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## **John F. Kennedy, President, 1961-1963 Transcript**

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**THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY:  
TRANSFORMATION AND CHANGE  
JOHN F KENNEDY, PRESIDENT 1961-1963**

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Ladies and gentlemen, this is my last lecture as the Gresham Professor of Law, but Gresham College have very generously asked me if I will continue this series covering the American Presidents so that I can get to George W. Bush next year, by which time, he will have ceased to be President.

Those of you who were here at my last lecture will remember that it was about Eisenhower. Eisenhower left office in 1961 at the age of 70, and he was then the oldest President to have left office, though Ronald Reagan left office older than that, and now we have John McCain seeking office who is already older than that - 72. But, until Reagan, Eisenhower was the oldest man to have held the presidency.

He was succeeded by the youngest elected President, John F Kennedy at the age of 43, and that record still holds. The president was actually Theodore Roosevelt, who succeeded to the presidency in 1901. He was Vice-President, and the President, like Kennedy, was assassinated, and so Roosevelt succeeded, but he was not actually elected to the presidency. He was 41 when he succeeded, and he was 44 when he was elected, so Kennedy is the youngest elected President.

In the 1960 Election Kennedy made great play with the fact that Eisenhower's presidency, partly because of his age, was too passive, complacent and unambitious; in short, he painted it as a conservative, with a small "c", presidency. He said there was a need to get America moving again. At home, what was needed was a higher rate of economic growth so that America could deal with the serious social problems that had been brought to light during the Eisenhower period - civil rights in particular, poverty, and many Americans living in poor conditions; and abroad, so Kennedy said, America was losing ground to the Soviet Union, and there was, he claimed, a missile gap, that the Soviets were moving ahead in nuclear weapons, and America ought to defend freedom more actively than Eisenhower had done. In short, Kennedy's stance was that Eisenhower was far too passive a President, and the next President should use the power of the presidency more creatively and actively to create a better America and a better world. Kennedy was, in a sense, the embodiment of those hopes for a more idealistic and a better world.

But he was President for less than three years before he was assassinated in November 1963, and it is one of the shortest presidencies in American history. There are only five shorter presidencies than him, and they mostly are forgotten. I think if I were to mention the names of William Henry Harrison, Zachary Taylor, or James Garfield, probably not many people would be familiar with them. However, unlike these other people, Kennedy has not been forgotten. He is remembered, and perhaps somewhat idealised. Those of you who have seen the Oliver Stone film, *JFK*, would see the hero, a young Sir Lancelot from Camelot. This use of the word "Camelot" incidentally was not coined by Kennedy, but by his widow shortly after his assassination, when she compared his presidency to Camelot.

But Kennedy did have an air of charisma, colour and grandeur, and seemed to embody the hopes of a young and idealistic generation. The feeling of loss was accentuated for many Americans by what happened afterwards, because it seemed that, after that, there were a series of failed presidencies: Lyndon Johnson was bogged down in Vietnam and left the presidency rather as a failed President in 1968; Nixon had to resign after Watergate and its seemingly criminal activity or at least unethical activity; Ford's presidency was very short and seemed not to achieve much; Carter seemed another failed presidency, a one-term President. After Kennedy, hope seemed to have gone, all ending in the traumas of Vietnam and Watergate. The popular view, still held by many Americans, is that none of this would have happened if Kennedy had lived, and that America would have had a brighter future. However, on the whole, historians do not agree with that, and the popular estimate of Kennedy is much higher than the historians' estimate of him.

But first we must ask the question of who was John F Kennedy?

He was the son of a wealthy financier and businessman from Boston. He was from an Irish Catholic family, which I think is very important, because he was the first, and so far the only, Catholic to become President of America. Only one Catholic had run before, and that was in 1928, Al Smith for the Democratic Party. He had been trounced by Herbert Hoover for the Republicans. This was partly on the issue, although of course not wholly, of religious prejudice or discrimination.

The older Kennedy said to his son when he was running for President: "You have to remember, this country is not a private preserve for Protestants. There is a whole new generation out there, and it is filled with the sons and daughters of immigrants from all over the world, and those people are going to be mighty proud that one of their own was running for President, and that pride will be your spur." Kennedy had to fight some degree of prejudice, and he said, in the 1960 Campaign: "I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democrat Party's candidate for President, who happens also to be a Catholic."

