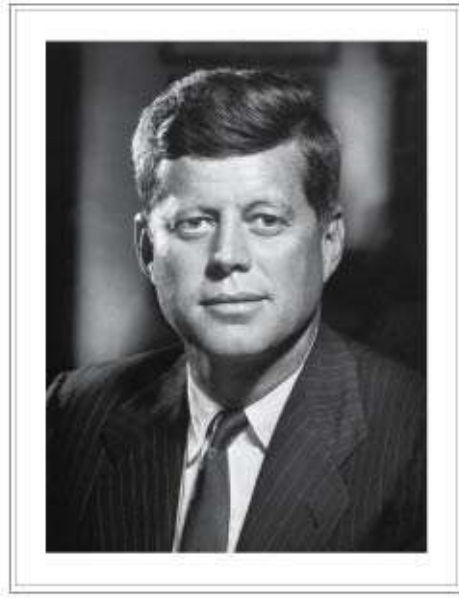


**JOHN F.
KENNEDY**

ALAN BRINKLEY

THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTS





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John F.
Kennedy



THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTS

ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER, JR., AND SEAN WILENTZ

GENERAL EDITORS

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For William Leuchtenburg

With gratitude for his friendship and for all I have learned from him

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THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY

The president is the central player in the American political order. That would seem to contradict the intentions of the Founding Fathers. Remembering the horrid example of the British monarchy, they invented a separation of powers in order, as Justice Brandeis later put it, “to preclude the exercise of arbitrary power.” Accordingly, they divided the government into three allegedly equal and coordinated branches—the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary.

But a system based on the tripartite separation of powers has an inherent tendency toward inertia and stalemate. One of the three branches must take the initiative if the system is to move. The executive branch alone is structurally capable of taking that initiative. The Founders must have sensed this when they accepted Alexander Hamilton’s proposition in the Seventieth Federalist that “energy in the executive is a leading character in the definition of good government.” They thus envisaged a strong president—but within an equally strong system of constitutional accountability. (The term *imperial presidency* arose in the 1970s to describe the situation when the balance between power and accountability is upset in favor of the executive.)

The American system of self-government thus comes to focus in the presidency—“the vital place of action in the system,” as Woodrow Wilson put it. Henry Adams, himself the great-grandson and grandson of presidents as well as the most brilliant of American historians, said that the American president “resembles the commander of a ship at sea. He must have a helm to grasp, a course to steer, a port to seek.” The men in the White House (thus far only men, alas) in steering their chosen course have shaped our destiny as a nation.

Biography offers an easy education in American history, rendering the past more human, more vivid, more intimate, more accessible, more connected to ourselves. Biography reminds us that presidents are not supermen. They are human beings too, worrying about decisions, attending to wives and children, juggling balls in the air, and putting on their pants one leg at a time. Indeed, as Emerson contended, “There is properly no history; only biography.”

Presidents serve us as inspirations, and they also serve us as warnings. They provide bad examples as well as good. The nation, the Supreme Court has said, has “no right to expect that it will always have wise and humane rulers, sincerely attached to the principles of the Constitution. Wicked men, ambitious of power, with hatred of liberty and contempt of law, may fill the place once occupied by Washington and Lincoln.”

The men in the White House express the ideals and the values, the frailties and the flaws, of the voters who send them there. It is altogether natural that we should want to know more about the virtues and the vices of the fellows we have elected to govern us. As we know more about them, we will know more about ourselves. The French political philosopher Joseph de Maistre said, “Every nation has the government it deserves.”

At the start of the twenty-first century, forty-two men have made it to the Oval Office. (George W. Bush is counted our forty-third president, because Grover Cleveland, who served nonconsecutive terms, is counted twice.) Of the parade of presidents, a dozen or so lead the polls periodically conducted by historians and political scientists. What makes a great president?

