

Ever since Kennedy, the role of a presidential debate as a deciding factor in swaying the will of the American public has amplified. In every election following, debate and stage performance, especially when spread on television or other mediums of technology have overwhelmingly influenced the outcomes of elections. In the election of 2000, for example, George W. Bush came across as more humble and relatable than Al Gore, who was perceived as giving a lecture rather than cogent explanations of issues and therefore could not resonate with the audience in the same way that Bush had. Bush won the election. (Law). The vice-presidential debates of 2020 are also noted for their importance of iconic visual persona. Two seemingly contrasting personalities clashed on stage. Mike Pence, the incumbent Republican vice president, was calm, cool, collected, and non-vindictive, but very stern, appearing to be ready to take over for President Trump at a moment's notice with subtle ease. Kamala Harris appeared to be a little different, more vengeful, captious, and fierce than her subdued opponent. In the case of this debate, both candidates' comfortability to express their political ideologies and personal preferences on stage was a boon to their successes as politicians. Kamala Harris with her running mate, Joe Biden, ended up winning the election of 2020, however. (Hudak). Nevertheless, these political debates have been noted by historians and political scientists with increasing importance in gaining a candidate victory,

this pattern first commenced with the iconic Kennedy-Nixon debates, in which Kennedy's iconic aura and attractive personality steadily captured the hearts of many Americans.

A Representation of American Unity- and Its Rupture

Camelot and Its Implications

In the minds of many, John F. Kennedy's presidency is defined more by ideals than by what he was able to do in office. His image was defined by his "boyish exuberance, attractive wife, and young family", and he "represented the hope for peace" for the future. (Brigance). JFK's administration had this sort of mystical eloquence that defined the American experience at the time, leading to the Camelot myth that summed up its fateful idealism. The word Camelot denotes a castle that King Arthur resided at with his knights and is supposed to evoke the utopian bravery and adventurous spirits of knights. Therefore, when Alan Jay Lerner wrote out the music for the theatrical show at the time, *Camelot*, lyricized, "Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot'... there'll be great Presidents again... but there'll never be another Camelot... This was Camelot... Let's not forget.", the term was associated with Kennedy. (Brigance)

When Kennedy was assassinated, his and Camelot's demise was almost symbolic of the demise of the nation. Theoretically, the nation was on an ascendancy up until Kennedy's assassination. The latter part of the '60s is remembered for more killings, a violent turn in the civil rights movement, foreign catastrophe, and economic stagnancy. Therefore, historians note a certain degree of disengagement and cynicism among the American population, starting in the 1960s. Many note different contributors- the tiredness of two working parents, negative campaign rhetoric, and along those same lines, the ideological gridlock between liberals and conservatives, causing political paralysis. (Brigance). When Congress is stalled, the nations' leaders are screaming execrations at each other, and families can't muster up enough energy to be productive outside of work, it makes sense that people would grow frustrated and weary. However, JFK's death signifies this shift in America- one of a short burst of nostalgia and idealism to long-term disillusion after the murder.

According to Norman Gherson, the "adoption of the Camelot myth was the last thing we did as a whole". (Brigance). It seems that JFK's call to ask how one can perform civil service for the welfare of others died with him. Hence, the '60s are also marked as a pivot point in public engagement among Americans. The overall trend was that fewer individuals turned to one another for aid and the desire to help out in the community decreased. (Brigance). Rather, the government was viewed as the premier agency to help the American population, hence the liberality of Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programs. By this point, the government was seen as the only thing that could revive weary America, and when Johnson's credibility gap and the faults of the Vietnam War were unleashed, cynicism and political divide spiked; these are two primary attributes of modern 21st-century, made prevalent at this time.