He was also the first member of an immigrant community to become President. America, we all rightly think, is a country of immigrants, but until Kennedy every President had been a "WASP": a White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant. He was the first to come from a different community, and I think that he inspired and was a role model for other people who did not come from that predominant "WASP" community. This is perhaps particularly relevant with regards to Barack Obama, who stands a very good chance of winning the presidency now. Indeed, I think there are considerable similarities between Kennedy and Obama.

Like most Irish Catholics at that time, Kennedy was a Democrat. Kennedy's father, Joseph P Kennedy, had acquired a very large fortune, by means which perhaps do not bear up to too much scrutiny. He spent a lot of his money financing Franklin Roosevelt, and in 1934, Roosevelt appointed him Head of the Securities & Exchange Commission, whose remit was to regulate the American Stock Exchange. People objected to Roosevelt; they said, "He is meant to ensure honest financial practice, but he's not very honest himself." Roosevelt replied: "You set a thief to catch a thief."

In 1938, his support for Roosevelt's campaign through his contributions was such that he was appointed Ambassador to Britain. This was at the time when Neville Chamberlain was Prime Minister, following a policy of appeasement towards Nazi Germany, of which Kennedy was a strong supporter, and even, in some ways, a stronger supporter than Chamberlain himself. He really went much too far in that direction and became really quite sympathetic to Hitler and rather anti-Semitic, which I think Chamberlain never was. Of course, this damaged him when Churchill came to power. Churchill never liked or trusted him, and got him removed as Ambassador. This dogged John F Kennedy for much of his political career, and when he was fighting for the Democratic nomination in 1960, Lyndon Johnson, one of his rivals, attacked Kennedy by saying: "I was never an Umbrella Man!", meaning Chamberlain.

The younger Kennedy, John F Kennedy, wrote a book about these experiences, a thesis, called "While England Slept" and it was an attack on the policy of appeasement. But critics said that the book should be called "While Daddy Slept".

The older Kennedy returned to America in 1940, and told the President that he thought Britain would be beaten in the War, and that America should not be involved. Roosevelt did not agree with that, but Kennedy made it clear that he was thinking of standing for the Democratic presidential nomination himself, which could have been a threat to Roosevelt, because the older Kennedy could win the isolationist vote. But Roosevelt, rather skilfully, finagled him with all sorts of promises till after the election, but after the election he said to his wife, "Get him out of here - I never want to see that son of a bitch again!" and he did never see him again. This hung around John Kennedy throughout his political career, and when he was standing for the presidency, Harry Truman, the former President, said, "It's not the Pope I'm afraid of, it's the Pop!"

John F Kennedy was actually the second son in the family, and the oldest was killed in the War. John F Kennedy was a War hero. It is true that he exaggerated what he had done in the War, but nevertheless, he was a hero, and more than that, with his ill-health, he could easily have avoided military service but he joined the Navy and he rescued a crew member from drowning, for which he received a Purple Heart. There is no doubt of his bravery during the War. After the War, in 1946, he became a Congressman, and it was the same year as his Republican opponent in 1960, Richard Nixon. Although they were strong opponents, and in a sense, were identified as opposites, they were in fact very close friends in Congress and later on.

Critics said that Kennedy had won this Election through his father's money, because his father had made such huge contributions. Indeed, apparently some of these contributions were handed over in paid toilets in Massachusetts because the older Kennedy said, "You can never be too careful in politics about handing over money." Jack Kennedy himself mocked this, in the fifties. He said he had a telegram from his father which said, "Dear Jack, Don't buy a single vote more than is necessary. I'll be damned if I'm going to pay for a landslide."

Kennedy was elected for one of the poorer districts of Massachusetts, and this gave him contact with a group in society he had

not previously come into contact with as he had previously mixed with the rich. In 1952 he was elected Senator for Massachusetts. In 1956 he was talked about as a possible candidate for the vice-presidency, but he did not get it, and that was fortunate because it was a very bad year for the Democrats. Kennedy laughed at this in a speech - he had a good sense of humour. He said: "Socrates once said that it was the duty of a man of real principle to avoid high national office, and evidently the delegates at Chicago recognised my principles even before I did!"

In 1960 he became the Democratic candidate for the presidency. He had not achieved very much in Congress, and here there is another similarity with Obama, fighting Hillary Clinton, who has some achievements in Congress. There was no major legislation attached to his name. He was not part of the inner grouping in the Senate, and was thought of on the whole as a rich and rather empty young man. Nor did he have a particularly liberal record. He was indeed the only Democratic Senator not to vote for the censure of Senator Joe McCarthy. This is because he did not wish to offend his Irish Catholic constituency in Massachusetts, many of whom supported McCarthy, though it is fair to say Kennedy himself never indulged in McCarthyite smears.

