

The Presidency of John F. Kennedy and the Cold War

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The presidency of John F. Kennedy only lasted from January 20, 1961 until November 22, 1963 but in those short two years, he effectively changed the world. During his presidency the world was brought to the brink of nuclear destruction, there was a failed coup in Cuba staged by the U.S., the space race was in full swing, and it was all brought to an end on November 22, 1963 when he was assassinated. This short term was marked with some successes and some failures that came to define the Cold War.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy, affectionately referred to as Jack, was born on May 29, 1917 in Massachusetts to Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. and Rose Fitzgerald and was raised in a family with 9 children. He moved multiple times in his youth between Massachusetts and New York until he was 14 when he was sent off to boarding school in Connecticut. He was known as a consummate trouble maker but that all changed when he attended Harvard University in the fall of 1936 where his interests in military matters and current events heightened and set the foundation for his political career. After he graduated in June of 1940, Kennedy joined the Navy following in the footsteps of his older brother Joe and was assigned to command a patrol torpedo boat in the Solomon Islands. In charge of the PT-109, Kennedy has a crew of 12 men and on August 2, 1943 a Japanese Destroyer rammed into the much smaller PT-109 and split it in two. Kennedy injured his back, two men were killed, and one was seriously injured and Kennedy swam with this man on his back to the shore. The men were stranded for 5 days on this deserted island until some local fishermen spotted them and they were saved. Kennedy was awarded the Purple Heart for sustaining his injuries in combat and the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for "extremely heroic conduct" (JFK Library).

After he returned home, Kennedy entered into the world of politics and ran for Congress in Massachusetts's 11th Congressional District and won in 1946. After six years in the House of Representatives, Kennedy was elected Senator of Massachusetts in 1952. His political stardom was beginning to burn bright and he was a recognizable figure in Washington D.C. at this time. On November 8, 1960 Senator Kennedy was elected the President of the United States. He was 43 when he was elected making him the youngest president to ever be elected and he was also the first Catholic and Irish-American elected to be President. In his inaugural speech, Kennedy famously proclaimed, "Ask not what your country can do for you" he added, "ask what can you do for your country." These famous words came at a perfect time for the United States that was now getting into the full swing of the Cold War.

I will discuss the events that took place from January 20, 1961 until November 22, 1963 in regards to the presidency of Kennedy and the Cold War. This includes his relationship with Soviet First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev, the involvement of the United States in Latin America and their role in thwarting communism there, the Alliance for Progress, the Berlin Crisis, the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and the Space Race. All of these events had a profound effect on the world and one wonders what would have happened between the United States and the Soviet Union if President Kennedy had not been assassinated on that fateful day in Dallas, Texas.

Kennedy's First 100 Days

On January 20, 1961, John F. Kennedy was sworn in as President of the United States and immediately thrown into the issues of the Cold War. Kennedy ran his campaign on the basis that he was going to be a President tough on Communism and he vowed to improve the nuclear missiles and bridge the gap with the Soviets. This campaign was the exact opposite of how the incumbent left office. President Dwight D. Eisenhower left office with his farewell address that requested the limitations of the military-industrial complex. He said "In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex" (LaFeber 219). In other words, Eisenhower was proposing to limit the amount of money and the amount of labor the United States was expelling every year in order to keep up with the Soviets in relations to the number and quality of missiles and nuclear bombs. Kennedy ran on the fact that we, as Americans, have to spend more money and expel more labor because we cannot be second in the world. The Americans would have to be more efficient than the Soviets and this would grant reassurance to Americans that we are the most powerful nation in the world and that if the Soviets were to choose to go to war with us, that we would undoubtedly crush them. This campaign proved to obviously be effective and true to his word, Kennedy increased missile and weapons productions after he was elected. In 1961, the administration increased the defense budget by 15 percent. They did this by doubling the number of combat-ready divisions in the Army Reserve, increasing the size of the Marine Corps, adding seventy vessels to the Navy's fleet, and giving twelve more airplanes for the Air Forces tactical fleet. By 1965, the United States was exporting \$1.9 billion worth of arms to Europe, Japan, Iran, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, and multiple other nations (LaFeber 218).