Distrust in Government Institutions

It's clear to many that Kennedy's assassination was forever "etched into the American consciousness", as a part of collective trauma. (Kurtz). After the murder, Americans wanted answers. There were three ongoing investigations of the assassination- the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI), the House Select Committee's, and the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy's (Warren Commission).. Therefore, in theory, the government should've been able to garner enough viable evidence to prove to the American public what Lee Harvey Oswald's motives were and that he was the only killer. Why, then, are there so many ongoing conspiracy theories? The American public's distrust in the government increased threefold after the assassination of their beloved President Kennedy, and it has much to do with the executive's reluctance to release all

evidence available to the public domain, the use and misuse of evidence, and total disregard of certain facts. (Kurtz).

The Warren Commission

Technically, the initial federal coverage of the event was illegal, as the assassination was under the jurisdiction of the state of Texas. However, Johnson was unsatisfied with their perceived incompetence, specifically after they held a night press conference with Lee Harvey Oswald, where some “leaks” were exposed, and also after Jack Ruby snuck in and murdered Oswald. So, he transferred complete jurisdiction over the event to his elected Warren Commission. Although Johnson stated that the Commission was created to ascertain the facts on the situation to deliver a reliable report of the events surrounding President Kennedy’s death, he privately noted in memoirs and to other federal figures that he just wanted to mollify a restless and yearning American public, as well as quell the noisome rumors that were circulating globally. Earl Warren, the committee’s chairman, asserted the same thing. (Kurtz). It’s evident that the motives for creating the committee were sketchy, which foretells that its findings would be that much more specious and biased.

Adding to the commission’s bias was the previous report of the FBI. The FBI found that Oswald was the sole assassin- not acting in conjunction with any other person or organization. The Warren Commission chose to uphold this assertion, rather than entertain any other ideas. J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the FBI additionally saw the commission as an adversary. He did not want it to uncover any evidence that the FBI could not, as this would damage its reputation, and therefore chose much of the resources given to the commission.

The Warren Commission's report was finally released in September 1964. Being not much different from the FBI’s, they wrote of the substantial evidence that posed that Lee Harvey Oswald was the sole assassin. Although the reasoning of their verdict was valid and supported, many critics noted the apparent bias in the investigation, discussed above, the report’s “waste of paper” (some of the pages entailed reports of Oswald’s pubic hair), and many condemned their interpretation of certain medical documents. (Kurtz)

Adding to the sketchy nature of the assassination investigation was the federal government withholding documents that the Warren Commission used in their findings. When the public caught on, this faced much scrutiny, especially among scholars who couldn’t find adequate resources to completely research the subject. Congress faced further pressure to reopen the case in the 1970s, when a House committee on governmental operations uncovered disclosed activities such as assassination plots against Fidel Castro as well as a CIA-Mafia association, but most importantly, the withholding of information by the FBI and CIA from the Warren Commission. Therefore, a House Select Committee on Assassinations was opened. When they released their report, they found that Oswald was the sole assassin, but implied the existence of a conspiracy. The shots were fired in different directions. It is true that Lee Harvey Oswald worked on the sixth floor of the Depository Building, and his prints were found on the rifle that was used to shoot. An eyewitness says they saw Oswald’s fire shots. But, Oswald was on the first floor ten minutes before the shooting, and on the second floor two minutes after the shooting; these present some discrepancies. The Warren Commission had said that Oswald fled the building and murdered a Dallas police officer forty-five minutes later in a residential section of Dallas. The latter is true, but Oswald was seen walking out of the building normally, not in a hurry. (Kurtz).

Also evident is a lack of a clear motive. It’s clear that Oswald held a distorted view of himself and the world. (Kurtz). He was a communist and pro-Castro. (Kennedy and Cohen). But at the time, many others were as well, and their views did not necessarily correlate with violence. Another inconsistency pertains to the medical documents and pictures, which do suggest that there was more than one assassin, specifically three. After the assassination, two Dallas policemen, Officer Joe Marshall Smith and Constable Seymour Weitzman accosted two men right after the shooting at Grassy Knoll. When they showed their Secret Service identifications, they were released, but Kurtz voices that the Secret Servicemen were supposed to be on the motorcade. Multiple eyewitness accounts tell off men fleeing Grassy Knoll after the assassination. (Kurtz).