In 1957, when Eisenhower sent troops to Little Rock to enforce school integration, Kennedy opposed it, because he did not want to offend the Southern Senators who were very powerful in the Democratic Party. So he was not really a liberal. Indeed, he probably was not anything, and he confessed that his upbringing had led him to be more interested in the mechanics of politics than in the ideas. His father had taught him how to get elected, but not what to do once you were elected. So that was deceptive. He appeared the liberal against Nixon, but he had no particular liberal record.

He was deceptive in another way too, because when he appeared with Nixon, the first time you had televised debates in America, he appeared the picture of health as compared with Nixon, who had injured his knee and he was rather exhausted and so appeared rather weary. Kennedy looked the picture of vibrant health. It is interesting that those who heard the debates on the radio were sure that Nixon had won, but those who saw them on television said that Kennedy had won because he appeared so much more impressive. But in fact, Kennedy was a very sick man, and a sick man throughout his life. He had a whole host of illnesses, which I will not bore you with discussing, but his main problem was a disease of the adrenal glands, Addison's disease. This left him in constant pain for a good part of his life, and indeed, he had been near death more than once. When he was first diagnosed with Addison's disease in 1946 he was given a year to live, and in 1947 he was given the last rites. Again, in 1954, after an operation, he contracted an infection and was again given the last rites. Nixon, his friend, burst into tears at the thought of this bright young man being cut off so early. Kennedy himself thought he would not live much beyond 45, but he did not complain about that. He said, "You must make the most of life as it is." But he lived on a huge range of pills. It has been said that he was as promiscuous with pills as he was with women. Also, some of the time, hidden from television, he was on crutches. You could not of course get away with that now, but the media then were much more deferential. It took great willpower to overcome this pain, and it may be related to his womanising, though I am no psychologist. We have to ask two questions I think about him, whether the illnesses or the womanising affected his decision making, and I think the answer is not simple in either case.

The first question, of his illness, is discussed very well in the recent book by David Owen called *In Sickness and in Power*, which I recommend to everyone, because of course David Owen, as well as being a leading politician, is also medically qualified. He thinks the illnesses did affect his decision making and did undermine his performance. He gives two examples of this: he says at his first meeting with Khrushchev in June 1961, he was on drugs which affected his concentration and perception; and at the time of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, in early 1961, he was hyped up by drugs. However, although I obviously accept David Owen's medical skills, I am not sure I wholly agree with this, because I think even if he had not been in that state, the same decisions would have been made. I do not think there was any sense in which it was because he was ill that those decisions were made. It is rather similar to Anthony Eden about Suez. Everyone says Eden did this because he was on drugs, which is true, but I think others would have made the same decisions, or might have done, in those positions, and I see no evidence in either case that the decisions were different because they were on drugs. David Owen does take a different view and I think it is an excellent book, so obviously his view does command respect, and I recommend it to anyone who is interested in that fascinating theme.

On the question of women, in one sense there was no problem because he never got emotionally involved with the various women as they were for relaxation. But some of them were people who could have caused him a lot of trouble. One of them was the mistress of a Mafia boss, and another was an East German spy, and there were also wives of his friends, and also friends of his wife, and this left him open to blackmail. Certainly, you would not be able to get away with that now, but in that pre-feminist age, when the media were much more deferential, it was kept under wraps, but one has to leave open the

question of whether, if he had survived and there would have been a second term, whether there would not have been attempts at blackmail.

Kennedy won the 1960 Election on the programme of a "New Frontier", as he put it: a new beginning and a moving forward from the policies of Franklin Roosevelt and Truman. But it is often forgotten that he only just won the 1960 Election. Critics say that if it was not for vote fraud in Illinois and Texas, he would not have won the Election. Nixon was advised to challenge the vote fraud in the courts, but he said he would not do so because it would not be good for America to have to wait some time to discover who had been elected President. So Nixon accepted defeat, though there is a case for saying that vote fraud was involved.

Also, Kennedy would not have won without the support of the Southern States, and he had only gained that through having on the ticket Lyndon Johnson as his vice-presidential candidate, who hailed from Texas and carried the Southern States with him. It is probable if a Northerner had been the vice-presidential candidate, Texas would have gone to the Republicans.

