

CHAPTER 3

The New Frontier of American Liberalism

IT REALLY IS TRUE THAT FOREIGN AFFAIRS IS THE ONLY IMPORTANT ISSUE FOR A PRESIDENT TO HANDLE, ISN'T IT? I MEAN WHO GIVES A SHIT IF THE MINIMUM WAGE IS \$1.15 OR \$1.25 . . . ?

—President John F. Kennedy in conversation
with Richard Nixon, 1961¹

In American popular memory, the 1960s are regarded as years of ascendant liberalism. According to this view, liberals in Washington, D. C. and elsewhere had a more or less free hand in setting the political agenda for the decade. In domestic policy, they launched a “war on poverty” that raised unfillable expectations, squandered vast sums of money, and may even have been responsible for worsening the conditions prevailing in the nation’s central cities. In the courts, they sponsored a “rights revolution” that led to noisy demands for special treatment by minorities, welfare recipients, homosexuals, criminal defendants, and others outside the mainstream of American society.

In the end, the liberals’ overweening ambitions put them out of touch with the real values and best interests of the American middle class, bringing the liberal cause—along with the Democratic party—a well-justified repudiation at the polls. Thus stands the contemporary historical indictment of Sixties liberalism.²

While there are certainly elements of truth in this interpretation, it considerably overstates the power of liberals to shape events in the 1960s. Of the three branches of the federal government, liberals held the commanding heights through the decade in only one branch, the judiciary (and, ironically, several of the liberal lions of the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1960s, including Chief Justice Earl Warren, had been appointed by President Eisenhower). In the legislative branch, notwithstanding Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, liberal Democrats were nearly always a minority. Every

Democratic congressional majority since the late 1930s had included a conservative Trojan horse: the 60 to 70 southern Democrats who were as likely to ally themselves on any given issue with Republicans rather than with liberal Democrats. As for the executive branch, neither of the two Democratic presidents who occupied the White House from 1961 through 1968 would, at the moment of their rise to national power, have been the first choice of the party's liberal wing. Particularly at the start of the 1960s, liberalism was neither sufficiently coherent as a political philosophy, nor sufficiently well organized as a political movement, to realize many ambitions, overweening or otherwise.

In the late 1950s liberalism was a philosophy with a heroic past, and an uncertain future. It was chiefly due to that past, embodied in the memory of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the legislative legacy of the New Deal, that "liberal" was considered an honorable and even desirable political label to wear within the Democratic Party. To be sure, not all Democrats, and few indeed in the South, would use the word to describe themselves. But the liberal designation remained a virtual prerequisite for a serious bid for the Democratic presidential nomination.

In a very general sense, what liberalism meant to its adherents on the eve of the 1960s was, first and foremost, the preservation of the "New Deal coalition," that politically winning alliance of organized labor, farmers, blacks, intellectuals, and southern whites established by Franklin Roosevelt and passed on to Harry Truman. The term "liberalism" evoked 20 years of Democratic leadership during which the nation had survived its worst economic depression, and then gone on to triumph in the most devastating war in history. It stood for policies and laws that came out of Roosevelt's New Deal and Truman's Fair Deal, and that most American believed in, such as providing pensions to the elderly and relief to the unemployed. It expressed faith in the wisdom and legitimacy of a strong federal government, and particularly in the ability of a strong president to secure the greatest possible good for the greatest possible number of Americans.³

But, except for Harry Truman's upset victory in 1948, liberal Democrats did not fare well at the polls from the end of World War II to the late 1950s. Senator Joseph McCarthy and other zealous on the Right accused them of being "soft on Communism" or of actively abetting the Soviet state. Their party lost the presidency to the Republicans in the lopsided contests of 1952 and 1956. And a majority of Congress, even in the years when Democrats made up a majority, was unsympathetic to most proposals for extending the New Deal tradition of government activism into new programs, although President Eisenhower, a shrewd moderate leader, carefully refrained from undoing the social welfare provisions that his Democratic predecessors had put in place in the 1930s and 1940s.

Liberalism is a philosophy of change, and when Democratic electoral prospects suffered in the aftermath of World War II, liberals were eager to

embrace new ideas, causes, and constituencies that would restore their political clout. But how much and what kind of change would be required?

One group of liberal intellectuals counseled a tough-minded approach to social ills. In his 1949 manifesto *The Vital Center*, Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. criticized his fellow liberals for cherishing a naive faith in the perfectability of mankind. He preached instead a militant opposition to visionary ideals, a chastened liberalism of restraint and limits. Citing William Butler Yeats' "terrible vision" of the "rough beast, its hour come round at last, . . . slouching toward Bethlehem," Schlesinger warned that there was to be found "a Hitler, a Stalin in every breast." Ideological mass movements, dreaming of establishing heavens on earth, were like lemming migrations, a "convulsive mass escape from freedom to totalitarianism," hurling nations "from the bleak and rocky cliffs into the deep, womb-dark sea below." Liberals needed to break with those he characterized as "the sentimentalists, the utopians, the waiters," and identify instead with "the politicians, the administrators, the doers."⁴

But what still needed "doing" in post-New Deal America? Schlesinger would make his reputation as a historian with biographies of Andrew Jackson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, liberal presidents who had come to power during times of economic distress.⁵ Thanks in part to what Schlesinger described as the "brilliant success" of the New Deal, the United States had put behind it the hard times of the 1930s, apparently forever. What then, if anything, would propel future liberal Democrats into the White House? The "quantitative liberalism" of the Roosevelt era, Schlesinger noted in an article published in the mid-1950s, had focused on "immediate problems of subsistence and survival." These were no longer of relevance in a prosperous post-war United States. It was time to move on to a "qualitative liberalism," that would be dedicated, in ways that Schlesinger left somewhat vague, "to bettering the quality of people's lives and opportunities."⁶