Great presidents possess, or are possessed by, a vision of an ideal America. Their passion, as they grasp the helm, is to set the ship of state on the right course toward the port they seek. Great presidents also have a deep psychic connection with the needs, anxieties, dreams of people. “I do not believe,” said Wilson, “that any man can lead who does not act ... under the impulse of a profound sympathy with those whom he leads—a sympathy which is insight—an insight which is of the heart rather than of the intellect.”

“All of our great presidents,” said Franklin D. Roosevelt, “were leaders of thought at a time when certain ideas in the life of the nation had to be clarified.” So Washington incarnated the idea of federal union, Jefferson and Jackson the idea of democracy, Lincoln union and freedom, Cleveland rugged honesty. Theodore Roosevelt and Wilson, said FDR, were both “moral leaders, each in his own way and his own time, who used the presidency as a pulpit.”

To succeed, presidents not only must have a port to seek but they must convince Congress and the electorate that it is a port worth seeking. Politics in a democracy is ultimately an educational process, an adventure in persuasion and consent. Every president stands in Theodore Roosevelt’s bully pulpit.

The greatest presidents in the scholars’ rankings, Washington, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt were leaders who confronted and overcame the republic’s greatest crises. Crisis widens presidential opportunities for bold and imaginative action. But it does not guarantee presidential greatness. The crisis of secession did not spur Buchanan or the crisis of depression spur Hoover to creative leadership. Their inadequacies in the face of crisis allowed Lincoln and the second Roosevelt to show the difference individuals make to history. Still, even in the absence of first-order crisis, forceful and persuasive presidents—Jefferson, Jackson, James K. Polk, Theodore Roosevelt, Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush—are able to impose their own priorities on the country.

The diverse drama of the presidency offers a fascinating set of tales. Biographies of American presidents constitute a chronicle of wisdom and folly, nobility and pettiness, courage and cunning, forthrightness and deceit, quarrel and consensus. The turmoil perennially swirling around the White House illuminates the heart of the American democracy.

It is the aim of the American Presidents series to present the grand panorama of our chief executives in volumes compact enough for the busy reader, lucid enough for the student, authoritative enough for the scholar. Each volume offers a distillation of character and career. I hope that these lives will give readers some understanding of the pitfalls and potentialities of the presidency and also of the responsibilities of citizenship. Truman’s famous sign—“The buck stops here”—tells only half the story. Citizens cannot escape the ultimate responsibility. It is in the voting booth, not on the presidential desk, that the buck finally stops.

—Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

Introduction

Among the many monuments to the memory of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, perhaps the most striking is the Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas, which more than three hundred thousand people visit each year. It is located in what was once the Texas School Book Depository from which Lee Harvey Oswald waited on November 22, 1963, to shoot at the president's motorcade. The museum is an oddity in itself in its close physical association with Kennedy's death, although the impressive exhibits trace much more than the history of the assassination. But the most memorable (and eerie) moment of a visit to the museum is when visitors turn a corner on the sixth floor and suddenly look out over Dealey Plaza from the window through which Oswald fired his infamous shots. The space is cluttered with boxes, as if it had been on that November afternoon.

Almost equally memorable is the guest book in which visitors have signed their names and identified the towns or cities or countries in which they live. Many of them write comments. Some are tributes to Kennedy himself: "Our greatest President." "Oh how we miss him!" "The greatest man since Jesus Christ." At least as many others write about the assassination itself and what they consider the mendacity of the Warren Commission and the government's effort to hide the conspiracies that lay behind Kennedy's death.

John Kennedy's legacy remains enormous decades later. The reality of his life may not have lived up to his global reputation. But in his short presidency this reticent and pragmatic man became, in the eyes of the world, a charismatic leader who in his life and in his death became a symbol of hope and purpose.