Of even greater significance, perhaps is that multiple individuals had foreknowledge of the assassination. During the Kennedy administration, tensions between the United States and Cuba reached a point of belligerency. The Bay of Pigs Invasion, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and multiple known CIA plans to assassinate Castro contributed. Castro had even threatened American lives if the threats against him were not ceased. The FBI and CIA uncovered multiple reliable and proven accounts of Cuban-Americans who said they knew about the impending assassination in Dallas before it happened. One example is of a Cuban man telling a San Antonio pharmacist about it the day before. Multiple accounts demonstrate that Oswald had received payments from Cuba for the Kennedy assassination. A statement from a man with close connections with the Cuban exile community sums up this conspiracy: “There was a Cuban communist assassination team at large, and Oswald was their hired gun”. (Kurtz).

Distrust and Disillusion

As shown by the depiction above, there are many shady things surrounding the Kennedy assassination and its uncovering, including the misuse and withholding of evidence, discrepancies in eyewitness testimonies, and potential Cuban involvement. This led to an American public who felt like they did not know or understand the full scope of the Kennedy assassination, which led to disillusionment and distrust in the government after the Warren Commission’s failures were clearly noted. This was only exacerbated after Nixon’s Watergate scandal. (Cohen and Kennedy). All this stained the American conscious and diminished the respect people had for the government- a sentiment that many feels have not gone away since.

Pew Research Center led a report that compiled data sets that, from a poll sent out to the public, tracked general trust in the United States government. During the Eisenhower-Kennedy years, the percentage of those who said they trust the government to do what is right all or most of the time ranged from 70-80%- a high. There a key dips that can be attributed to each downward trend. Johnson’s “credibility gap” due to the Vietnam War saw a decline to around 62% by the end of his term. This only went down during the initial Nixon years and stumbled to a lowly 36% after the Watergate scandal. There is no doubt that the federal blunders in evaluating Kennedy’s assassination contributed to that, even if it was not the primary reason. Trust in the government never reached a point as high as it was in 1960 again, demonstrating a general distaste for the government among the American population after Kennedy, which carries into the modern 2022, where political divisiveness attributes to 20% of people who believe government can do what is right most or all of the time.

Beyond the hardcore evidence, conspiracy theories are another example of how Americans have become disillusioned with American civil institutions after the Kennedy assassination. Due to the Warren Commission’s ineptitude in finding a viable conclusion and the 1979 House Select Committee’s implication that a conspiracy could’ve existed, people began to make their own theories up, and they have become deeply embedded in American popular culture. (“JFK Assassination Conspiracy Theories”). Some people write about how the Cubans killed Kennedy. Others how it was a supposed CIA-Mafia coup d’etat. Some people even go as far as to think that Lyndon Johnson and FBI director J Edgar Hoover set the operation up. The most radical of them all is the belief that the government used the assassination to cloud discoveries relating to Unidentified Flying Objects, UFOs. (“JFK Assassination Conspiracy Theories”).

Many, including Purdue professor Michael G. Smith, think that these theories must be laid to rest, in order to “respect the dead rather than distort their memory”. He asserted that “we need to mark it as a simple crime, a murder solved and closed, as well as understand it as a complex event that has been misunderstood and misread”. Former President Donald Trump held a similar view. In 2017, he directed the National Archives to release much of the formerly classified documents related to the JFK Assassination. In accordance with this, over 19,000 documents and over 5 million pages were released in 2018. However, many resources and evidence were still classified. All documents withheld were set to be reviewed in 2021, but President Biden decided to

stall their release, still making many believe that the government is hiding something. (“New Group of JFK Assassination Documents Available to the Public”).