John Kenneth Galbraith, an economist and Schlesinger's colleague at Harvard, tried to fill in some of the programmatic details of this new "qualitative" liberalism. In a series of popular books and articles published in the 1950s, Galbraith argued that America's recent prosperity had not made its citizens truly secure. True, most working-class families were doing better than ever before, and big corporations were churning out a dazzling array of pleasing goods. The common welfare, however, was being neglected. At the civic core of what Galbraith dubbed "the affluent society," he glimpsed a growing rot. Schools were crowded, parks were dirty and sparse, urban transportation inefficient, and municipal workers underpaid. Galbraith offered a grim portrait of the pursuit of pleasure in Eisenhower's America:

The family which takes its . . . air-conditioned, power-steered, and power-braked automobile out for a tour passes through cities that are badly paved, made hideous

by litter, blighted buildings, billboards. . . . They pass into a countryside that has been rendered largely invisible by commercial art. . . . They picnic on exquisitely packaged food from a portable icebox by a polluted stream and go on to spend the night at a park which is a menace to public health and morals, just before dozing off. . . . they may reflect vaguely on the curious unevenness of their blessings. Is this, indeed, the American genius?⁷

By the later 1950s a host of other liberal-minded authors had examined the current state of American society and found it wanting in all kinds of ways, most of them related to the stultifying and unaesthetic quality of daily life, as reflected in advertising, corporate culture, television, the suburbs, and the like. This critique, embodied in such popular works as John Keats's *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1956), William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), and Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) and *The Status Seekers* (1959), testified to a growing unease, at least among the educated middle class, with the rewards offered by "the affluent society."⁸ But taken in their entirety, these books hinted at few remedies beyond the hope that culturally sensitive readers might take a more enlightened approach in their consumer and career choices. No one was going to take to the political barricades solely on the basis of the tastelessness of contemporary bill-board advertising.

But along with such "qualitative" discontents, another issue was beginning to draw the attention of liberals—one that was at once more deadly serious and yet more amenable to political solutions. That was the issue of civil rights. For many white liberals, the inequality of black people was gradually becoming the prime symbol of what needed to be changed in American society. African Americans, in the liberal view, were the great exception to the postwar boom, a people whose plight embarrassed the nation abroad (where it became a staple of Soviet propaganda) and mocked the most cherished American ideals at home.

The most influential text on race relations in the postwar years was a thousand-plus-page book entitled *An American Dilemma* that had been published in 1944 by a Swedish social scientist named Gunnar Myrdal. The "dilemma" of Myrdal's title referred to the apparent contradiction between the "American Creed" of equality before the law and equal opportunity, and the actual treatment of the black "caste" at the bottom of American society. The "Negro problem," Myrdal insisted, was in reality a white problem. Like the Progressive Era social reformers, he believed that once an enlightened middle class had been confronted with the facts of injustice, they would act decisively to make amends. The role of blacks in this process of change was largely to demonstrate their own worthiness for full citizenship, abandoning the "pathological condition" of their communities (which, in Myrdal's view included not only crime and illegitimacy, but also "the emotionalism in the Negro church"), and go on "to acquire the traits held in esteem by the dominant white Americans."⁹

Many of Myrdal's assumptions would come to sound patronizing to later generations (although his book was hailed by black civil rights activists in the 1940s and remained popular reading among black college students up to the early 1960s).¹⁰ Few white liberals in the 1950s were yet able to imagine a time in which black Americans would be able and willing to lead the fight for their own emancipation (relying heavily on the power of their "emotional" churches) or to define their own aspirations in ways that might diverge from being simply the dark shadow of middle-class white society. Myrdal's most lasting contribution to the future civil rights movement was to identify the struggle first and foremost as a moral struggle, and one that would become the defining issue for the nation's future: "Mankind is sick of fear and disbelief, of pessimism and cynicism," Myrdal wrote. "It needs the youthful moralistic optimism of America." Thus the "Negro problem" was not just "America's greatest failure" but also its "great opportunity for the future." If Americans embraced full racial equality, the United States would gain "a spiritual power many times stronger than all her financial and military resources—the power of the trust and support of all good people on earth."¹¹ A sympathetic foreigner was one of the first to argue that the best way to realize America's providential mission in the world was through ensuring racial justice at home.

Activists motivated by the ideas of Schlesinger and Galbraith, and the moral imperative of civil rights, felt most at home in the Democratic Party (although there were also a scattering of liberal activists in the Republican Party, particularly in the northeast). But the party itself, on the eve of the 1960s, was an unsteady colossus, one foot firmly resting on its achievement of the 1930s and 1940s, the other poised uncertainly in midair. Was it enough to be the party of the New Deal and the Fair Deal—as former president Truman, most of the urban political bosses, and many labor leaders believed? Or should Democrats focus on continuing problems that had not been adequately addressed by previous Democratic administrations, like racial discrimination and structural poverty?