Out of all the foreign nations where Communism was being expelled in 1961, Kennedy gave special attention to the nations of Latin America. He believed that they were under the biggest threat from Soviet influence and since it was in our backyard, it was our business too. This idea of the United States policing the western hemisphere goes back to the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 which restricted European expansion in North American and even down into Central and South America (Makarov 2/3/11). One of the ways Kennedy established American influence in Latin American to undermine Soviet ideology was through the creation of the Peace Corps on March 1, 1961. The goal of the Peace Corps was to teach and train people in technical services in newly emerging nations. This group of young men and women would go to nations such as Venezuela or other Latin American nations and give the people, mainly children, something that they did not have easy access to which was an education. On March 13, just twelve days after the establishment of the Peace Corps, Kennedy furthered his initiative in Latin America and announced the Alliance for Progress which was a ten-year commitment of \$20 billion of American money, aid, and image to Latin America. As part of this alliance, Latin American nations promised \$80 billion in investment over the ten-year commitment, land, tax, and socioeconomic reform (LaFeber 220). The aspect of socioeconomic reform was most likely the most important to Kennedy because at this time the United States was just throwing money around the world as if it were worthless. What Kennedy cherished more was loyalty and commitment. He wanted these Latin American nations to be partly dependent on the United States for aid but more so committed to the United States by way of capitalism. The alliance was met by some reluctance in Latin America, mainly from Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil. These are all major nations but the real nation that the United States was after was Cuba.

In the early hours of April 17, 1961, a group of about 1,500 U.S. trained Cuban insurgents stormed the beach of the Bay of Pigs in Cuba with the intentions of overthrowing the Socialist government of Fidel Castro. The Cuban insurgents were trained and led by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and were given the go by President Kennedy on April 16th. The invasion had no air support, as planned, and went horribly wrong. Cuban intelligence discovered the invasion plans and the army was fully prepared in a defensible position. The United States also believed that the Cubans knew about the invasion plans, but this information was never relayed to Kennedy (Reeves 91). The invasion lasted three days and was an utter failure. By the 19th, the Cuban army had either captured or killed just about all of the 1,500 insurgents. Kennedy was forced to negotiate the release of the captured insurgents and did so over a twenty-month period, spending about \$53 million in ransom money (Reeves 105). After the Bay of Pigs failure, Kennedy ordered an investigation of the CIA and this led to the removal of some of its high officials. After the failure, Kennedy remarked publicly that “All my life I’ve known better than to depend on the experts, how could I have been so stupid, to let them go ahead” (LaFeber 221). This failure led to the assurance of Castro’s power as well. Since the United States failed to overthrow this charismatic leader, it gave him the feeling that he was untouchable. With the power of the Soviet Union at his back, Castro had the right to feel untouchable. However, this failed invasion also had to make Castro worried. He was now an enemy of the United States. Yes, it is great for him to have the support of the Soviet Union and Nikita Khrushchev in his corner, but there is not much he can do from over 5,000 miles away. The United States is a mere twenty miles away from the shores of Cuba and now Castro was under the watchful eye of President Kennedy. This failure also proved the worth of Cuba to Khrushchev. There were meetings between U.S. and Soviet officials immediately following the invasion in Havana and Moscow and in one of the meetings the First Deputy of the Soviet Council of Ministers, Secretary Rusk said to Kennedy that “Cuba means a great deal to Bolsheviks like Khrushchev and me, more than the Americans know” (Reeves 105).

