

The Camelot Years & the New Frontier

President John F. Kennedy (Jack) and his wife, Jacqueline, were a glamorous couple, charming many Americans, including the White House Press Corps, with their elegance, energy, wit, style and grace. The Kennedys embraced the arts and culture, inviting artists, musicians, and celebrities to visit the White House. They frequently adorned magazines and appeared on television, sharpening the contrast between the reserved and elderly Eisenhowers with a luster that celebrated new prosperous times, as showcased in the popular musical of the day, *Camelot*.

The Kennedy administration did have its critics, who complained that his presidency was all style and no substance, but Kennedy surrounded himself with many intellectuals and businesspeople, including **Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.** and **Robert McNamara**. He named his very capable brother, Robert (or Bobby), as attorney general, and who also served as the president's chief adviser.

President Kennedy called his ambitious and optimistic domestic program to modernize America the **New Frontier**--a term used by his speech writer, **Theodore Sorensen**, to describe the challenges then facing the United States. In his acceptance speech for the Democratic nomination for President in 1960, Kennedy said, "We stand today on the edge of a new frontier--the frontier of the 1960s, a frontier of unknown opportunities and paths." He added, "The new frontier of which I speak 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."

Kennedy had a difficult time getting Congress to support his New Frontier program. Conservative Republicans and southern Democrats blocked many of his bills. These included bills to provide medical care for the aged, rebuild cities, aid education, and promote civil rights. One reason for Kennedy's difficulties was that he was elected by a small margin. As a result, he lacked a popular mandate, and rarely pushed hard for his bills.

He did succeed with some proposals, however. To help the economy grow, the Kennedy administration used deficit spending. Kennedy hoped that increased spending on defense would help boost a recession hampered economy.

Lagging behind the Soviets in the space race, Kennedy made the civilian controlled **NASA** (National Air and Space Administration) a top priority, setting a national long range goal to reach the Moon "before the decade is out." The space race affected American society in many ways. Schools taught more science, researchers developed many new technologies, and industry flourished, contributing to economic growth.

The Kennedy Administration also tried to solve the problems of poverty and racism. In 1963, Kennedy called for a national effort to fight American poverty. He also ordered the Justice Department, headed by his brother, to investigate racial injustices in the South, sending Federal agents into Mississippi to enforce integration of the that state's primary university, and to protect civil rights activists in their campaign against



segregation. Disappointingly, a civil rights law against segregation could not be passed.

Additional successes of the Kennedy Administration include:

- The **Trade Expansion Act** of 1962 that authorized the President to negotiate tariff reductions on a reciprocal basis of up to 50 percent with the European Common Market helped to encourage international trade.
- Amending the **Fair Labor Standard Act** in 1961 to expand the FLSA's scope and gradually increased the minimum wage.
- The **Omnibus Housing Bill** of 1961 that asked for 3.19 billion to provide for affordable housing for middle and low income families. In addition, the bill provided for mass transportation, urban renewal, community development, and technical assistance to local and state government.
- The **Manpower Development and Training Act** of 1962 that authorized a three-year program aimed at retraining workers displaced by new technology.
- The **Area Redevelopment Act** of 1961 whose goal was government funding of the private sector (usually urban or rural depressed areas) in an effort to stimulate job creation. The effort also included \$4.5 million per year for vocational training programs.
- The 1963 amendment to the **National Defense Education Act**. It included \$731 million for state and local governments maintaining vocational training programs.
- The **Mental Retardation Facilities and Community Mental Health Centers Construction Act** of 1963, beginning a new era in federal support for mental health services.
- Proposing the Medical Health Bill (later known as Medicare) to Congress, but congress failed to enact it.
- The **Equal Pay Act**, eliminating some forms of sex-based pay discrimination.
- The **Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Control Act** aimed at preventing youth from committing delinquent acts.
- An attack on organized crime that, in 1963 alone, brought 288 mobsters to trial.

Shattering the optimism of the New Frontier, tragedy struck. On November 22, 1963, President and Mrs. Kennedy arrived in Dallas, Texas to improve relations with the state's Democratic Party. Large crowds greeted the Kennedys as they rode along the streets of downtown Dallas. Then, rifle shots rang out. Kennedy was fatally shot. The tragic news spread across the nation and then around the world. Millions of Americans sat glued to their televisions over the next few days. They watched on live television as a gunman shot and killed the president's accused killer, **Lee Harvey Oswald**. The events seemed too strange to believe. Many people wondered if Oswald had acted alone or with others. **Chief Justice Earl Warren** headed a commission to investigate the assassination. The **Warren Commission** determined that Oswald acted alone. However, many people continue to believe that Oswald was part of a conspiracy hatched by communists, the mob, or the military industrial complex.