Kennedy's narrow victory is rather surprising because the Democrats were the majority party in Congress at that time. They had been in power in Congress almost all the time since 1930. For a very brief time, they were out, during the beginning of Eisenhower's first term, but otherwise they had a majority for most of the time. So Kennedy ran behind his Party. This is often forgotten. He was not more popular than his Party; he was less popular. This is important because Congressmen and Senators felt they did not owe him anything. If you are a popular leader, and Congressmen and Senators are elected on your coat tails, then you owe your leader something. That was the case with Roosevelt, it was later to be the case with Ronald Reagan, but people did not feel that about Kennedy. They also remembered him as a not very effective Congressman and Senator, so they especially felt no particular obligations towards him.

The Democrats in Congress were very much split between the Northern liberals and the Southern segregationists, and because of the seniority rule, this meant that you became a chairman of an important committee when you were the senior member. Now, most of the seats in the South were absolutely safe at that time, because the Republican Party hardly existed since the time of Lincoln in the Congressional and Senatorial races. The Democrats won almost every seat in the South without trouble, and in fact, victory in the Democratic Primary was almost as good as getting elected. Therefore, most of the chairmanships in Congress and the Senate were held by elderly Southerners, who were segregationist and very conservative, and this posed further problems for Kennedy.

Eisenhower had surmounted some of these problems in the 1950s because he was seen as a popular national leader and the Democratic opposition in Congress was prepared to work with him. The leader in the Senate at the time was Lyndon Johnson, and he became almost a co-President with Eisenhower. They worked together to get moderate and centrist reforms through.

But Kennedy was not seen as a great national leader, and the Republicans were not prepared to work with him. They saw him as an untried young man. Therefore, if Kennedy was to get anywhere, he had to get the support of the Southern Democrats, and that meant he had to go slow on civil rights. He said, "If I press for civil rights, I will endanger other parts of my legislative programme - increasing the minimum wage, aid to the depressed areas, aid to public housing, aid for the unemployed - and these programmes are of benefit to those at the bottom of the economic pyramid, many of whom are themselves black, so let's concentrate on those." But to do that, he paid a very high price. He accepted the nomination of segregationist judges to the bench in the South to win their support. One, a particularly horrible man, Cox of Mississippi, shouted at black plaintiffs in open court that they were "a bunch of niggers acting like a bunch of chimpanzees." These were some of the people he appointed at the behest of Southern Senators.

In his Election appeals he had said that he would abolish segregation in public housing by executive order, by the stroke of a pen - it did not need legislation, you could do it by presidential action. In fact, he did not do it for nine months, and civil rights leaders kept sending him pens to encourage him to fulfil his promise.

He did nothing to enforce desegregation in the schools in the South, and he took the view that the federal government had a constitutionally limited role in education, and therefore he could not act. He only acted when forced to do so when Southern governors tried to block court orders, and then he did act, but only in the last resort.

Throughout this time, black people were becoming more militant. The period saw the rise of the freedom riders who were jailed in Mississippi and about which Kennedy did nothing about, sit-ins and marches and so on. I think Kennedy had not realised how volatile the situation actually was. The only black people he came into contact with were domestic servants, chauffeurs and the like, and when he once met some black people from the Peace Corps, he assumed they had all gone to the Howard University, which was an old black university. It did not occur to him that black people were now being educated at other

universities as well.

When black diplomats complained to him that as they drove into Washington, they could not get meals at segregated restaurants, he said, "Well, why do you need to drive into Washington? It's much quicker to fly." But the point, of course, was that you could not avoid using those restaurants, however you came in.

But it is fair to say, and this I think is one of the keys to his presidency, he was a rapid learner. So, by 1963, he produced a Civil Rights Bill. However, it was bogged down in Congress and not passed till after his death - partly in response to that, with a sense of guilt. One has to say that he did not give a lead on civil rights, and contrary to what he hoped, the passivity did not help him with other legislation either. You can say he neglected part of the role of the presidency in failing to declaim against the evils against the black population.

When assassinated, apart from the Civil Rights Bill, there were three other major items of domestic legislation on the table in Congress awaiting action: a tax cut to stimulate economic growth; federal aid to education; and a Medicare plan for the elderly, which Truman had tried to pass and failed, and Kennedy did not pass it either. These were all left as a legacy for his successor, Lyndon Johnson.

However, Kennedy wanted to be judged not so much on domestic policy, but on foreign policy, which he had studied, or claimed to have studied, from an early time. He said: "Domestic policy can only defeat us. Foreign policy can kill us."

His Inaugural Address, in 1961, struck a very different note from anything Eisenhower would have said. He said this: "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty." I think a lot of American history since 1961 can be understood in terms of those words.