The Bay of Pigs Invasion and U.S. involvement in Latin America was taking place in the public eye. Generally ignored by the public is the U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia in April of 1961. In the nations of Laos, Cambodia, Burma, Vietnam, and Thailand there was increasing guerrilla activities under the communist movement of Pathet Lao. These nations border China and the communist insurgents were given aid from the Chinese by way of weapons, resources, and cross-border safety. Kennedy saw this region as a very important region because of its ties with our old ally France and the economic resources that come out of the area. Therefore, Kennedy pledged over 300 American military advisors and \$32 million in assistance to the governments under threat. This action became the precursor to the Vietnam War through the initial U.S. involvement in the area that did not stop until 1975 (LaFeber 225). However, as China increased its presence in the area, Kennedy and Khrushchev decided that a growing Chinese influence was bad for both the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Therefore, both nations enforced neutrality in the area and told the Chinese to stop building roads to Laos and to respect its territorial sovereignty. Southeast Asia was a new region of conflict in the Cold War but our involvement was shadowed by our involvement in Latin America. Kennedy even remarked, “Thank God the Bay of Pigs happened when it did, otherwise we’d be in Laos by now – and that would be a hundred times worse” (LaFeber 225).

August 13, 1961 marked a day in the world that many people remember vividly because this was the day when the Berlin Wall was erected in Berlin, East Germany by East German officials with assistance from the Soviet Union. The wall was obviously created under heavy influence by the Soviet Union with the aim of not

letting East Berliners travel to West Berlin which was very “Americanized” at this point. Kennedy was appalled by the actions of the Soviet Union and thought that the wall was completely unnecessary and showed more the weakness of the Soviet Union because they had the entrap their citizens to make them follow their ideologies. Regardless, Kennedy refused to risk American lives and go to war with the Soviet Union. Instead, he tested out the strength of the wall and the guards by ordering a battalion of tanks and other military vehicles to travel through one of the checkpoints that they did successfully but then met Soviet tanks and a standoff ensued. The controversy of the wall led to a greater faction between Kennedy and Khrushchev. Shortly after in November of 1961, Khrushchev ordered the testing of a 58-megaton weapon that was 3000 times more powerful than the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II. This meant that nuclear testing was back in session and the U.S. continued underground testing in preparation for nuclear war. This all started after the creation of the Berlin Wall which only led to greater distrust and faction between the two rival nations (LaFeber 223-4).

The first 100 days of a presidency is where you prove your value to the American people. Kennedy’s first hundred days were characterized by limiting the Soviet influence in Latin America through the establishment of the Peace Corps, the creation of the Alliance for Progress, and the Bay of Pigs Invasion. The invasion may have failed but it proved that the U.S. is committed to Latin American and will go to great lengths to keep Soviet influence out of their backyard. The first 100 days were also marked more globally with the U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia and the U.S. disdain for the Berlin Wall. Through his first 100 days, Kennedy had defined the Soviet threat in global terms and it would lead to the rivalry between President Kennedy and Soviet Premier Khrushchev.

1962: Kennedy’s War against Khrushchev

On June 4, 1961 President Kennedy met with Premier Khrushchev for the first time and it became instantly forgettable for Kennedy. He was bullied throughout the meeting by Khrushchev, who bragged how the Soviet Union was making Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles “like sausages.” Khrushchev was not impressed by the new American president and thought little of him. However, the one bright spot for Kennedy in the meeting was when he proclaimed that any act by the Soviet Union against the people or infrastructure of West Berlin would be considered an act of war. This meeting sparked the rivalry between the two leaders that would be heated throughout Kennedy’s presidency.

The year 1962 went through virtual peace for the first half of the year with one major bright spot for the United States. Yuri Gagarin was the first man to fly in space on April 12, 1961 for a total of 108 minutes. This was a great achievement for all of mankind but not the U.S. because Gagarin was Russian and a member of the Soviet Air Force. This was the major achievement that the Soviets had over the Americans. The Americans may have produced more missiles and bombs at this point but the Soviets won in the “Space Race” and that always hung over Kennedy’s head. However, the Americans launched their first man into space on February 20, 1962 when John Glenn orbited the Earth on a Mercury-Atlas rocket named Friendship 7 (Reeves 285). Glenn had orbited the Earth three times in four hours and fifty-six minutes clearly trumping Gagarin’s 108 minute flight. This was a major moment for Americans and it proved to be one of the highlights of the first half of 1962 for Kennedy. Continuing on positive moments for Kennedy, one of his all time speeches happened on September 12, 1962 when he boldly proclaimed that the U.S. planned to put a man on the moon within ten years. He continued by saying “we

choose to go to the moon in this decade among other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard” (Reeves 338). This proclamation in some ways was a direct challenge for the Soviet Union because the U.S. admittedly lost the “Space Race” but now they had to do one better than the Soviets and put a man on the moon. The U.S. accomplished this on July 20, 1969 when three men, Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins aboard the Apollo 11 landed on the moon. Neil Armstrong was the first man to ever walk on the moon and his “one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind” arguably won the Space Race for the Americans.