* * *

As a young boy growing up in Washington, D.C., during the Kennedy years, I was entranced by him. His visibility was remarkable—his press conferences, his speeches, his visits across the world that attracted hundreds of thousands of admirers. He was the first president I was old enough to care about, and I devoured stories about him in newspapers, in magazines, and on television. I stood on Capitol Hill in 1961 to watch his inauguration, and I stood on Pennsylvania Avenue in 1963 to see his funeral cortege move slowly to the Capitol Rotunda (while overhearing a transistor radio in the crowd describing the shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald). The drama of his life and the tragedy of his death left an indelible mark on my memory, as it did on millions of people of my generation—and even on many others who were born after he died.

From the beginning, Kennedy's presidency seemed different. He was hugely popular through most of his presidency, described constantly by such words as *charisma*, *grace*, *vigor*, *purpose*. He was young, rich, handsome, witty, eloquent. He published essays, articles, and a book that won a Pulitzer Prize. He had a beautiful wife and charming young children. He brought a kind of exhilaration to Washington. "The capital city, somnolent in the Eisenhower years, had suddenly come alive," Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. wrote of Kennedy in 1965. "The air had been stale and oppressive; now fresh winds were blowing. There was the excitement which comes from the injection of new men and new ideas, the release of energy which occurs when men of ideas have a chance to put them into practice."¹

* * *

A decade later, most historians were treating Kennedy more lightly. In the scholarly rankings of presidents since World War II, Kennedy has tended to rank mostly in the middle of the pack. The political scientist Richard Neustadt—a great admirer of Kennedy—remarked in the 1970s that “I will be just a flicker, forever clouded by the record of his successors. I don’t think history will have much space for John Kennedy.”²

Kennedy’s image did not always match reality. His famous vigor and energy hid serious lifelong illnesses. The image of his attractive family disguised his almost pathological womanizing. His first year in office was, as he himself admitted, a disaster. He was unable to pass most of the legislation he proposed. He was slow to embrace the civil rights movement, conservative in his embrace of Keynesianism, aloof and ineffective in his dealings with Congress. Through much of his presidency he was largely reactive, driven by external events rather than by his own goals. A plan by the Eisenhower administration drove him heedlessly into the fiasco of the Bay of Pigs. A decision by the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, encouraged by what he considered Kennedy’s weakness, drove him into the Cuban missile crisis. A decade of precedent led him reluctantly but decisively into Vietnam. That Kennedy was not always as bold as he wanted the world to believe was not, perhaps, a weakness. His worst decisions were often his boldest ones.

None of this seemed to hurt him politically. His rhetoric almost always got him out of trouble. He promised to “get the country moving again.” He sought a “national purpose.” He asked Americans to sacrifice for the good of all. Americans liked these challenges, even if they did little to meet them. And for much of his presidency, his public approval rating was at 70 percent or more.

Like most presidents, he had good times and bad times, successes and failures. His administration was dominated by the many problems and crises he encountered—in Cuba, Laos, Berlin, and Vietnam, and in Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama. Some of these crises he managed adroitly and, at times, courageously. Others he could not resolve. It would be hard to call him a great president, but neither was he a failure. He contributed to a reshaping of the Cold War, making it somewhat less dangerous and somewhat more manageable. His presidency launched dramatic new programs: civil rights bill, Medicare, the outlines of the War on Poverty. None of them became law in his lifetime. But all of them became law after his death, and in part because of it. Perhaps most surprising of all, John Kennedy—who almost never revealed passion—seemed to many people a passionate and idealistic liberal. “For a time we felt the country was ours,” Norman Mailer said after his death. “Now it’s theirs again.”³ But Mailer missed the point. In his lifetime Kennedy was never “ours,” but neither was he “theirs.” Only after his death did he become the property of the world.

The Irish Prince

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was born into an Irish American world that his family helped change forever. For generations, Americans of Irish descent had faced almost insuperable boundaries to their aspirations. Until the first decades of the twentieth century, most Irish Americans lived in insular communities and were largely excluded from many professions. They attended Catholic schools and—for those who chose to enter politics—ran for office in Irish wards and won votes from mostly Irish voters. Rarely did they attract support from outside their own communities. But the two families who gave birth to the first Irish American president broke new ground.

