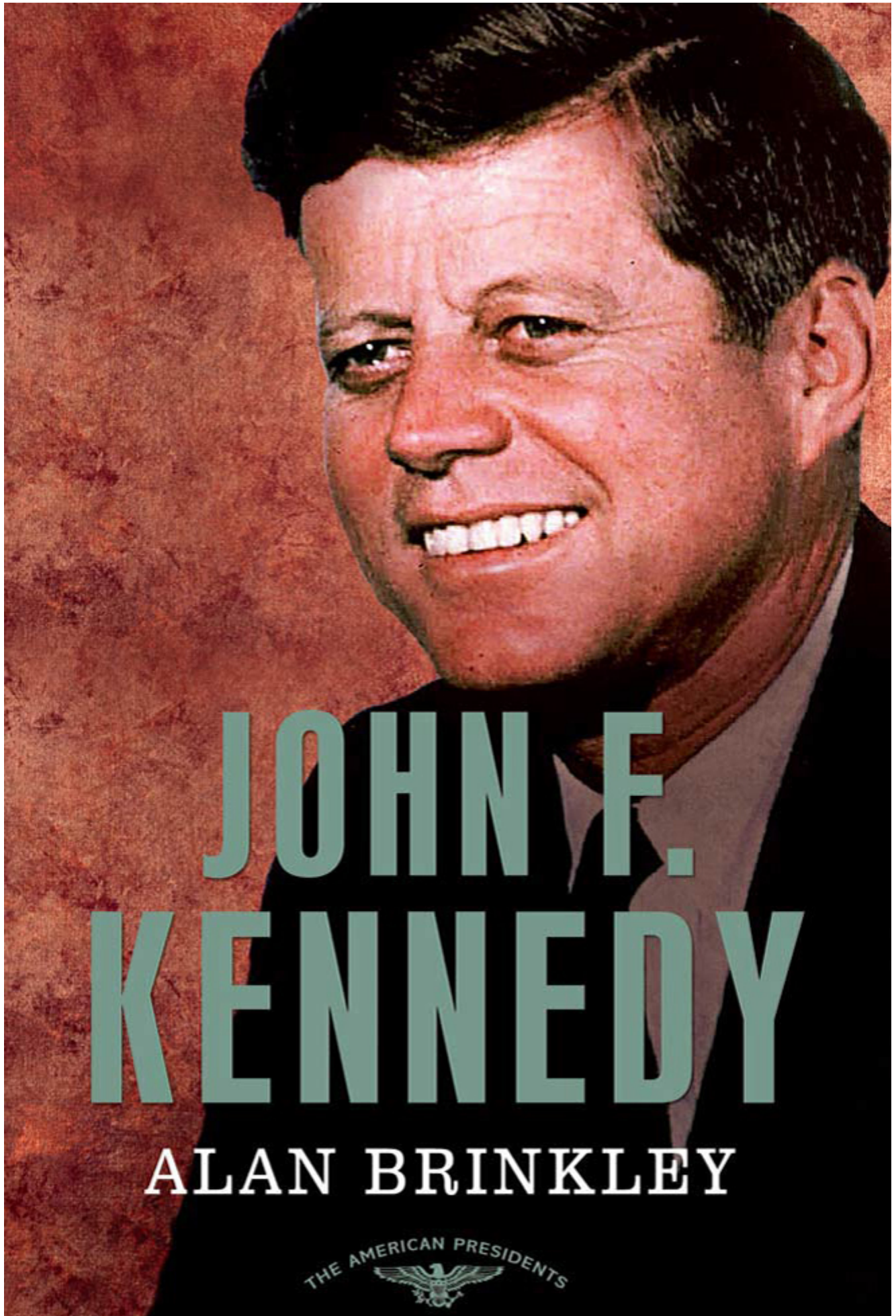


# {essays in history}

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John F. Kennedy



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### Reviewed Work(s)

*John F. Kennedy*. By Alan Brinkley (New York: Times Books, 2012). Pp. 202. Cloth, \$23.00.

In 1960, the American public received its first glimpse of John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1917-1963) on the national stage. He was young, good-looking, Harvard-educated, articulate, and a scion of great wealth. Unlike other politicians, Kennedy possessed an uncommon amount of energy and verve. Yet he was also opaque. Who was he? Novelist Norman Mailer, who sized him up as “a great box office actor” with potential, may have offered the most astute assessment of Kennedy in the post-Eisenhower era of great expectations.<sup>[1]</sup> Histories of the thirty-fifth President have tended to break down into one of the following categories: 1) near-hagiographical accounts (e.g. Arthur Schlesinger Jr, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in The White House*, 1965); 2) largely favorable works (e.g. Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963*, [2003]); or 3) iconoclastic monographs (e.g. Thomas C. Reeves, *A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy*, 1997). In his new biography written for the American Presidents Series, Columbia University historian emeritus Alan Brinkley delivers a concise, trenchant, and thoroughly balanced overview of one of the most scrutinized presidents and presidencies in modern American history. Instead of characterizing Kennedy’s persona and leadership as either genius or unprincipled, Brinkley allows the evidence to compose a far more nuanced picture of a complex figure in a complex world.