The year 1962 was not all fun and games for President Kennedy and the Americans because in October the world was put on the brink of global destruction with the Cuban Missile Crisis. The controversy dates back to April of that same year because it was at this time that the United States began building missile launch sites in Turkey, only a couple hundred miles outside of Moscow (Reeves 345). This was not seen as an act of aggression in the eyes of President Kennedy but a calculated act of military strategy. The U.S. had no intention to launch a preemptive strike on the Soviet Union but they wanted to be prepared in case the Soviet Union was to attack. These bases also operated as collateral because Khrushchev knew they were there and that Moscow was in striking distance of the bases. This prevented Khrushchev from doing anything that would make Kennedy angry because he had a plethora of ICBM’s at his expense that he could use at anytime.

On October 16, 1962, President Kennedy received photographs taken by a U-2 spy plane showing the construction of a nuclear launch pad that could potentially fire an ICBM up to 1000 miles away. In the following days, another U-2 spy plane located another site built for specialized weapons that could launch missiles up to 2,200 miles (LaFeber 233). This was a clear act of aggression by Nikita Khrushchev but the U.S. was doing the same thing in Turkey, effectively creating a global nuclear standoff. After some days of deliberation with his cabinet, especially his brother Bobby who was the U.S. Attorney General, Kennedy decided that his preferred course of action would be a preemptive air strike against all nuclear launch sites, airfields, weapons and ammunitions factories, and all potential nuclear storage sites.

Thankfully, Kennedy was convinced otherwise by the diplomatic members of his cabinet who feared that a preemptive air strike would bring about a nuclear war that could wipe out almost half the population of the United States (Reeves 373). Kennedy kept the knowledge of missiles in Cuba a secret from the American public for as long as he possibly could but on October 22 he addressed the nation in regards to the missiles in Cuba. He said that the Soviets were building nuclear bases in Cuba “to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere” and announced that the U.S. was imposing “a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment being shipped to Cuba.” Kennedy continued to say that the United States would “regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union” (LaFeber 234).

The world was at a standstill with millions of people caught in between. The Cuban Missile Crisis instantly became the biggest fear of Americans, especially those who lived in major cities within reach of the ICBM’s, which included Miami, Washington D.C., Baltimore, and even New York City. Khrushchev adhered to Kennedy’s warning and did not even try shipping offensive military equipment into Cuba in the days following but after a U-2 spy plane was shot down by Soviets in Cuba Khrushchev took off the gloves. He demanded that the U.S. missiles be removed from Turkey or the world would inch ever closer to nuclear destruction. American and Soviet cabinet members deliberated in the days following to no avail.

The leaders from each nation just became irritated with each other and nothing substantial was ever achieved. On Friday, October 27th, Kennedy received a telegraph from Nikita Khrushchev that became part of a series of letters sent to Kennedy who in short said that he was scared of the danger that could erupt from this crisis. After some time of bickering between the two, Kennedy remarked "It is insane that two men, sitting on opposite sides of the world, should be able to decide to bring an end to civilization" (Reeves 411). This series of conversation between the two men showed their lighter side which was that both of them were fearful of what could happen as a result of this standoff. However, the day after he sent the message to Kennedy, Khrushchev went on Soviet broadcast and boldly proclaimed that the Soviet Union will not remove its arms from Cuba until the U.S. removes its arms from Turkey. Robert Kennedy quickly made Khrushchev aware of the fact that the missiles in Turkey had been ordered to be removed months before because they were outdated and not needed (LaFeber 235). Neither side seemed to listen to each other in their official meetings on the matter of Soviet missiles in Cuba; the only way to achieve any of their goals was through secret negotiation. In part of the series of messages sent from Khrushchev to Kennedy, Khrushchev proposed a solution to the crisis that came to be the results. Khrushchev proposed that the Soviet Union would end all armament processes with Cuba if the United States swore not to invade Cuba and in addition the United States had to remove their missiles from Turkey (Reeves 412). This proposal seemed as a way out for the Soviets that actually hurt the Americans but it was more costly for the Soviets, especially Khrushchev.