One of John Kennedy's grandfathers, John F. Fitzgerald, was himself a politician who crossed the boundaries that had limited Irish American ambitions. He was a charming, garrulous, energetic man who graduated from Boston College, enrolled briefly at Harvard Medical School, and was elected to Congress in 1894. Twelve years later, he became the first Irish American mayor of Boston, serving three terms between 1906 and 1914. For years, he remained one of the best-known political figures in the city. (He lived long enough to see his grandson elected to Congress, and he predicted that he would become president.) Fitzgerald's wife and second cousin, Mary Josephine Hannon, gave birth to six children. The eldest of them was Rose Elizabeth Fitzgerald, born in 1890.¹

The future president's other grandfather was Patrick J. Kennedy, who left school at fourteen to support his large and struggling family. But despite his scant education and his impoverished beginnings, he saved his earnings and bought a small string of taverns and bars. Later he opened a liquor importing company and later still bought substantial interests in a coal company and a bank—enterprises that made him a wealthy and substantial figure in the Irish American community. His wife, Mary Hickey, was herself the daughter of a prosperous tavern owner. She had four children—among them Joseph P. Kennedy, born in 1888.²

Rose Fitzgerald and Joseph Kennedy were exceptional young people within this enclosed world. Rose's eminent political family made her something of a celebrity at a young age. She attended elite Catholic schools and took an extensive tour of Europe. By the age of eighteen she had abandoned her early hopes to attend Wellesley College to join her father's political life.³

Joe Kennedy, although from a less eminent family than Rose's, was more ambitious—and more successful—than almost anyone else in the Irish community. He attended the prestigious Boston Latin School, graduated from Harvard, and moved into banking. By the age of twenty-five, he was the president of Columbia Trust, a modest bank in which his father had once invested. Joe quickly doubled its accounts.⁴

Rose and Joe had become attracted to each other as early as 1906, when she was sixteen and he eighteen. Rose's father had another suitor in mind for his daughter—a wealthy contractor and friend of the family—and Fitzgerald tried for years to keep her apart from Joe. But Rose found Joe a much more compelling figure than her father's choice, and she wore him down. They were married in 1911 and they broke with tradition by moving to a house in Brookline, then an almost entirely Protestant community. Their first son, Joseph Patrick Kennedy Jr., was born in 1915. Two years later, on May 2

* * *

Life in the Kennedy family was dominated by Joe's social ambitions and his spectacular financial success. His marriage to the mayor's daughter was only one of many steps that would lead him and his children well beyond the Irish world in which they were born. Joe was smart, ambitious, and often ruthless—determined not only to accumulate wealth but also to gain power. Banking, he believed, was the key to the kind of success he sought. "I saw, even in my limited dealings, that sooner or later, the source of business was traced to the banks," he wrote later. Banking, he claimed, "could lead a man anywhere, as it played an important part in every business."⁶

It was not just power and wealth he sought. He could have had a prosperous career as the most eminent Irish banker in the city, but he aspired to rise higher. He wanted to move into the great world of finance—a world dominated by old Yankee families in Boston and New York. World War I interrupted his plans. He left the bank and became a manager of war production at the Bethlehem steel yards in Quincy, Massachusetts. When the army tried to draft him, the Bethlehem executives fought to keep him, calling him indispensable. His success in a world of Yankee businessmen helped draw him into larger and larger worlds. "The key to Kennedy's spectacular financial success," one of his colleagues later said, "was his anticipation of the future ... his vision of what lay down the road, a vision that was always there, sustaining him and guiding him—that vision was simply phenomenal." In the heady days of the stock market boom in the 1920s, he joined a Brahmin brokerage house, where he expanded his connections in the financial world and became one of the canniest and most successful investors of his era. By 1927, he had relocated his family to Riverdale, just north of Manhattan, where he could be closer to Wall Street. Even before the family's move, he had accumulated over \$2 million, which was only the beginning of his extraordinary rise.