Brinkley uses the first chapter of *John F. Kennedy* to not only recount Kennedy’s formative years, but also to begin framing his overall assessment of the character and contribution of the thirty-fifth president. As Kennedy was raised in a world of financial and political success, the spoils of his privileged upbringing likely contributed to his lack of studiousness and often reckless behavior. According to Brinkley, Kennedy’s sexual escapades in the White House, which only became

publicly known after his presidency, had their origins in his unchecked, promiscuous youth. Despite having a relatively undistinguished academic record, Kennedy was able to follow in his father's footsteps into Harvard. His senior thesis "Appeasement at Munich" achieved notoriety and was turned into a popular book *Why England Slept* (1940). Clearly, Kennedy possessed above average analytical abilities and had some writing talent, but American entry into the Second World War quickly dispelled any thoughts about a career in journalism. In 1946, Kennedy was a twenty-nine year-old Harvard-grad and war hero, having saved his PT boat crew in the Pacific. Along with his youthful charisma, his perfect resume proved more than enough to win a seat in the House of Representatives.

In January 1947, Kennedy, future red-baiter Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, and future president Richard Nixon of California were sworn into Congress as new members. During his three terms in the House (1947-1953) and eight years as a US Senator, Kennedy often sided with conservatives on key issues concerning immigration and foreign policy—if he happened to be in attendance. Along with a number of other historians, Brinkley implicitly criticizes Kennedy's long record of absenteeism. Aside from occasionally leaving Congress to recuperate from recurrent health problems, Kennedy also returned to Massachusetts for extended periods to court constituents to ensure his re-election. In the new age of television, voters were starting to choose candidates on the basis of framed media images instead of on their legislative accomplishments. In stating "[w]e're going to sell Jack like soap flakes," Joseph Kennedy Sr. had demonstrated an acute understanding of the new realities (and unrealities) of modern politics (35). Indeed, both Kennedy's district and the state of Massachusetts were swayed again and again by his charm-offensives and charisma. In pursuing the Democratic nomination for president in 1960, the Kennedys put their "soap-flake" strategy to the ultimate test.

If Brinkley had added a paragraph or two contrasting Kennedy with rival Democrat Hubert Humphrey, then he would have fully succeeded in his characterization of his subject as a comparative poseur. Unlike Kennedy, Humphrey was a serious policy-thinker and a person of deeply-held convictions. At the 1948 Democratic convention, Humphrey delivered a moving and memorable speech on civil rights. Facing down southern



Democrats more disposed to thwart social equality, Humphrey thundered, “the time has arrived in America for the Democratic Party to get out of the shadow of states’ rights and to walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights. People—human beings—this is the issue of the 20th century.”<sup>[2]</sup> As a result of his noble stand a dozen years earlier, Humphrey won a place in the hearts of both African Americans and progressive Democrats. Nonetheless, the American people embraced Kennedy over the senator from Minnesota. Why the voting public chose Kennedy is central to Brinkley’s superlative angle on Kennedy’s unique political gift. While other politicians successfully advocated for causes (i.e. Humphrey for civil rights) or demonstrated their governmental expertise by passing significant social and economic legislation (Lyndon Johnson in the US Senate), Kennedy captured the hearts of Americans by articulating a modern vision of progress and justice consistent with the founding ideals of the nation. In a word, Kennedy revitalized the American dream for the WWII generation.

In the conclusion of his third chapter “The Great Ambition,” Brinkley delivers a particularly well-written, brief synopsis of the over-analyzed 1960 general election. One of the decisive factors, of course, was the outcome of the first televised debates between presidential candidates in election history. Due to his pasty, brow-sweating image and tendency to agree with his rival, Nixon managed to lose a significant lead in the polls after his appearances. Over the remaining weeks, Nixon made up ground but still lost in one of the closest elections in American history. Kennedy’s principled decision to help ensure the safety of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., who had been arrested, shackled and transported to jail in Georgia for participating in an anti-segregation sit-in, surely bolstered his vote-total among white liberals and minorities.

Kennedy admitted his first year in office was an abject failure, and Brinkley does not disagree. By turning the presidency into a series of media events through elaborate, televised press conferences, Brinkley convincingly claims that the new president had to rely heavily on issuing executive orders – which surely aggravated Congress even further. In terms of foreign policy, Kennedy’s undue deference to CIA Director Allen Dulles and foreign affairs specialist McGeorge Bundy ultimately led to the Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba in which a semi-clandestine attempt to overthrow Marxist-leader Fidel Castro turned into a rout of American

Special Forces and their anti-Castro Cuban allies. As the credibility of the United States within the international community had been significantly damaged, Kennedy was forced to devote much of the remainder of his incomplete term salvaging and rebuilding America's standing in the world.