This secret proposal to Kennedy met opposition from many members of Kennedy's cabinet including his brother Robert but the President approved. His idea was that Khrushchev proclaimed his weakness and that if the crisis were to escalate to war, that Khrushchev felt that the U.S. was stronger. In the end on October 28, Kennedy and Khrushchev agreed to the terms and the Soviet Union began deconstructing its nuclear missile launch sites in Cuba, the United States removed its missiles from Turkey, and President Kennedy gave his word to Khrushchev that the United States would not invade Cuba. The U.S. media quickly jumped on the story as a victory for the Americans and an embarrassing defeat for the Soviets. This angered Kennedy greatly because he did not want Khrushchev to feel embarrassed or that he lost because then he might order a preemptive strike against the U.S. out of pure emotion (Reeves 424). After the Cuban Missile Crisis, life went on in the United States but not as if it never happened. All Americans were fully aware that the world was on the brink of disaster and after this point in the Cold War, Americans never truly felt safe from the Soviets.

1963: The Year of Nuclear Test Bans and Vietnam

In the year 1963, Khrushchev and Kennedy were both adamant about avoiding another nuclear standoff like they had the previous October in Cuba. In the summer months they negotiated and signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963. This test ban was the first of its kind to limit the arms race between the United States and Soviet Union and it significantly reduced the battle for the stronger nuclear arsenal. The Nuclear Test Ban prohibited above-ground nuclear testing by either nation which seems minute today, but that was a significant step during that time considering they were months removed from obliterating the entire world. The test ban was met in the Senate with a strong opposition because many Senators believed that nuclear war was imminent with the Soviet Union and they simply did not trust Khrushchev to obey the treaty. The other side of this argument was made by nuclear scientists and physicists from all over the world, and they convinced Khrushchev and Kennedy that this arms race would only lead to world destruction (LaFeber 237). On October 7, Kennedy and Khrushchev officially signed the Nuclear

Test Ban Treaty that put the official end to aboveground nuclear testing and set the tone for the Cold War for the future where all the treaties become about nuclear limitations, not nuclear expansion.

The crisis and the resulting test ban treaty had opposite effects on the world leaders involved. Premier Khrushchev was now seen as weak and was being questioned internally and externally, most famously by China who simply stated that he was an idiot for placing missiles in Cuba and a coward for removing them. The Chinese thought the Americans to be “paper tigers” that would not actually strike with their full power, to which Khrushchev responded with that assumption as “dung.” As Khrushchev was becoming less influential, Kennedy’s star was becoming even brighter and some say it peaked at a speech at American University in Washington D.C. on June 10, 1963 where he appealed to the Soviets to seek a “relaxation of tensions.” At this speech, he continued his push for nuclear test bans and was met by an outstanding applause (LaFeber 237).

The summer of 1963 also held one of Kennedy’s most famous speeches in his presidency in Berlin on June 26. In this speech at the Berlin Wall, Kennedy spoke of Communism in the city of Berlin and the differences between East and West Berlin. He proposed the argument that there is a great difference between Communism and Capitalism and this difference is shown in the economic status of the separate sides of the city. He famously says, “There are some that say that Communism is the wave of the future. Let them come to Berlin. Lass sie nach Berlin kommen!” He ends his speech with the now famous phrase, “Ich bin ein Berliner” which translates to “I am a Berliner” (Reeves 536). This speech is considered a direct attack at the ideologies of the Soviet Union and the faulty system of communism because the differences at this time between East and West Berlin were great, and Kennedy made sure the world knew of it.