Joe's remarkable success created problems for Rose. She wanted an ordered and respectable domesticity. But Joe was not much of a partner in the home—traveling constantly, working late, and always looking for new connections and new opportunities. That left Rose alone in a large and complicated home. By the early 1930s, there were nine children: Joe Jr., Jack, Rosemary, Kathleen, Eunice, Pat, Bobby, Jean, and Ted. It was a loud, boisterous, and at times chaotic household that never lived up to Rose's hopes—perhaps in part because Rose herself was either pregnant or recovering from pregnancy for the first seventeen years of her marriage. After the family moved to Riverdale, they retained a foothold in Massachusetts. Joe purchased a large property in Hyannis Port that became the family's most enduring home. The celebrated pictures of the Kennedy family in later years—sailing off the coast of Cape Cod, playing touch football on the lawn—were a reminder of decades of outdoor activity and competitive sports. Long before the Kennedys became politically active, the family had already become among the most famous Irish American families in America—a result of Joe's enormous and conspicuous wealth, and also because of the attractive image of the Kennedy tribe.⁸

But the attractive, even idyllic, images of this apparently golden family disguised its share of troubles. Rose remained overwhelmed by her large family, particularly after their first daughter, Rosemary, was diagnosed as mildly retarded. Rose had few friends and few activities in New York beyond taking care of her growing family. She distanced herself from her husband sexually except for procreation and traveled extensively around America and Europe to escape the pressures of home. His absence dismayed her children (and especially Jack). Joe Sr. was still mostly away, traveling on business and expanding his business empire—including an investment in the movie industry. He also

maintained an extramarital sexual life—most conspicuously with the actress Gloria Swanson. The children grew up supervised for long periods by servants and relatives.⁹

Rosemary aside, Jack had the most difficult life of the family. He was under the shadow of his older brother, Joe Jr., who was the recipient of his father's greatest hopes. Jack developed a competitive relationship with his older brother, who almost always won whatever contests they waged. But a more important part of his youth—and indeed of much of his life—was the long history of illness that began shortly after birth. He was restless and fitful even as a baby, had trouble digesting milk, and suffered frequent stomachaches. By the time he was three, he had experienced scarlet fever, causing his mother “frantic terror” and leading his father to spend hours praying (uncharacteristically in the Catholic Church, which he rarely attended).¹⁰ This frightening illness was followed by other debilitating diseases (chicken pox, ear infections, and undiagnosed stomach, intestinal, and other ailments that made it difficult for him to eat and sometimes left him so weak that he could hardly stand). Sickness plagued him into adolescence and beyond, baffling his doctors, his family, and Jack himself. For months at a time, he was gaunt, pale, and weak. Multiple and often mistaken diagnoses added to his ordeal. Treatment for one problem created problems elsewhere, and there was no definitive explanation of what ailed him. Jack liked to joke about his frequent illnesses, and he tried to disguise the pain and fear that he often felt. But there were also periods of near despair, especially when he was in hospitals for weeks, submitting to endless tests, and still failing to get any answers about what his problems were.¹¹

His illnesses inevitably affected his schooling. Shortly after the family's move to New York, Jack was enrolled in the Riverdale Country School. But at the age of thirteen, with his grades at an undistinguished C+ average, his parents decided he should go to boarding school. Rose Kennedy was especially eager to get the boys out of the house because she felt so overwhelmed by her many children. Jack expected to follow Joe Jr. to Choate, the distinguished boarding school in Wallingford, Connecticut, but Rose—on her own—decided in the fall of 1930 to send him instead to Canterbury, a Catholic school for boys in New Milford, Connecticut. He suffered there not only from his chronic ailments but also from homesickness. He complained to his family about the “whole lot of religion” and the isolation of the school. (“The only time you can get out of here is to see the Harvard-Yale and Army-Yale [games].”)¹² Much of the time he was in the local hospital, and he spent the last months of the academic year at home, with tutors.¹³