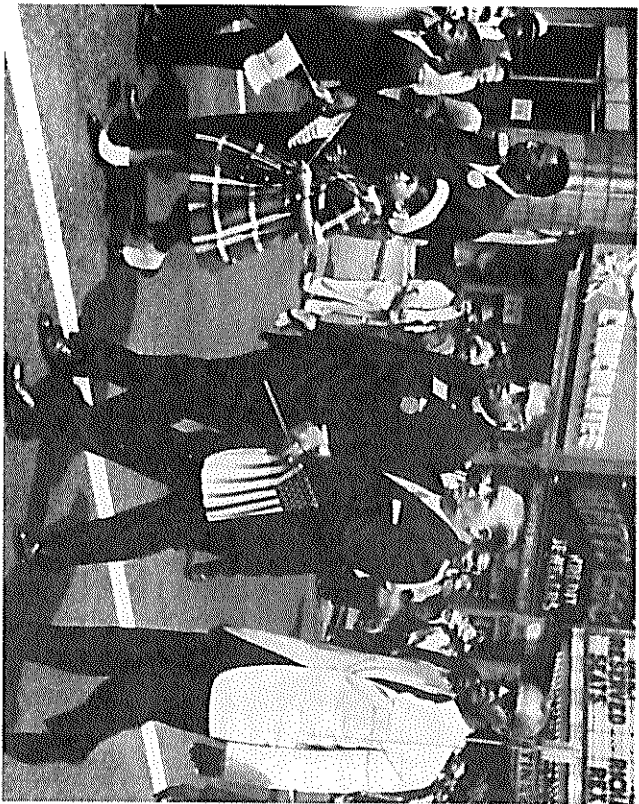
The stakes were high. Polls taken at the turn of the decade indicated that the numbers of politically involved Americans who described themselves as either "liberal" or "conservative" were roughly equal. The outcome between the two camps would be decided when one side or the other found the issues and constituencies that would allow it to win over the uncommitted majority of voters. With the right choices, Democratic liberals believed, they could not only return to the White House but control the national government for the next generation.¹²

The Democratic party's organizational base was in flux. In most industrial cities the once powerful political machines were undermined by the postwar move to the suburbs by white working-class voters, as well as the dying off the older European immigrant generations. The continued migration of

blacks to northern cities supplied new voters to Democratic Parties, but also raised tensions as newcomers and oldtimers competed for living space, jobs, and political patronage.¹³

In the Northeast, Midwest, and along the Pacific Coast, trade unions remained a powerful electoral force that could deliver campaign expertise, manpower (both in terms of paid staff and volunteers), and financial contributions, just as they had during the New Deal. Indeed, as the older forms of electoral party machinery decayed, labor's participation became even more important to Democratic strength—in some states, like Michigan, the unions virtually took over the party.

But even as official labor's importance within the Democratic Party electoral machinery increased, its ability to speak convincingly for the general welfare declined. Institutional stability brought many benefits to the unions and their members, but these came at the cost of a sense of social mission. Every year at annual conventions, delegates adopted resolutions pledging support for a wide range of ambitious social reforms, but few people in or out of the labor movement took them very seriously. Unions existed primarily to service the needs and represent the interests of their own members, not to



Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago, marching in a civil rights march, 1963. On his left is NAACP leader Roy Wilkins. Source: James Dugan, *Chicago Historical Society*

wage crusades on the behalf of non-dues payers, however just their cause or dire their plight. Established unions thus did little in the 1950s to help the most exploited workers in the land—migrant farm laborers up and down both coasts, and domestic workers all over. These groups were heavily black and Latino, and they had been left unprotected by the landmark labor laws of the 1930s. Neither did unions do much to appeal to the growing mass of service and clerical workers, heavily female, whose jobs still seemed ancillary to the manufacturing dynamo. Government workers, however, organized themselves and demanded changes in the law that would legitimize their new unions.¹⁴

Within the ranks of labor's leadership, conservatism and, on occasion, venality seemed to reign. George Meany, head of the AFL-CIO, boasted that he had never walked on a picket line. When the black trade unionist A. Philip Randolph spoke up at the 1959 AFL-CIO convention and challenged the lily-white composition of many of the nation's skilled craft unions, Meany angrily dismissed his concerns: "Who the hell appointed you as the guardian of all the Negroes in America?"¹⁵ The presidency of the huge Teamsters Union was held by Jimmy Hoffa, who vigorously defended his members' economic interests but also flagrantly promoted his own, with the aid of the Mafia. Nationally televised hearings in 1957 of the Senate Committee on Improper Activities in the Labor or Management Field (popularly known as the McClellan hearings, after its chairman John McClellan of Arkansas), made Hoffa and his union synonymous in the public mind with corruption. The committee's aggressive chief counsel was Robert Kennedy, who would certainly never have taken on the position if he thought it would harm the presidential aspirations of his brother John. But there was little political cost, and much to be gained by bashing union bureaucrats, as many Americans came to view labor as just one more selfish "special interest," uninterested in the nation's general well-being.

Into the vacuum of power and ideas within the Democratic Party stepped a new generation of liberal activists. These earnest young men and women, who were overwhelmingly white, worked through advocacy groups like Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), campus organizations like the National Student Association (NSA), and reform-oriented groups like the Village Independent Democrats in New York City. They certainly wanted to be counted among Schlesinger's "doers." At gatherings of Reform Democrats, the rhetorical emphasis, wrote a political scientist, was "on fact-finding, expertise, research, background papers, and 'resource persons'" rather than "deductions from an a priori ideology."¹⁶

But beneath the surface sobriety of 1950s liberalism lurked fugitive traces of the idealistic, the visionary, and the romantic—all those qualities whose political utility Schlesinger had discounted. Like millions of their fellow Americans, the young liberal activists of the 1950s were living a great suc-

cess story. The “bleak and rocky cliffs” of freedom to which they clung, came equipped with picture windows and two-car garages. Liberals might not have always enjoyed reading the daily newspapers in the 1950s, but they were, after all, living the American dream—enjoying the opportunity to pursue higher education in colleges and universities (institutions whose expansion was fueled by such Democratic legislative achievements as the GI Bill), along with the opportunity to move out of crowded, decaying urban neighborhoods to the sprawling and shiny new suburbs (financed by GI Bill loans, or the New Deal-initiated Federal Housing Administration). The many young liberals from Jewish or Roman Catholic backgrounds were coming of age during the first time in American history when non-Protestants were encouraged to think of themselves as full members of the national community.