With the plans of nuclear limitations in the works, Kennedy began to focus his attention on the liberation movements taking place around the world but specifically in Southeast Asia because he hoped to halt the expansionist Communist China. The United States focused on two nations in Southeast Asia for specific reasons advantageous to the U.S. First, the nation of Laos was regarded as the American stronghold in Southeast Asia after the Americans effectively rid Laos of Chinese influence and it became the hub of American influence in Southeast Asia. Second, the nation of Vietnam was seen as the primary target of the future because it was vital to American interests but it was also the “cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike...Her political liberty is an inspiration to those seeking to obtain or maintain liberty in all parts of Asia” (LaFeber 242). None other than Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts said these words in 1956 when the U.S. was beginning their involvement in Vietnam. When he became President, Kennedy further increased American influence in Vietnam saying that the civil war going on was a battle of freedom against tyranny and that only American involvement could assure that freedom won. The Kennedy administration bought into the Eisenhower idea of the “domino effect” and that if one country fell to communism, that the next country over was now susceptible to falling as well (LaFeber 242). Kennedy, among others, believed that American involvement with our substantial firepower would quickly eradicate any communist liberation movement. In Vietnam, regardless of the number of troops or amount of firepower the Americans had, the Vietminh and the Viet Cong were still making ground gains because they were using classic guerilla tactics which boil down to hit and run tactics, assassinations, and the use of small and mobile units (Nagl 120). Against an insurgency using guerrilla tactics, you cannot use conventional war strategies and be successful. This was something that Kennedy understood but his

top military advisors did not. When the American forces cleared the landscape in large battalions, they were susceptible to small band of soldiers attacking them and scattering. This causes the conventional force to scatter, making them more vulnerable to attack. Kennedy proposed counterinsurgency tactics to fight these guerilla forces to the U.S. Army generals but they fell upon deaf ears. With him being up for reelection in about a year, Kennedy chose not to push the issue with Vietnam.

American involvement in Vietnam at this time was nothing that it would become but President Kennedy was adamant about the U.S. being there to thwart the Chinese and Soviet Communist influences in the area. However, his presidency came to an abrupt halt on November 22, 1963 when he was assassinated in Dallas, Texas in his motorcade. The man who allegedly assassinated President Kennedy was Lee Harvey Oswald, a former American soldier and communist, who spent time in the Soviet Union. The day of his assassination is often referred to as one of the darkest days in American history and the conspiracy around his assassination lives on even today.

Conclusion and JFK's Cold War Legacy

The presidency of John Fitzgerald Kennedy was cut short but not after he greatly influenced the world. In his first hundred days of being the president he made it clear that he was going after the Soviet Union, especially in regards to their influence around the world. He created the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress, both of which goals were to expel communism from the areas of their reach. Even though it was a total failure, the fact that he approved the Bay of Pigs Invasion showed his commitment-undermining communism in the world.

A president is defined by his actions and no one's actions spoke louder than those of President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis where he stood his ground and waited for Nikita Khrushchev to blink first that he did. Kennedy was not afraid of compromise and frequently went against the opinions of his top advisors, including his brothers, and this was never more evident in the removal of our Mid-Range Ballistic Missiles from Turkey as a part of the deal to end the Cuban Missile Crisis with the Soviet Union.

Kennedy frequently attacked and berated the Soviet Union in his speeches but he also applauded them in some aspects because he knew that everything he said was going to be heard by Khrushchev and other Soviet leaders. His Cold War legacy is that of a president who quivered in the beginning against the Soviets but came out strong. This was ever present in his deals with Khrushchev or the expansion of U.S. influence around the world. His legacy will also include that he began the process of increasing the American involvement in Vietnam which proved to be a failure in the long run but that cannot be blamed on him. It becomes a hypothetical argument if he would have lived long enough to see the results of our involvement in Vietnam and what his actions would have been. The world will truly never know how extensive his reach would have been if he had not been assassinated in Dallas on November 22, 1963, but we know that he made great change in his short time with us.

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