JFK’s Manifestations in Other Democratic Leaders

1960 Democratic Party Platform and Its Connection to John F. Kennedy

To fully grasp an understanding of John Kennedy’s influence on the democratic party, it is important to note the positions of the party for which he ran. Its position outline, given on July 11th, 1960, elaborates on many issues that plagued the country during the commencement of the decade. (The following information pertaining to the Democratic stance in 1960 is derived from the positioning platform described above, recorded on the University of California at Santa Barbara’s American Presidency Project website.) The issue seems to be war, specifically the Cold War. The Party vowed to undo the apparent errors under President Eisenhower, whose policies did not augment American influence and power globally, but actually diminished it when compared to other competing powers such as the Soviet Union and China. Democrats of the day wished to achieve American advancement in space technology, nuclear technology, and overall military might, per JFK’s impending New Frontier and crusade against Communism. However, in the same breath, they announced plans for disarmament to avoid accidental nuclear warfare and to maintain global peace. It seems that the party wanted both aspects: to increase the power of America while ensuring that no further war breaks out. Both of these sentiments, which are seemingly contrasted, are noted in JFK’s reaction to the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Vietnam crisis, situations in which he de-escalated and escalated the tension respectively. (Kennedy and Cohen).

In terms of immigration, the platform asserted that they would adjust the quotas and naturalization laws put in place by Republican Warren Harding after World War One, as these restrictions on familial reunification and a chance at the “American dream” to all peoples of the Earth was against their fundamental mentality in upholding the universal “rights of man”. This is what JFK worked for, and what Lyndon B. Johnson ultimately fulfilled when he signed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which expunged these quotas and established a more liberal immigration policy. (Kennedy and Cohen). This idea of helping others, especially foreigners, was expanded in the platform’s promise to provide monetary aid to many developing countries of the world and increase the country’s involvement with the United Nations. This was in part to serve to stop the spread of Communism, but also asserted a new international order that democrats vied for. JFK’s actions portray this, mainly in the establishment of the Peace Corps.

Additionally, the party shared some ideas about the economy. It called for an annual growth rate of 5% without creating inflation, by encouraging American free competitive enterprise. They rejected the growth of interest rates, as it put a strain on the working class when they wanted to finance a home or a car and contributes to inflation. They wanted to gather tax dollars to lower the cost of living while raising the standard of living and providing aid to those who demonstrate need. They impugned against Republican anti-labor laws, such as the Taft-Hartley Act, and praised Franklin Roosevelt’s pro-labor union Wagner Act. The Democratic platform vowed to hold presidential conferences with labor union leaders, common workers, and company management to ensure good relations. They vowed to uphold the right of unions to organize as well as obtain a liveable minimum wage. Overall, they wanted to be active in the state of the economy, prudently react to recessionary signs, and proactively aid the working class.

As stated, the Democrats vowed to increase the standard of living for Americans through government programs and aid. The main facet of this was to raise the federal minimum wage and provide adequate and affordable housing to underserved individuals, seeing the right to a decent living quarter as a fundamental human right. They also wanted to expand the powers of Social Security and establish medical care programs for the elderly (which were instituted under the Johnson administration); they believed that healthcare was a fundamental human right, not a privilege for the wealthy. The platform also called for an expansion of American

healthcare by building more hospitals, increasing care for psychiatric patients to combat the mental health crisis, and providing more services to disabled individuals.

Lest, with an expanding population, the availability of natural resources became a point of contention. The Democratic Party encouraged the establishment of bills that commenced the building of water dams and hydroelectric plants while conserving farmland, forests, deserts, and mountain lands. To fight pollution, the platform explicitly said that a democratic president would sign bills to fend off the disposal of chemical and radioactive waste off American coasts, as well as to fight noxious fumes emitted from industrial power plants and automobiles. It additionally sought to develop regional energy plants of all kinds, that were environmentally friendly as well as affordable to the general population.