In chapter five "Flexible Response," Brinkley credits Kennedy for dismantling Eisenhower's provocative "New Look" strategy (which emphasized nuclear weapons rather than conventional forces for deterrence) and for launching a new diplomatic initiative with Moscow. Cold War tensions, however, prevailed, and the geopolitical world officially divided upon the erection of the Berlin Wall in August 1961. Consequently, Kennedy only achieved partial success in his efforts to reset relations with the Soviet Union.

In chapter six, titled "Freedom," Brinkley distills the landmark events of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1960 Greensboro sit-ins to end public segregation, to the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (28 August 1963). By sending in the military both to allow African-American student James Meredith to enroll at the University of Mississippi and to protect civil-rights activists from the racial tyranny of public safety commissioner Bull Connor in Birmingham, Kennedy took a courageous stand against institutionalized racism and a bold step toward racial equality. While Kennedy had been politically beholden to the same intransigent Southern, anti-progressive bloc of Democrats as Woodrow Wilson a half-century earlier, Brinkley tacitly lauds Kennedy's late yet decisive break in favor of using the federal government to enforce civil rights. The President could neither ignore public opinion (which had been inflamed by scenes of police dogs and fire hoses being unleashed against unarmed, black protesters in Alabama) nor his own conscience. For Brinkley, Kennedy's moments of greatness can be ascribed to these few pivotal instances when his rhetoric became reality.

In "The Evolving Cold War" and "Quagmire," Brinkley delivers an overview of the Cuban Missile Crisis. When reconnaissance photos from an American U2 plane detected the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba in October 1962, the Executive Committee of the National Security Council began meeting frequently to formulate a coherent response. Over a tense two-week period, the political and military brass in the Kennedy administration debated how to eliminate the threat. Kennedy's

advisers pressured him to resolve the situation with military force, but he resisted and deftly maneuvered Khrushchev into a compromise whereby both leaders could claim geopolitical victory. In the end, Kennedy agreed to remove American missiles from Turkey in exchange for the removal of Soviet missiles from Cuba. As such, both leaders were able to bolster domestic security and avert disaster. Although most of the components of the Cuban Missile Crisis are contained in Brinkley's account, one key aspect of the story is missing: the social-intellectual repercussions on the home front. In the aftermath of the first near nuclear exchange, a significant number of young people became disaffected over a world that had produced a politics of annihilation. Tom Hayden, a prominent member of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and author of its manifesto (Port Huron Statement), later confessed, "[t]hat [the Cuban Missile Crisis] alienated us from the Kennedys." Another SDS leader, Richard Flacks, similarly recalled, "[t]hey [the Kennedys] were not liberals of the kind that we wanted to work with. They had brought us close to nuclear war."<sup>[3]</sup> If the Cuban Missile Crisis provoked the first rift between the Kennedy brand of liberalism and the rising baby boomer generation, then Kennedy's decision to regard Vietnam as the "cornerstone of the free world" and to carry out a vicious, covert proxy war in Southeast Asia created an unbridgeable chasm (133).

After outlining the Kennedy administration's perilous decision to increase support to the corrupt regime of Ngo Dinh Diem in Vietnam, Brinkley ends his biography by depicting Kennedy as a representational figure for the up-and-coming World War II generation. While his stewardship of the nation may have been uneven, Kennedy's speechmaking skills inspired millions around the world to believe in the possibility of a world at peace. Five months prior to his death, the president traveled to West Germany. In front of a crowd of 120,000 at the Berlin Wall, Kennedy told the audience gathered in the capital, "[a]ll free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words, 'Ich bin ein Berliner.' (I am a Berliner)."<sup>[4]</sup> To this day, these words of hope and idealism define the West and its commitment to universal human rights and liberal democracy—a legacy that transcends the man and his presidency.<sup>[5]</sup>

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[1] Quoted in Allen Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper, 1984), 13.

[2] Hubert Humphrey, “1948 Democratic National Convention Address” 14 July 1948 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania *American Rhetoric: Online Speech Bank* Accessed 28 November 2012 <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/huberthumphrey1948dnc.html>

[3] James Miller, “*Democracy Is In The Streets:*” *From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago*(New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 164.

[4] “1963: Kennedy: ‘Ich bin ein Berliner,’” *BBC NEWS: On This Day* 26 June 2005 Accessed 5 December 2012 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/june/26/newsid\\_3379000/...](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/june/26/newsid_3379000/...) Several longer and more detailed works on Kennedy are available including Robert Dallek, *John F. Kennedy: An Unfinished Life* (Boston: Back Bay, 2004) and Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile in Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).

[5] Brinkley, *John F. Kennedy*, 149. On the day of his assassination (22 November 1963), Kennedy told his wife, “We’re heading into nut country today. But Jackie, if somebody wants to shoot me from a window with a rifle, nobody can stop him. So why worry about it.” (149)



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