Not only was postwar America prosperous, it was powerful. Liberals, for the most part, felt at ease with that power. It was part of the world they had inherited from Franklin Roosevelt. They saw in the Cold War a continuation of the liberal internationalism of the Second World War, a war of ideas as well as power blocs that Roosevelt had defined as a struggle for the “Four Freedoms”—freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. The first two freedoms were the same as those sought by the classical liberalism of the nineteenth century—the absence of restraint. But the last two suggested the need for a strong, interventionist government, along the lines of Roosevelt’s own New Deal, to redistribute resources or stimulate economic growth to do away with “want,” and to protect the rights of political and racial minorities to do away with “fear.” A foreign policy conducted for such goals implied commitment to improving the lives of other peoples, as well as securing the best interests of the United States.

The older generation of liberals, who had cut their political teeth in the bitter feuding between Communists and “anti-Stalinists” in the 1930s and 1940s, tended not to ask too many questions about the actual conduct of the Cold War by Washington policymakers. Outside of the tiny Communist and pacifist movements, few Americans in the 1950s of any political perspective argued that there were fundamental problems with America’s chosen role in the world.

Still, liberals of the younger generation offered a more selective support to the Cold War than their elders. They found themselves uneasy with the “excesses” of American policy—the U.S. government’s cozying up to develop and test hydrogen bombs, the State Department’s cozying up with Generalissimo Franco in Spain, and the pretense that Chiang Kai-shek’s exile regime in Taiwan was the real government of mainland China. These were merely cracks in the Cold War consensus, but in time they would widen.

In 1959 a recent graduate of Smith College named Gloria Steinem took a job organizing a delegation of young Americans to attend and disrupt a Communist-sponsored international youth festival in Vienna. The funding



Gloria Steinem, future feminist leader, as she appeared in her 1956 college yearbook. Source: Sophia Smith Collection

for the group, carefully hidden from the delegates but probably known to Steinem, came from the Central Intelligence Agency. Steinem, however, did not think of herself as the covert agent of a great power. Upon her return from Vienna in August 1959 she wrote to a relative: “I suppose this was my small world equivalent of going off to join the Spanish Revolution.”¹⁷

Allard Lowenstein, a graduate of the University of North Carolina, served for a year as president of the National Student Association at a time when the CIA was secretly subsidizing the group. Yet in 1959, as a freelance journalist investigating the apartheid system in South Africa, Lowenstein risked his own freedom by smuggling an African dissident out of the country, hidden in the back of Lowenstein’s Volkswagen Beetle. His friends jokingly referred to him as “U.S. undercover agent 1001”—although furthering the struggle against apartheid was far from official U.S. policy in 1959.¹⁸

In the 1950s Steinem and Lowenstein were patriotic young people, and committed cold warriors. But there was a streak of independence in that commitment—not so much “my country, right or wrong,” but an attitude that might be described as “my country—just as long as it is right. . . .”

The new currents in American liberalism that began to emerge in the 1950s represented less a well-defined set of political doctrines, and more a kind of political sensibility reflecting a new social environment. Younger, middle-class liberals, many coming from "ethnic" and working-class backgrounds, and in many instances the first generation in their families to enjoy college educations, were now, in effect, laying claim to a political territory that had formerly belonged to socially prominent, old-line Protestant Republicans. They were becoming self-appointed spokesmen for the public interest in good government, civility, and social responsibility. Theirs was a vision that harkened back to Progressive Era notions of responsible citizenship, or what philosopher John Dewey had called, in the 1920s, the goal of creating a "Great Community," a society in which "an organized, articulate Public" was deeply and directly involved in every aspect of government decision making. At the same time, there was a new and more quixotic element within this liberalism, a kind of insouciant adversarial stance, a willingness to stand against the current, like Yossarian in *Catch-22*, if that's what conscience seemed to dictate.

To whom did such a mixed vision of community and individualism appeal? One of the leading liberal weekly journals of opinion, *The New Republic*, took a survey of its readers in the early 1960s. The magazine's "typical reader," it turned out, was about 35 years old, had completed college and at least one year of graduate school, was married to a college graduate and had one child.¹⁹ Professionals, like lawyers, architects, and journalists, accounted for 35 percent of the readership, teachers 18 percent, and students 12 percent.²⁰

Although the entire readership of *The New Republic* at the start of the 1960s could have been gathered together in one of the nation's larger football stadiums,²¹ it represented a significant constituency just beginning to find its own voice in American politics. Younger Americans at the start of the 1960s were more educated than their parents and more apt to have careers requiring professional accreditation; and they were postponing marriage and child bearing (which would, in a few years, bring the postwar "baby boom" to its close). These were people who had the spare time, the financial wherewithal, the credentials, and the self-confidence to challenge conventional wisdom and take on established authorities.

They would, in the course of the 1960s, come to be referred to as "the conscience constituency," or "the new class."²² They embraced new causes, or old causes that had gone out of fashion, like environmentalism and women's rights. They combined a passion for social change and social justice with the belief in the power of reasoned argument—which is why they so often came to a new cause by having read some seminal book on the topic. Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, published in 1961, sparked a movement in defense of livable urban neighborhoods. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, made converts for a new environmental

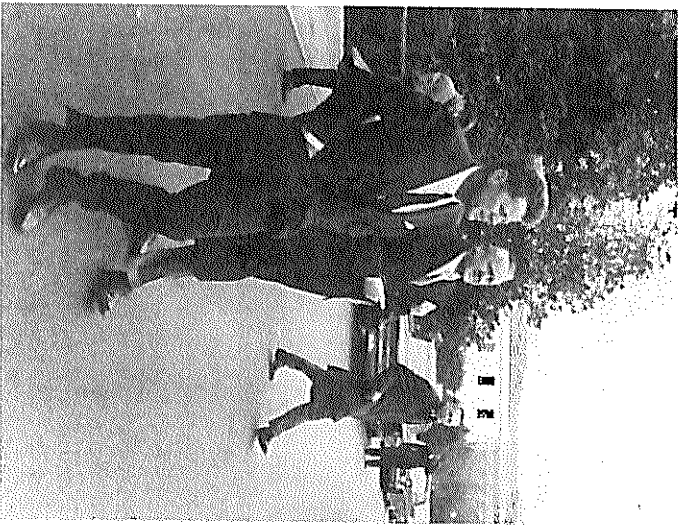
movement. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, contributed to the rebirth of American feminism. And Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed*, published in 1965, did the same for a new anticorporate consumer movement.²³