It is fair to say that this was in response to a recent speech by Khrushchev, the Soviet leader, who had said that the Soviet Union would support wars of national liberation around the world. The Inaugural speech was a response to this. Kennedy, I think, saw it as a warning, but the Soviets saw it as a challenge; that America was going to use her power much more actively than in the time of Eisenhower.

Eisenhower had been very cautious. He had never used that sort of language. He had succeeded gently, with his coups in Iran and Guatemala that I mentioned last time, and in desegregating where he could do so, where it was under his direct control in Washington DC, run by the federal government, and in the Army. By contrast, Kennedy seemed boastful and vain-glorious.

When he came to power, he already faced a crisis in Indo-China, though not in Vietnam - that was to come later - but in Laos. In 1954 Laos, when the Geneva Agreements had been signed, was neutralised, but neither the Americans nor the Communist side had been willing to accept that, and there was a battle going on, with Eisenhower supporting the right wing government. Eisenhower told Kennedy that he had to ensure the Communists did not win there. Kennedy, despite his rhetoric, was prepared to support a neutral government there, partly because Britain and France were unsympathetic to Eisenhower's policy, and Kennedy believed America should not go it alone. So there, he was very different from his rhetoric and he was not prepared to support any friends and attack any foe, but to try and reach an agreement.

However, soon he faced what he saw to be the very serious problem of Cuba. Castro had taken power in Cuba in 1959. The Americans were terribly upset about this because Castro, after an initial period as seemingly a radical, identified himself with the Communist block, and Russian advisors and the like were sent in. The Americans got terribly upset about this from the Eisenhower Administration onwards, in a way that we perhaps find difficult to understand. The reason is that Americans had previously seen Cuba as something of dependency of Washington, like the Panama Canal Zone, and it seemed very peculiar that a small state, ninety miles from Florida, could choose a different philosophy.

Before leaving office, Eisenhower had developed plans for an invasion of Cuba and the overturning of Castro, which is often used as a defence of Kennedy's Bay of Pigs invasion in early 1961. However, the planning was in its infancy and there was no sign that Eisenhower had endorsed it. Indeed, he had not given it a high priority. The person who was most sympathetic to the idea was Richard Nixon, but nothing had yet been definitely decided.

During the presidential campaign, Kennedy attacked Nixon in a television debate for his passivity over Cuba. Nixon of course could not reply, "No, we're not passive at all - we're preparing an invasion plan," so he was stymied. It is said that Kennedy did not know that they were preparing an invasion plan, but I don't think we should be so sure. There is no proof either way, but I

suspect he did know. But, regardless to this question, Nixon, of all people, was labelled as being "soft on Communism" and this was boxing Kennedy in so that he had to be tough on Communism. He was told by one Democratic Senator, Senator Fulbright, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, that he should get this in perspective. He said: "The Castro regime is a thorn in the flesh, but not a dagger in the heart," which is a fair view.

However, regardless of this, there was a CIA-sponsored invasion, on the assumption there would be a spontaneous rising against Castro. There was no rising, partly because Castro had put a number of the possible leaders of the hoped-for uprising in prison, although that was not the only reason. Kennedy supported this though he would not allow American troops to be involved, because he wanted to deny American involvement. That was a threadbare claim and no one really believed that, so that was useless. But it is fair to say he would not send troops in when it failed - he limited his liability, and again, he would not go to any lengths to support any friend or oppose any foe, as he would not in Laos. One commentator said of the Bay of Pigs that it was "one of those rare events in history - a perfect failure".

Kennedy, publicly, though not privately, accepted full responsibility. Oddly enough, his poll ratings shot up when he did (and perhaps there is a lesson for Gordon Brown there). He said, look, I have a total fiasco and my poll rating is go up - how do I get them up further?!

I do not think Eisenhower would have gone ahead with that. He would have checked the details very carefully before approving it, and once he had gone ahead, he would not have let it fail. This, as Kennedy recognised, was inexperience, and he learnt a very important lesson from this, which is that you should never trust experts, because the experts all said it would work. The CIA said we can get this landing, there would be a rising, we have got information about Cuba, and the military said it would be successful - hardly anyone said it would be a disastrous failure. So Kennedy learnt the first lesson, that you cannot always trust the experts.

There was also another lesson he learnt from that: that he was not going to follow an active policy in Laos, but he was going to compromise. He told Nixon, the day after the end of the fighting in Cuba: "I just don't think we ought to get involved in Laos, particularly where we might find ourselves fighting millions of Chinese troops in the jungles. In any event, I don't see how we can make any move in Laos, which is thousands of miles away, if we don't make a move in Cuba, which is only ninety miles away." So you can see that Kennedy was a very quick learner as he had learnt very quickly that his ideas about supporting any friend and fighting any foe was not going to happen.