The party additionally asserted the promise to uphold the civil rights of minority groups, in which the movement was mainly centered around African Americans at the time. They believed that all American citizens should have the right to vote and the right to obtain many of the liberties formerly expressed in their promises. Overall, the Democratic Party of 1960, the one with which Kennedy was most closely affiliated, vowed the uphold what is considered the natural rights of all human beings with government might.

Actions of Democratic Leaders That Uphold the 1960 Party Platform.

John F. Kennedy was associated with the version of the Democratic Party described above. He, with his New Frontier ideology, and his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson with his Great Society vision, worked to achieve its ideals. The following paragraphs will explain the politics and policies of many later Democratic leaders, and how they fulfilled what the platform indicated in 1960, and while drawing comparisons to John F. Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, to further analyze their respective political legacies. JFK and LBJ's commitment to the Democratic platform will not be discussed here, as they were mentioned and analyzed before. Rather, this section is to elaborate on their political legacy by discussing the actions of other Democratic leaders that followed.

Robert Kennedy

Robert Francis Kennedy (RFK), was the seventh child of the Kennedy family and a younger brother to John. His political debut came when he helped run the successful campaign for John's Massachusetts Senate endeavor. He later served on Senator McCarthy's House Investigation Panel, but became disturbed by its tactics and resigned. After, he was a minority leader for the Democratic Party and then helped organize John's successful presidential campaign. John ended up appointing him as Attorney General, a position in which he gained fame and political respect in the judicial sector. One of RFK's core beliefs was that of civil rights, an opinion that was consistent with his brother's. As Attorney General, he upheld African American voting rights and affirmed the admission of James Meredith, a black student, into the University of Mississippi, even if it caused a riot. After his brother's assassination, he resigned, signaling an apparent political exile. However, he ran a successful campaign for the New York Senator position in 1964, achieving a landslide victory. ("Robert F. Kennedy").

In-office, Robert Kennedy was seen as a sort of "liberal icon". ("Robert F. Kennedy"). Drawing upon Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society, he insinuated policies to serve underprivileged children and individuals with disabilities as well as instituted successful plans to raise the standard of living in Brooklyn. He sought to alleviate poverty by encouraging private businesses to relocate to stricken areas, thereby creating jobs, as opposed to just handing out governmental welfare to those in need. He emphasized the underserved and minorities, and they, as a whole, idolized him. An example of this in practical terms is that he vowed to make amends with oppressed groups, such as Native Americans and blacks, and also to provide direct aid to those who "exist(ed) in dark tenements" and "whose bellies are (were) swollen with hunger". ("Robert F. Kennedy"). Toward the end of his career, he even began to elaborate on populist visions, such as taxing the rich.

In the realm of foreign policy, Robert Kennedy was essentially a “Peace Corps” of democracy, who promoted universal self-determination and the right to criticize the government without fear of reprisal. He traveled to Africa and Eastern Europe on service trips and supported the fight in Vietnam initially, but then ardently opposed it when he saw that it, in itself, was a violation of many of the basic principles of human rights that were so near and dear to his heart. (“Robert F. Kennedy”).

All of his sentiments and ideologies no doubt emerge from those of his brother’s, John F. Kennedy. John Kennedy called on the people to help the nation, just as Robert called on business to help alleviate the country-wide poverty, which additionally continued John’s War on Poverty. Many historians argue that he was even further left than JFK or LBJ on the political spectrum, but this changed the fundamental nature of the Democratic Party, whose policies were and have been modeled after his.

It is important to note that Robert F. Kennedy announced his bid for the presidency on March 16, 1968, but was gunned down at a Los Angeles hotel on June 5th, just after winning the California primary. (“Robert F Kennedy”).