Tellingly, such books were often referred to by their admirers as "the bible" of this or that cause. Notwithstanding their commitment to rational debate, the outlook of the new liberalism also embodied a highly moralistic vision, political involvement became an extension of—or, increasingly, a substitute for—a personal quest for spiritual salvation.²⁴

Many Democratic leaders were wary of the new missionaries of reform. Professional politicians like Harry Truman, hard-bitten labor leaders like George Meany, and old-line urban bosses like Mayor Daley scorned the reformers as "eggheads"—arrogant and impractical intellectuals. The new Reform Democrats admired a few labor leaders, particularly Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers, who walked on civil rights marches and waxed idealistic about a broader welfare state. But Reform Democrats were not, on the whole, all that interested or well versed in the bread-and-butter economic issues that had been the mainstay of Democratic Party policy and political strategy during the New and Fair Deals. Despite the disdain of the old pros, however, the Reform Democrats gained significant influence in the mid- to late 1950s in Democratic parties in such key electoral states as New York, Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and California. The enjoyed the patronage of Eleanor Roosevelt, the leading liberal icon of the Democratic Party, and they gained useful political experience and contacts in Adlai Stevenson's presidential campaigns of 1952 and 1956. But they remained, at the end of the 1950s, a movement without a clear leader.

Ironically, the man who became identified, for most Americans, with a new birth of liberalism was a thoroughly practical politician of the old school who tended to view idealists and moralists as sentimental fools.

John F. Kennedy was born in Brookline, Massachusetts, in 1917, the second of nine children fathered by Joseph P. Kennedy. The elder Kennedy was the grandson of impoverished Irish immigrants who had emigrated to the United States to escape the potato famine. The old Protestant elite in Boston looked on the arrival of Irish Catholics as a kind of barbarian invasion. Young Joe Kennedy, whose father was a prosperous Boston saloon keeper, grew up determined to beat the Protestants at their own game in both business and politics. Shrewd investments in the 1920s made him a millionaire. But although he enjoyed prominence in Democratic Party circles in the 1930s, and was awarded with political plums such as the chairmanship of the Securities and Exchange Commission and the ambassadorship to Great Britain, he would never realize his life's ambition of becoming president of the United States. That would be left to his sons, who were groomed from childhood for the run for the White House.



President John F. Kennedy. Source: John F. Kennedy Library, photo number AKR7018G 1 Feb. 1962

Pride of place fell to John (nicknamed Jack) after his older brother, Joseph, Jr., died in a World War II plane crash. John suffered from a variety of physical ailments that frequently confined him to bed and plagued him throughout his life. But his father still demanded that the boy join his siblings in rigorous physical exercise, sailing races, and touch football games. His mother, Rose Kennedy, herself the daughter of a prominent Irish-American politician in Boston, pinned notes to his pillowcase urging him to memorize the presidents. Competition was the family creed. "Don't play unless you are captain," Joe Kennedy, Sr. advised his brood. "Second place is failure."²⁵

John Kennedy enjoyed every advantage his father's money could buy him. His Harvard education culminated in the publication of his first book, *Why England Slept*, a study of British foreign policy in the late 1930s. It became a best-seller, in part because Joe Kennedy persuaded *New York Times* columnist Arthur Krook to revise it for his son, and in part because Joe Kennedy took the precaution of purchasing thirty thousand copies of it himself, most of which were relegated to the family attic.

After Pearl Harbor, Jack Kennedy enlisted in the navy, was commissioned an officer, and given command of a PT (patrol torpedo) boat in the South

Pacific. On an August night in 1943, near the Solomon Islands, a Japanese destroyer rammed Kennedy's PT boat, slicing it in half. Kennedy rallied his men, helping the survivors make it to a nearby island, and personally towing an injured sailor several miles to safety. Joe Kennedy induced the *Reader's Digest*, the highest circulation magazine in the country, to run excerpts from a laudatory account of his son's rescue of the crew of PT-109, when Jack Kennedy returned from the war and ran for Congress in 1946, thousands of reprints of the article appeared on subway and bus seats throughout the Boston-area congressional district he was seeking to represent. Kennedy won in a landslide, and six years later, again well financed by his father, he secured election to the United States Senate.

In the last half of the 1950s, Kennedy devoted himself single-mindedly to a new prize, the 1960 Democratic nomination for the presidency. The campaign included the publication of yet another ghost-written best-seller (*Profiles in Courage*, which appeared in 1957 and, once again through Joe Kennedy's intervention, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize). Kennedy's supporters stressed his intellectual attainments, and he himself preferred a style of cool rationality to any excessive display of sentiment or emotion.²⁶

But the candidate's real appeal had little to do with intellect. By 1960 the Kennedy image of glamour, grace, and inspirational leadership was provoking the kind of adulation formerly associated with such male sex symbols as Frank Sinatra (who was a prominent Kennedy enthusiast in the 1960 campaign). After witnessing Kennedy speak that summer at the Democratic national convention, novelist Norman Mailer marveled that "the Democrats were going to nominate a man who, no matter how serious his political dedication might be, was indisputably and willy-nilly going to be seen as a great box-office actor." The consequences for American politics, Mailer mused, "were staggering and not at all easy to calculate."²⁷