Kennedy was misadvised by the military that America would inevitably have to fight China some time, so they might as well do it then over Laos. General Decker, the Chief of Staff of the US Army, said, "We cannot win a conventional war in Southeast Asia. If we go in, we should go in to win, and that means bombing Hanoi, China, and maybe even using nuclear weapons." Curtis LeMay said it was best to attack China now before she had nuclear weapons. The Under-Secretary of State, Chester Bowles, who later painted himself as a dove, said he thought "the main question to be faced was the fact we were going to have to fight the Chinese anyway in two, three, five or ten years, and it was a question of where, when and how." But despite all of these strong voices of opinion, Kennedy ignored the advice and he settled the Laos situation for a neutral government and he got a ceasefire there.

Unfortunately that was not the only legacy of the Bay of Pigs, because it led directly on to the Cuban Missile Crisis, which was the most dangerous crisis I think the world has ever had to face. Bobby Kennedy, Jack's brother, who was Attorney General, put the chance of a nuclear war as between a third and evens. We now know things that Bobby Kennedy did not actually know, because at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, it was not known that there were already nuclear warheads and missiles in Cuba, and that Soviet commanders on the ground had been given authority to use them in response to an attack. At the time it was believed that there were not any nuclear missiles in Cuba, but in fact, there were.

Khrushchev deceitfully put these weapons in Cuba, which the Americans thought was aggressive. Khrushchev said it was not aggressive but defensive, because he believed that America would try and invade Cuba or assassinate Castro who was their ally and they could not let that happen. There were grounds for that because, in 1975, the Church Committee had looked at policy towards Cuba, and found that there were eight attempts to assassinate Castro between 1960 and 1965. Contrary to what Kennedy had said, there was no missile gap with Russian. Or, rather, there was one but it was the other way round: America had a vast superiority in nuclear weapons of about 17 to one over the Soviet Union. So the Soviet Union felt themselves threatened by this as much as, if not more than, America did.

Kennedy said these missiles were offensive missiles. But the question is over whether they have been used offensively or

whether they were there for defensive purposes? A relevant story for this is that when it was later pointed out that the Americans had nuclear missiles in Turkey, Kennedy said, "Ah, but these are defensive missiles..." which rather brings out the bite in the question.

However, when faced with the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy had to decide what to do. Some people originally said that they should do nothing because it did not affect the balance of power in any way, but that view soon disappeared, and people turned 180 degrees round and said there ought to be an air strike, and that the air strike ought to be used to get rid of Castro as well. That was the view of the Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, and of George Bundy, the Head of the National Security Council, and also of Vice-President Lyndon Johnson. If a decision had been made two hours after the Executive Committee met to discuss this, it would have been for an air strike. As we now know but they did not know at the time, there were nuclear missiles already in Cuba, and these would almost certainly have been used if America had attacked Cuba.

But, after some discussion, it was clear that America could not authorise an air strike. Bobby Kennedy, who was in on these discussions, said, "I know now how Tojo felt when he was planning Pearl Harbor." He said this would be a Pearl Harbor in reverse and it would blacken the name of the United States in the pages of history. "For 175 years, we have not been that kind of country. A sneak attack was not in our tradition, not anything the US could do." That was very fortunate.

So what they decided to do was to establish a blockade of Cuba, but they did not call it a blockade because this was illegal in international law, so they called it a quarantine. They were not going to let any ships from the Soviet Union reach Cuba. They got support for this policy in the United Nations, the Organisation of American States and the African States. This meant that Guinea and Senegal, for example, refused to allow the Soviets to have landing and refuelling facilities for planes going to Cuba. This made Khrushchev think that he was being isolated.

Four days after the Crisis began, an American U2 plane was shot down by Cuba, and a second U2 plane strayed accidentally across the Soviet border from Alaska, and the Russians could have thought it a prelude to invasion, although in the event they did not, fortunately. But after the plane was shot down on Cuba, the Chiefs of Staff unanimously recommended an attack. As I say, they did not realise that there were nuclear warheads in Cuba. In 1985 it was learnt that there were 170 there, to be used against an invading fleet, and also targeted on the East Coast of America.