Jimmy Carter

Jimmy Carter rose to the presidency in the wake of the Watergate scandals that overthrew the Nixon regime and the disastrous leadership of Gerald Ford. (Kennedy and Cohen). Being the first democratic president since Lyndon Johnson, he drew upon many of the party tenets noted in the 1960 position speech. Most notable in many facets is his policies regarding the environment as it pertains to the energy crisis and pollution. He addressed the Nation on April 18th, 1977, urging the people to minimize their energy consumption. He then urged Congress to do the same two days later, calling for the passing of a National Energy Plan to conserve resources, which was later passed and signed in 1980 as the Energy Security Act. He signed into law a Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (1977) but was unsatisfied with it because he “would prefer to have a stricter strip mining bill”, presumably for conservation purposes. (“Jimmy Carter Event Timeline”). Lyndon Johnson made a similar effort in his passage of the Clean Air Act and Water Quality Act in 1963 and 1965 respectively. (U.S. Department of the Interior). And before him, Kennedy took little baby steps to protect the environment by establishing three national coastlines and promoting a youth conservation corps. (“Season 3, Episode 5: Everyday Environmental Challenges”). His actions were similar to the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) President Franklin D. Roosevelt had worked to establish during the Great Depression. (Kennedy and Cohen).

Jimmy Carter further urged the fight for environmental conservation after the Three Mile Island Nuclear Reactor had a partial meltdown, setting up a commission for its cleanup and also to examine its causes to ensure it would never happen again. He used the incident to also advocate against the reliance on foreign oil, encouraging people to simply drive less. (“Jimmy Carter Event Timeline”). It’s clear that President Jimmy Carter had a passion for the environment, and that he sought to use government agencies and the ability to solve the many crises that plagued the nation. This, in many ways, stemmed from the same passion of former democratic presidents, like President Kennedy.

Carter additionally used “humanitarian diplomacy” in dealing with a multitude of foreign affairs. An example is the Panama Canal Treaties Act, in which the canal was set to be given completely back to the nation of Panama in 1999. (“Jimmy Carter Event Timeline”). President Kennedy reacted a bit less munificently, promising “to insure the full enjoyment of the various benefits which the Canal should afford the two nations that made possible its construction”. (“Letter to President Chiari Concerning the Canal”). Woodrow Wilson’s Panama Canal Tolls Act, which no longer excused American ships from paying the required fees, was a similar ethical step toward eventually giving Panama full autonomy over the vital waterway. (Kennedy and Cohen). It’s clear that President Kennedy was influenced by democratic presidents before him, and that Carter was influenced by President Kennedy; he just took humanity and humility up a notch.

Bill Clinton

Bill Clinton had stated himself that John Kennedy was his political idol. The story begins in 1963 at the prestigious Boys Nation program at the Capitol. There, Clinton, then sixteen years old, worked with his fellow peers to pass legislation in a mock congressional committee. He had tried but failed to get a bill creating a Department of Housing and Urban Development, and was one of the only southern students to vote “yes” on a pro-civil rights bill, being that he was progressive, thinking in parallel with many of the ideas of then-President Kennedy. Soon after Kennedy’s European tour, the President went to the White House to deliver a speech on the importance of public service to Boys Nation. Clinton felt inspired by this, and his later handshake with John Kennedy was the cementing point that made him believe he would be a president just like his idol. (Broder).

Clinton did, in fact, become President of the United States, and Kennedy’s influence on him manifested in many of his actions in office. Clinton possessed a “preternatural energy, exuberance, and optimism”, a trait likewise noted by many historians and political analysts in JFK and FDR. (Greenstein). Similar to JFK, Bill Clinton sought to provoke idealism in an evermore politically divisive nation. The beginning of his speech invoked the “mystery of an American renewal”, a nation of rebirth and revival that JFK had similarly described with his “New Frontier” rhetoric. Clinton also called on the self-reliance of Americans. Just as Kennedy had said to ask Americans to serve the country, Clinton asked each generation of Americans to “define what it means to be an American”. He pointed out what he saw as the most pressing issues of 1993- the high cost of healthcare, crime, and poverty- issues that LBJ had also worked to solve with his Great Society program. (Clinton).