In his campaign for nomination, John Kennedy benefited from the support of prominent liberal activists such as Schlesinger and Galbraith. Most liberals, however, would have preferred any number of other candidates for the presidential nomination: Adlai Stevenson, not formally in the race, was backed by both Mrs. Roosevelt and Walter Reuther, while Minnesota senator Hubert Humphrey, Missouri senator Stuart Symington, and others actively pursuing the nomination had their partisans. Kennedy was regarded with suspicion by the Democratic Party's liberal wing because of his father's isolationism in the 1930s, his own lackluster congressional record, and his temporizing over the issue of McCarthyism in the early 1950s.²⁸

Whatever reputation Kennedy had for liberal sympathies in 1960 was more a matter of a calculated style than of politics: the tousled hair, the fondness for touch football and windswept walks on the Hyannis beach, the Harvard affiliation, all seemed to imply a combination of youth and vigor and daring. His demurely beautiful wife, the former Jacqueline Bouvier, with her

family ties to genuine European aristocracy, her fondness for French designers, and her stylish bouffant hairdo, only enhanced the Kennedy image.

Kennedy won the presidential nomination at the Democratic convention on the first ballot. Liberals, by and large, swallowed their disappointment at his nomination (although, as Schlesinger reported privately to Kennedy in August, ADA was responding to his candidacy with "almost reptidity"). Kennedy further dismayed liberals by choosing Texas senator Lyndon Johnson as his running mate. Johnson had begun his political career in the 1930s as an outspokenly liberal congressman but had moved to the right in the years since. Liberals viewed Johnson as an unprincipled wheeler-dealer, and his nomination as vice president as a dangerous and unprincipled sop to conservative southern Democrats. ADA refused outright to endorse Johnson's candidacy.²⁹

In the fall campaign, Kennedy shored up his reputation with liberals by hitting hard at the Eisenhower record on domestic policy. His opponent, Richard Nixon, bore the burden of defending the record of the administration in which he had served eight years as vice president—and, unfortunately for his cause, had to do so in the midst of an economic recession. Kennedy declared that the "war against poverty and degradation is not yet over," citing statistics showing millions of American living in substandard homes, and millions of elderly people living on inadequate assistance.³⁰ In response, Nixon pointed to the growth of giant shopping centers as evidence of American well-being—the very sort of development that Galbraith, Packard, and others had spent the past half-decade denouncing as a wasteful and frivolous misuse of resources.

Kennedy's promise that he would "get the nation moving again," was as vague about specifics as a good campaign slogan should be, but not so the party platform, adopted by the delegates at the Democratic national convention in 1960. Kennedy ran for office committed to a liberal wish list of bold initiatives: if elected, and true to these promises, he would raise the minimum wage, improve the conditions of farm workers, secure passage of national health insurance for the elderly, and launch a 10-year campaign to eliminate urban slums.

The Democratic Party platform also pledged vigorous enforcement of existing civil rights legislation and praised the southern student sit-in movement. And in the waning days of the campaign, Kennedy was persuaded by his liberal advisers to reach out to the civil rights movement in a direct and dramatic fashion: when Martin Luther King was hustled off to a Georgia prison in late October on a bogus charge of violating probation from an earlier traffic violation, Kennedy called up Coretta Scott King to offer the prisoner's wife his sympathy. His brother and campaign manager Bobby called a Georgia judge, who arranged to get King released. The Kennedy campaign heavily publicized these gestures in black communities. Although many white

voters in the South were put off by Kennedy's evident sympathy for King (and others could not, in any case, bring themselves to vote for a Catholic), Kennedy was the last Democratic candidate for president to win both a majority of the southern white vote and a majority of the national black vote.

The black ballots proved decisive. On election day a full 70 percent of black voters who went to the polls cast their ballot for Kennedy (up 10 percent from the black vote for Stevenson in 1956). Kennedy's narrow margin of victory (which also benefited from some creative vote counting in Democratic precincts in Illinois and Texas) lagged considerably behind the total popular vote for Democratic congressional candidates.³¹

Once in office Kennedy charmed liberals (and much of the country) with the dash he brought to public occasions, especially his frequent press conferences. He cultivated intellectuals and artists: Robert Frost read a poem at Kennedy's inauguration; Pablo Casals provided cello music at a White House reception. Jackie Kennedy was much in evidence at such affairs, chatting in French with André Malraux, pointing out the works of art she had had installed in the White House in an effort to sweep away the dowdiness into which it had fallen in the Eisenhower years. Both Kennedy's managed the daunting challenge of associating themselves with high intellectual life without appearing snuffy or snobbish themselves. At a dinner honoring Nobel Prize winners from throughout the Americas, Kennedy described them with characteristic sly wit as "the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone."³²

But Kennedy's style and the Kennedy substance remained separate categories. During the first two years of the New Frontier, the lights did not burn late in the White House while the president fretted over domestic issues. In his inaugural address, where he stirred the country with an idealistic appeal to "bear any burden, pay any price" in defending freedom abroad, the new president failed to mention domestic policy at all. The liberals in his campaign encourage found themselves confined to odd corners of the administration, far from domestic policymaking. Schlesinger crafted speeches, not policy, while Galbraith went off to India as U.S. ambassador. Kennedy's brother-in-law Sargent Shriver (sometimes referred to by administration insiders as the "house Communist") was given the directorship of the newly created Peace Corps—a high-profile/low-influence position. Galbraith would later describe the role of the administration's liberals as resembling that of "Indians firing occasional arrows into the campsite from outside."³³ Not many arrows hit home: Kennedy regarded most of the domestic issues that concerned liberals as a distraction from the all-important military and diplomatic confrontation with the Soviet Union.