The following fall, he enrolled at Choate, which he found more tolerable because his brother Joe was already there. Jack remained a lackluster student. He was constantly reprimanded by his teachers and the headmaster, who considered him “one of the most undependable boys” in his grade. He lacked “application.” He was “careless” with his work. He was notoriously “casual and disorderly” in school committed to order.¹⁴ He insisted that he was “trying to be a more socially minded person.” Everyone agreed that he was intelligent, but that made his scholarly “mediocrity” all the more damning.¹⁶ Inattention was only one of his problems, for he fell victim soon again to his puzzling and often debilitating illnesses. At one point, according to his lifelong friend Lem Billings, he “came very close to dying.”¹⁷ He was in and out of the infirmary and local hospitals, trying to lead a normal life and struggling to keep up with his work. Through it all, he forced himself to remain cheerful, funny, and almost irresistibly charming. “I've never known anyone in my life with such a wonderful humor—the ability to make one laugh and have a good time,” Billings once wrote.¹⁸ “Jack didn't like to be too serious,” the Choate headmaster said long after Jack left the school. “He had a delightful sense of humor always ... He was a very likeable person, very lovable.”¹⁹

Living in the shadow of his older brother was difficult. Joe excelled in athletics, discipline, and

leadership. Jack could not compete. He did not like Choate very much more than he had liked Canterbury, and he often described it as a prison. But he made his way through his school years with garrulous charm and wit. It was not surprising that his jokes were often dark, because his health continued to deteriorate. He spent weeks at the Mayo Clinic, where he submitted to what seemed endless, humiliating tests. But as usual in his letters to Billings he treated it all as a joke. “I’m still eating peas and corn for food and I had an enema given by a beautiful blonde,” he wrote. “That, my sweet, is the height of cheap thrills.”²⁰

Partly to compensate for his inability to thrive in sports or academics, he developed a new sexual prowess that lasted through the rest of his life. Like his father, he treated sex as a kind of sport—casual, frequent, mostly unconnected to affection or romance. Most of his trysts were one-night stands, and he sometimes forgot the names of his sexual partners. The constricted world of Choate did not make sexual activity easy, but he found ways to get around the boundaries of the school in the same way he got around his illnesses.²¹

Jack’s disaffection—his illnesses, his poor academic performance, and his disdain for the stuffy traditions of the school—led him to join a group of similarly alienated students to form “the Mucker Club.” (*Mucker* was a term coined by the faculty to describe rebellious students with little respect for the “Choate culture.” Jack’s father, somewhat in sympathy with his son, later noted that if he had organized the club, its name would not have begun with an *M*.) The Muckers composed and sang vaguely obscene songs, sometimes about teachers. They organized pranks that mocked the staid habits of the school. The headmaster called them “a colossally selfish, pleasure loving, unperceptive group” and nearly expelled the entire group. Rose Kennedy, horrified by Jack’s rebelliousness, liked to believe that this confrontation with the headmaster was a turning point in his life—that he had learned to respect authority and to live by the norms of the school. But Jack was far from tamed. He avoided the more dangerous behavior that had created trouble for the Muckers, but he could not resist a final challenge to the Choate establishment by launching a successful campaign for the title of “Most Likely to Succeed,” using his popularity to defeat the more obvious candidates.²²

* * *

Jack’s path to college was as rocky as his path through prep school had been. He enrolled at Harvard for the fall of 1935, then withdrew before the term began to go to England to spend a year at the London School of Economics. But the onset of another mysterious illness, and his disappointment with the LSE, drew him back to America, where—weeks after the term had begun—he enrolled at Princeton, primarily because Lem Billings and other friends were already there. His enthusiasm for Princeton soon cooled. He found it provincial and oppressive—with its Protestantism, its small-town environs, and its eating-club culture that did not often welcome Catholics. “I think he was a little disenchanted with the country-club atmosphere of Princeton,” one of his friends later wrote.²³