One of the first things that Clinton did in office was naming his wife, Hillary Rodham Clinton, the head of the Task Force on National Health Care Reform, to help counter skyrocketing healthcare costs and ensure that healthcare was virtually universal in America- dramatically similar to LBJ’s instituted programs of Medicare and Medicaid. He, akin to Kennedy’s fight for black civil rights, led a baby step in the gay rights movement. In constituting a “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, he acknowledged and allowed gay people to serve in the U.S. armed forces if they would not open up about their orientation. (“Bill Clinton- Key Events”). Although this is far from their well-deserved liberation, it was a step in a positive direction, although the policy would later be seen as oppressive.

Clinton radically altered the way American welfare worked. In the Johnson and Kennedy administrations, welfare had essentially been the government doling out money to those in need, as a part of an overarching “war on poverty”. (Kennedy and Cohen). Bill Clinton’s approach differed. He believed that just handing out subsidies eliminated the values of hard work and independence that America was seemingly built upon. To fulfill his vision, he signed a bill that made it so families could only receive federal aid for up to five years, states would receive fixed grants each year, child care aid would increase, and legal immigrants would be ineligible for most public benefits. (“Bill Clinton- Key Events”). This drew upon Kennedy and Johnson’s fight against poverty while drawing upon a more conservative ideology that America swooned over post-Raegan. There are certain parts of his plan that are in line with the Kennedy democrat, an increase in childcare aid and the continuation of welfare being in that. However, his treatment of immigrants is not.

Barack Obama

Even if Barack Obama, the 44th president of the United States, never had such a profound interaction with the late John F. Kennedy as the one Bill Clinton had, but Kennedy’s aura, persona, and policy undoubtedly manifested in Obama’s. First of all, both former presidents had to overcome the personal prejudices of many Americans at their times. Kennedy was a Catholic, and never before had the American public elected a Catholic to the highest office in the land. Kennedy spoke many times about how being a Catholic should not affect whether

people voted for him or not because it had no bearing on his political policy. (Dolan Oral Interview #1). However, words themselves did not always make the cut; Kennedy had to portray a jocund personality very forcibly in order to win over the public's faith and trust. Barack Obama is a black man, and at the time of the election in 2008, America had never elected a black man before.

Obama's most famous speech, titled "A More Perfect Union" but often dubbed the "race speech", was the pinnacle of overcoming latent animosity seated within the American public. Obama gave this speech to a racially and politically diverse group of people. The oratory entailed a prescription to the omnipresent and complex tension between races in America and explained the common meaning of essentially what it means to be American to try to eradicate the rigidity. He used intricate sociological tactics, such as the assertion of an "us/them" complex as well as the repetition of traditional American symbols and ideas, such as the Constitution and liberty. (Hernandez). Really, Obama wanted the American public to know that although he was a black man, he was still fit to be president on the basis of his political ideas, his shared values with America, and his status as a highly functional American citizen. This is accredited to many political analysts as being a turning point in his campaign. (Hernandez).

Obama seems to pull another card right out of the Kennedy playbook pertaining to familial idealism. In the '60s, John Kennedy's family was seen as being something along the lines of "quintessentially American". He had a wealthy and beautiful wife, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, and (at the time of his election in 1960), two lovely children, John F. Kennedy Jr., who was just a newborn, and Caroline Kennedy, who was about three years old. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). Pictures would often be shown of Kennedy with his family to further gain the love and support of the American public- and to much avail. Many just adored his aura, and his family added to that cheerful and youthful vibe he gave off. Likewise, Obama had his passionate and cunning wife, Michelle Obama, with two young daughters, Malia and Sasha. People have seen many pictures of the family doing fun activities, like sledding, watching shows, traveling to national monuments, and standing politely together in the Oval Office. (Drupal). These are all romanticizations of familial life and what it means in the American backdrop.