In the 1960 election Kennedy had managed to outflank Richard Nixon on the right when it came to the issue of American foreign policy, suggest-

ing that the Eisenhower administration had carelessly allowed the Soviet Union to outpace the United States in the arms race, and in the struggle to influence developing nations around the world. While the charges were largely spurious (it was the United States in 1960 that enjoyed a substantial lead in nuclear weapons and the ability to deliver them against enemy targets), there is no question that Kennedy conceived of his role as commander-in-chief of the free world as the most important of his new responsibilities. He surrounded himself with a crew of foreign policy advisers who were, in the ironic description later provided by journalist David Halberstam, "the best and the brightest." They included the secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, the Harvard Business School-educated president of the Ford Motor Company, and national security adviser Mc-George Bundy, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Harvard. Bobby Kennedy, the new attorney general, also played a key role in the administration's foreign policy discussions.³⁴

JFK and his advisers beheld two fronts in the conflict with Communism. First, they sought to contain the USSR, led by mercurial premier Nikita S. Khrushchev, inside its client bloc in eastern Europe, and to make sure that the Soviets gained no advantage in the nuclear arms race or the space race. Kennedy initiated the most dramatic peacetime military buildup in American history, spending more money on nuclear weapons, missile systems, and fallout shelters in three years than the Eisenhower administration had spent in eight. The total megatonnage of the American nuclear arsenal more than doubled in the three years Kennedy sat in the White House.³⁵ At the same time, Kennedy committed the United States to sending a man to the moon by the end of the decade; as he declared in a message on "urgent national needs" to a joint session of Congress in May 1961, it was "time for this nation to take a clearly leading role in space achievement, which in many ways may hold the key to our future on earth."³⁶

Kennedy and his foreign policy advisers also committed themselves to reversing the gains made by Communists and other anti-American radicals in the Third World, where both the falling away of the old colonial empires and extreme social and economic inequalities were generating what seemed in the early 1960s like a tidal wave of revolutionary activism. Asked by a reporter about a little-known conflict going on in South Vietnam in 1961, Bobby Kennedy spoke dismissively of its significance in the overall scheme of U.S. policymaking: "We've got twenty Vietnams a day to handle."³⁷

Kennedy's first attempt to challenge Soviet influence in the Third World—an adventure initially planned by the Eisenhower administration but eagerly pursued by the new one—was a disaster. On April 17, 1961, a brigade of 1400 Cuban exiles, trained and armed by the United States, began an invasion of their homeland. The purpose of the landing at a beach called Playa Giron—better known as the Bay of Pigs—was to begin the overthrow of the

government of Fidel Castro, which had in the past year openly allied itself with the USSR. But Castro was a popular leader, and he had advance warning of the attack. It took Cuban planes and troops less than 24 hours to force the outnumbered invaders to surrender. Just before the invasion, Kennedy called off a planned air strike on Playa Giron for fear it would reveal U.S. sponsorship of the whole affair. Such an attack would not have changed the outcome of the botched invasion, but Kennedy's belated caution created the suspicion in some quarters that he had "sold out" the anti-Castro cause.³⁸

The embarrassing failure at the Bay of Pigs, for which Kennedy publicly assumed blame, strengthened the president's obsession with a regime he viewed as nothing more than a launching pad for Soviet aggression. Within six months, the administration had initiated Operation Mongoose, a secret program that did everything short of another invasion to destroy Castro's regime. Under Mongoose, hundreds of American and Cuban operatives, coordinated by the CIA, gathered intelligence, sabotaged the Cuban economy, and launched numerous assassination attempts against Castro, including one plot involving a poisoned cigar. Mongoose failed to topple Castro; instead it convinced the Cuban leader to seek ironclad protection from his Soviet allies against the Yankee behemoth to the north.³⁹

That search helped set in motion events that nearly ended in nuclear war between the superpowers. Responding to Castro's entreaties, Nikita Khrushchev decided to base Soviet missiles in Cuba, missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads to every major city on the east coast of the United States. The plans were kept secret, but in the fall of 1962 American spy planes flying over Cuba photographed feverish construction efforts on the ground. It did not take long for intelligence analysts to realize what was being built.

A year earlier, Kennedy and Khrushchev had bristled rhetorically over the latter's threat to restrict Western access to Berlin, long a pawn in the Cold War. The Communists ended that crisis in brutal fashion when they erected a high concrete wall separating the two sectors of the city, gunning down any East Germans who tried to scale it. In the early 1960s it seemed that Berlin was the most dangerous flash point in East-West relations. Kennedy knew there was not much he could actually do about the Berlin situation, except to make it clear to West Berliners that the United States would stick by them in any future conflict with the East. He was not, however, prepared to stand by idly at the expansion of Soviet power in his own backyard.

For nearly two weeks in October 1962, the president and the premier engaged in the most dangerous international confrontation in history. Each side gambled that the other would recoil from the prospect of nuclear confrontation. But it was a near thing. A number of Kennedy's top advisers urged him to take decisive actions against Cuba ranging from air strikes to a full scale invasion, each of which might have triggered a Soviet nuclear response. Kennedy, however, opted for a more cautious and flexible strategy, using U.S.

naval strength to "quarantine" Soviet shipping to the island to prevent any missiles or warheads from getting through. In the end it was Khrushchev who relented, sobered by Kennedy's resolve and well aware that the U.S. nuclear arsenal was much larger than its Soviet counterpart. Soviet merchant vessels turned around in midvoyage to Cuba and returned to their home ports. In return for an agreement to dismantle the missile bases in Cuba, the Soviet leader demanded that the U.S. president promise not to invade the island, and to remove U.S. missiles stationed near the Soviet border in Turkey. Kennedy readily agreed, particularly since the United States had already planned to remove the increasingly obsolete missiles. The crisis was over.⁴⁰