Khrushchev then sent two letters to Kennedy. The first one was that he said he would withdraw the missiles from Cuba if the Americans would agree to withdraw missiles from Turkey. Until that time Kennedy did not seem to know that they had these missiles there as they were obsolete. At one time in the discussions Kennedy said, "It's just as if we suddenly began to put a number of MRBMs (medium-range missiles) in Turkey. That would be goddamn dangerous I would think," and his security advisor said, "Well, we did, Mr President." Kennedy said, "Well, we're now in the position of risking war in Cuba and in Berlin over missiles in Turkey which are of little military value." But they came to the conclusion that they could not accept this offer of Khrushchev's because they said no ally would trust America again if she withdrew under threat, and both NATO and the Turks were against accepting that offer, even though the intention before the Crisis had been to get rid of these obsolete missiles.

Lyndon Johnson said something at another meeting at this time which explains why so many of the Kennedy people distrusted him: "All I know is, when I was a boy in Texas and walked along a country road and a rattlesnake rose up, the only thing to do was take a stick and cut off its head." People there said a little chill went around the room.

Fortunately, there was something of a rambling second message from Khrushchev - people thought written under the influence of drink or perhaps lack of sleep - in which he said he would withdraw the missiles. At that point, Bobby Kennedy went to see the Russian Ambassador and said the missiles would be out of Turkey within four or five months if the Russian missiles were removed, but if anything publicly was said about it, the deal was off. Kennedy also said he would not invade Cuba.

We also now know that if that deal had been rejected, Kennedy did not intend to go to war. He was intending to publicly propose the exchange through the United Nations if the deal failed, and so he was resisting the Chiefs of Staff and many others who said that he had to take active measures. He was determined not to get involved in a war, and so the crisis ended peacefully.

I think it is very possible to imagine that it might have ended in nuclear war if it had not been for Kennedy's leadership. You can compare it with 1914. If the leaders who had been in power in 1914 had been there in Cuba and America and Russia in 1962, would we have escaped a war? That question was very much on Kennedy's mind. He had read a book during the Crisis by Barbara Tuchman called *The Guns of August*, in which the German Chancellor was asked why the War broke out in 1914, and he said, "Ah, if we only knew!" What Kennedy was worried about was not that a war broke out through deliberate aggression,



because he thought no one wanted that, but miscalculation, as he said had happened in 1914. He said he was not worried about Khrushchev's intentions but the human error of something going wrong along the line. Again, this affected his perception very considerably.

When the Crisis was over he said: "It is my hope that the governments of the world can, with the solution of the Cuban Crisis, turn their attention to the competing necessity for ending the arms race and reducing world tensions." Then, he made a very important speech in the summer of 1963, at the American University, in great contrast to his Inaugural Lecture. He said: "As Americans, we find Communism profoundly repugnant, as a negation of personal freedom and dignity, but we can still hail the Russian people for their many achievements in science and space, in economic and industrial growth, in culture and in acts of courage." He reminded Americans that the Soviets had suffered a lot during the War and the last thing they wanted was another military war. He said: "We have to learn to live together." He was no longer boastful or vain-glorious; he was learning on the job.

He then installed a hotline between America and Russia to avoid any miscalculation in the future, and he was instrumental in securing a test ban treaty in 1963 to try and prevent nuclear proliferation. So there he was successful, I think.

But the other major issue he faced was Vietnam, and here the historians are divided as to whether he would have followed the same policy as Lyndon Johnson of expanding the war or whether he would have followed a different policy.

In the 1950s he called South Vietnam "the finger in the dyke". He said if that went, the whole of Southeast Asia will be flooded with Communism. When he got to power, there was a great expansion in the number of military advisors in Vietnam, which increased the American commitment. Many people would say that was the crucial decision, though others would say it was when Lyndon Johnson sent in American ground troops in 1965. Some historians now say that Johnson was right and that America could have won in South Vietnam if her will had been stronger.

By the time of Kennedy's assassination, there were 16,500 so-called military advisors from America in South Vietnam, but no ground troops, so you may say that it would be difficult to turn back. Also, the Americans had taken greater control of the country, because there was CIA-backed coup about a month before Kennedy's assassination, when President Diem, the authoritarian ruler of South Vietnam, was overthrown, and contrary to American intentions and hopes, murdered. You may say that too gave America a greater commitment in South Vietnam.