Also noted by many writers, historians, and analysts is the Obama family's role and presence in campaign measures and promotions. The family, who had previously chosen to leave their children out of the spotlight, decided that they should play a more prominent role in the 2012 reelection campaign. According to Political scientist, Andra Gillespie, displaying the total family in advertisements was a "way to humanize them, and it's also a way to signal youth and vitality". (Thompson) "Youth" and "vitality" were words used to describe Obama's late predecessor, Kennedy. (Brigance). It is evident that Obama used his family to his political advantage the same way Kennedy had.

Obama's politics in office was no less an extension of democratic principles asserted by previous presidents, specifically Kennedy and Johnson. A fighter for equality, he signed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009 to protect workers against pay discrimination and also a Hate Crimes Prevention Act. It was he who also repealed the long criticized policy of "Don't Ask Don't Tell"; from that point on members of the LGBTQ+ community would be able to serve openly. He comforted the parents of Trayvon Martin, a 12-year-old black boy killed by police, and condemned the action, which was ostensibly racially motivated. These all show that he was a fighter for civil rights as president, similar to JFK and his successor, LBJ. ("Barack Obama Event Timeline")

Following the precedents that the previous democratic presidents set before him, Obama also embodied a humanitarian domestic policy, specifically in healthcare. He argued that the United States spent much more on healthcare than any other developed nation, and why this was lunacy considering that America's sickness and mortality rate were not better than these other nations. Later, in March 2010, he signed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, which expanded the abilities of Medicare as a health insurance agency for many Americans. ("Barack Obama Event Timeline") This is a direct expansion of something that Lyndon B. Johnson started, and something that John Kennedy advocated for. Obama further injected American personnel

and diplomatic influence into foreign conflicts, striving to remain the “anchor of global security” and the “advocate for global freedom”- a role taken up during the Cold War under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations in the 1960s. One instance is in the president’s response to the Libyan Civil War. The people of Libya were finally rising up against the fear that Muammar Qadhafi’s forty-year reign on the country had inflicted on them. Obama condemned Qadhafi and suggested that he step down. Instead of doing so, the Libyan dictator chose to lead attacks on his citizens. Obama, seeing the need to preserve democracy and keep Libya stable, froze Qadhafi’s \$33 billion in assets and instituted a no-fly zone with the United Nations Security Council. When Qadhafi’s ruthless attacks did not cease, Obama used military intervention to cut off major supply lines used for the violence and also stall the attacks. (“Barack Obama Event Timeline”). Obama injected the American military into a situation that did not directly affect American citizens, as he did it to preserve global democracy and to help out the people of Libya. This holds many similarities to what Kennedy and Johnson did in Vietnam. However, it appears that Obama learned some things from their mistakes. For one thing, he emphasized to the American people that their interests were at the forefront, like helping U.S. citizens in Libya first and never employing ground troops. He also transferred responsibility for the conflict to NATO after the original American involvement worked. He would have the United States finance a lot of the efforts as well as stay engaged, but he ensured that the nation would not have to pay the blunt price for the conflict, as it had to during Vietnam.

Conclusion

John F. Kennedy died tragically due the assassin’s bullet on November 22nd, 1963, but yet he still lives today. Modern political debate, and the effort politician’s may put into their image on stage, is directly influenced by the effect of Kennedy’s showing in his debates against his competitor, Richard Nixon. Representing unity, the assassination of former President Kennedy also represents the political divisiveness noted more prevalently in America after his death. The idealistic spirit of America went just as fast as he did. In addition to this is the widespread distrust in governmental institutions after the Warren Commission and certain House Select Committees made some serious blunders in concluding all facts pertaining to Kennedy’s assassination. And, although his political career was not complete, his viewpoints and actions reflect much of those by modern-day politicians, completing his substantial political legacy. It’s clear that Kennedy nests deep in the American conscious. Remaining one of the most popular presidents in all of American history, his persona, image, and presidency has been revered and loved by many, and his legacy has truly changed the American political sphere.

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