In the United States, the outcome of the Cuban missile crisis was seen as an unambiguous American victory—the two great powers went "eyeball to eyeball" as the saying went, and Khrushchev blinked. Kennedy's personal popularity soared. The president, however, was sobered by the affair, and for the first time began to rethink his reflexive Cold War militancy insofar as it involved the possibility of direct confrontation with the Soviet Union. Khrushchev too was eager to avoid any replay of the crisis. The expensive arms race between the superpowers continued, but both sides toned down their rhetoric and avoided making gestures that would set off the nuclear trip wire. Although the word "détente" was not yet in vogue, a new kind of confidence slowly grew between the two powers that a third and final world war was avoidable. Months after the crisis, the United States quietly removed its missiles from Turkey. The White House and the Kremlin installed a "hotline" to facilitate communication in the event of future crises. And negotiations began on a treaty to stop nuclear testing in the atmosphere, with ratification coming in the fall of 1963.

In the early 1960s protests against the nuclear arms race, and interventions in Third World countries, were restricted to small circles of radicals and pacifists. But by 1962 Kennedy's domestic priorities—or his apparent lack of such priorities—was creating discontent among his liberal supporters. Now that they actually had a decidedly unsentimental "administrator" in office, many liberals found that they didn't much like it. In 1962 John Roche, a political scientist at Brandeis University and national chairman of ADA, denounced Kennedy's "technocratic liberalism." Roche suggested his administration could benefit from an infusion "of good old-fashion crusading zeal."⁴¹

Kennedy wanted to be a great president, and in the scope and authority given him to conduct foreign policy, he felt he had an arena in which to make his mark. Domestic policy in contrast, seemed a terrain full of potential pitfalls. Kennedy was mindful of the narrow margin of his victory in 1960; he was mindful, too, of the likelihood of facing a strong Republican challenge, most likely from the conservative Arizona senator, Barry Goldwater, in the

1964 election. He also faced formidable legislative constraints. The Democrats had lost 22 seats in the House and 2 in the Senate in 1960, despite their success in taking back the White House. Congress was even more firmly under the control of a coalition of southern Democrats and conservative Republicans in Kennedy's first two years in office than it had been in the last two years of Eisenhower's administration.

Kennedy strategists calculated that fewer than 180 of the 435 members of the House of Representatives could be counted to regularly support liberal legislation. As a result, 16 of the 23 bills dealing with domestic matters that the president sent to Congress in 1961 were defeated.⁴² And Kennedy wasn't asking for all that much, for he was eager to reassure a nervous business community that the return of the Democrats to power would not mean reckless spending or inflationary policies.

By 1962 the new administration's heavy spending on defense had pushed the federal budget into the red, but it had also given the sluggish economy a jump start. Kennedy gradually came to understand what liberal economists had believed for a generation, that there were worse things for the economy than having the federal government engage in deficit spending. Under the tutelage of Walter Heller, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, Kennedy became a convert to the "New Economics." Heller and others convinced the president that he had the power and the responsibility to shape the economy through the government's fiscal policies. The most useful weapon in his economic arsenal, they argued, would be a tax cut, which would stimulate economic growth. In January 1963 Kennedy proposed a \$10 billion tax cut.⁴³

To placate liberals, who noted that most of the benefits of Kennedy's economic policies would flow to those already well off, the president lent support to some limited initiatives in public welfare, including the Area Redevelopment Act, which provided loans to businesses willing to relocate to depressed regions like Appalachia, and the Manpower Development and Training Act, which created programs for the retraining of workers displaced by automation. Notwithstanding his skepticism about its worth, he secured an increase in the minimum wage, as well as a broadening of unemployment and Social Security benefits. But taken together, these measures fell far short of the glowing promises of the 1960 Democratic party platform.⁴⁴

Quite unmentioned, Kennedy made an important contribution to one beleaguered liberal cause, and that was equal rights for women. He issued an executive order in 1961 establishing the President's Commission on the Status of Women, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt until her death in November 1962. Kennedy had little if any interest in women's issues, but he saw the establishment of the commission as a gallant gesture to women in the Democratic Party, and also as a painless way to reward Eleanor Roosevelt for joining his campaign after he had won the Democratic nomination in 1960.

However limited the intent, the symbolism of his act had important consequences. Many states established their own status-of-women commissions, whose representatives met periodically in Washington. In October 1963, the President's Commission presented a report to Kennedy calling for equal employment and educational opportunities for women, and a wider role for women in American political life. Like the reports of most presidential commissions, it was politely received by a president who had no serious intention of pursuing its recommendations. Still, the commission's report documented the discrimination women faced in the workplace and helped to legitimize a public debate over women's roles and rights.⁴⁵

Of all the domestic issues Kennedy had to deal with, civil rights was the most politically problematic, since any gains made in pleasing black voters in the North came at the likely expense of alienating white voters in the South. Kennedy responded to the successive civil rights crises of 1961-1962 primarily in terms of crisis management, rather than the opportunity to provide political leadership. He angered civil rights supporters by appointing a number of staunchly segregationist federal judges in the South and by backing away from his campaign pledge to end discrimination in public housing "with a stroke of the pen" by means of executive order (he finally got around to issuing such an order after the November 1962 midterm elections were safely past). And the Justice Department, under Bobby Kennedy, did little to protect the lives of civil rights workers in the dangerous work of voter registration in the Deep South.

Through 1962, Kennedy's liberalism remained for the most part a matter of style rather than substance. In terms of domestic policy, John F. Kennedy became the liberal he is remembered as only in the last year of his life. Meanwhile, the decisions he was making about American policy in distant Vietnam would soon split Democrats into warring camps, to the lasting detriment of the liberal cause and agenda.