But, you may ask, would Kennedy have sent ground troops in? He had not done so after the Bay of Pigs in order to rescue the Cuban exiles who had been sent back to Cuba. He did not send troops to Laos. He did not take an aggressive line over the Cuban Missile Crisis. There are a number of statements from him that seem to indicate that he would not have sent ground troops in, and I tend to believe those, though it is by no means certain and there are good arguments on either side of the debate. But he told a journalist in October 1961 that: "US troops should not be involved on the Asian mainland. Moreover, the United States cannot interfere in civil disturbances created by guerrillas," and it was hard to prove this was not largely the situation in Vietnam. He told his National Security Council that he was concerned about becoming involved simultaneously on two fronts on opposite sides of the world. By comparison, he noted that: "Korea was a case of clear aggression, which was opposed by the United States and other members of the United Nations. The conflict in Vietnam is more obscure and less flagrant."

He told his later biographer Arthur Schlesinger: "They want a force of American troops. They say it's necessary in order to retain confidence and maintain morale," but he said, "The troops will march in, the bands will play, the crowds will cheer, and in four days, everyone will have forgotten. Then we will be told we have to send in more troops. It's like taking a drink: the effect wears off, and you have to take another." He said he thought, "Wherever converted into a white man's war, we would lose the way the French had lost a decade earlier." He told another journalist: "In the final analysis, it is their war. They are the ones who have to win or lose it."

But he also said he could not wind down the commitment. He said: "There are limits to the number of defeats I can defend in one twelve month period. I have had the Bay of Pigs and the pulling out of Laos. I can't accept a third."

At that time there was no dovish position. There was no position that said we ought to retreat completely. The dovish position said win the war by gentler means, without getting American ground troops involved; help the South Vietnamese, but do not let America get directly involved. I tend to think that is the position that Kennedy himself would have adopted.

The people who take the opposite view said that the people who advised Kennedy also advised Johnson and that was what

they advised him, but in my own opinion, Kennedy had grown very sceptical of his advisors, particularly when they were suggesting using force, and I think he would not have accepted what they said. I think he was gradually getting a growing sense of the limitations of American power and, against what he had said in his Inaugural Address, that he was being concerned that he had a much more limited foreign policy, a bit more like Eisenhower's. He was beginning to understand that many of the problems that America faced did not have military solutions, and America could not simply use force to resolve them. But that, as I say, is a debate on which there is disagreement on both sides. My own view, which I feel fairly confidently, is that he would not have expanded the war to the extent that Johnson did, and in the end, he would have accepted a coalition government, which would have meant the Communists would have won the war. But this is only what I think and one cannot be wholly confident about this question.

If one sums up his presidency, one has to say that, in many aspects, it is a disappointing presidency. He achieved little at home and abroad. It is true he was working towards better relations with the Soviet Union, but he had not resolved the Vietnam issue. He began with a rather simplistic view of asserting America's power wherever he could. But he might have done better if, like Eisenhower, he had been a bit more wary and more cautious about using power. He was gradually becoming more cautious as his presidency continued. He seemed much more radical than he was. He was very cautious in domestic policy. He called himself an idealist without illusions and generally took a middle path, but he was a rapid learner and especially in foreign affairs.

If he had lived, and assuming he would have been faced with Barry Goldwater as an opponent, as Johnson was in 1964, he would have won the same large majority that Johnson did. Then he could have implemented the programmes that he had in mind - the civil rights programme, the Medicare, and all the rest of the programmes that Johnson implemented. So you may say that the great society reforms of Johnson should really be called the Kennedy/Johnson reforms, because Kennedy would have won that majority himself.

Kennedy's is an unfinished presidency. Kennedy could have been alive today - he would be 91 if he was alive today, but he is frozen in memory at the age of 46. At the end of his presidency, after his assassination, Gallup did a survey and 80% of Americans claimed to have voted for him, but in fact only 49.7% did! He inspired a generation of young people, with Clinton as the most obvious. You have probably all seen the photographs of Clinton shaking hands with Kennedy, and he was very inspired by Kennedy. I think that so was Barack Obama. There was a certain colour, quality and charisma about him which most other American Presidents have lacked, and he reminds American of what might have been possible.

There is an even more poignant sense of what might have been possible, with the serious illness of Edward Kennedy appearing in the media last week. He is the last of the very tragic family: the older brother, Joe Kennedy, killed in the War; Jack Kennedy and his brother assassinated; his sister killed in a plane crash; another sister with severe mental problems, institutionalised; Kennedy's son, born during the beginning of his presidency, killed in a plane crash.

Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy's speech writer said: "Countless individuals have noted that the President's death affected them even more deeply than the death of their own parents. The reason, I believe, is that the latter situation most often represented a loss of the past, while the assassination of President Kennedy represented an incalculable loss of the future." Perhaps there is something in the Oliver Stone vision after all, perhaps something was lost with his death. But, of course, we will never know.