Before he finished his first term, he was rushed to Boston and was hospitalized with yet another apparently undiagnosable illness. After weeks of invasive and humiliating tests—“the most harrowing experience of all my storm-tossed career,” he wrote to Billings—he was diagnosed with leukemia. “Took a peek at my chart yesterday and could see that they were mentally measuring me for a coffin,” he reported.²⁴ But he refused to take the diagnosis seriously. He was vindicated when the doctors finally admitted that they had been in error. He spent the rest of his aborted academic year trying to restore himself to health—through vacations at Palm Beach, a few Teddy Roosevelt–like months on a ranch in Arizona, and a libidinous week in Los Angeles. In the summer of 1936, he was accepted again to Harvard. “To be a ‘Harvard Man’ is an enviable distinction,” he wrote on his application.²⁵ The

Admissions Committee said of him, “Jack has rather superior mental ability, without the deep interest in his studies ... He can be relied upon to do enough to pass.”²⁶ His father wrote the dean saying much the same: “Jack has a very brilliant mind for the things he is interested in, but is careless and lacks application in those in which he is not interested. This is, of course, a bad fault.”²⁷

He was happier at Harvard than he had been at any of his former schools. Although he left behind his closest friend, Lem Billings, he found new friends at Harvard—many of them through his older brother. Joe Jr. was, as usual, serious, ambitious, and hot-tempered, always striving to attract the admiration of his father. His greatest ambition was to win a Harvard football letter, a goal he never achieved. Jack was more easygoing. In better health than he had been in some time, he tried out for football himself but never expected to remain on the team. He was also an avid swimmer and boxer. As at Choate, he was a popular figure among his contemporaries—witty, lively, irreverent, and highly social. He was a more serious student in his first year at Harvard than he had been at Choate or Princeton. His mediocre grades obscured his avid reading, especially during his frequent hospital stays. (He remained a fervent reader, especially of history, throughout his life.)²⁸

Despite his mother’s belief that Jack’s near-expulsion from Choate was a defining moment in his life, a more plausible turning point was his summer-long European trip in 1937 after his freshman year at Harvard. He and Billings sailed to Europe on July 1 and returned in September—the longest trip either of them had ever made. It revealed the multiple roles that were coming to shape Jack’s young life. He was the privileged and dutiful son, who traveled with his way paved by his father’s meetings with statesmen and audiences with the pope and with Cardinal Pacelli (soon to become Pope Pius XII). Joe Kennedy’s friends and colleagues assisted him everywhere he went. Jack was also the reckless playboy, chasing fun, and women, in bars and cafés in Paris, the Riviera, and Biarritz. He was also becoming a serious and ambitious student of the political world. He kept a diary of the places he visited, showing a particular interest in the fascist countries. He was eager to see Spain, but the civil war there prevented him from entering the country. Instead, he sought out soldiers fleeing into France and asked them questions about the fighting. Kennedy and Billings found Italy impressive, prosperous and orderly (“Fascism seems to treat them well,” Jack wrote of the Italians).²⁹ In Germany, Billings wrote that they both “had a terrible feeling about ... the ‘Heil Hitler’ stuff.”³⁰ Jack was more ambivalent. He too hated the German arrogance and deplored the growing persecution of the Jews, but he was impressed by what he considered German efficiency. “All the towns are very attractive,” he recorded in his diary, “showing that the Nordic races certainly seem superior to the Latins. The Germans really are too good—it makes people gang against them for protection.”³¹ “Isn’t the chance of war less as Britain gets stronger?” Jack wrote after his return to Harvard. “Or is a country like Italy liable to go to war when economic discontent is rife? Wouldn’t Mussolini go if there was a war—as is all likelihood Italy would be defeated in a major war?”³² These questions would increase his serious study of history and politics.

Back at college in the fall, Jack was at least as eager to be a social success as to be a successful student. His greatest ambition in his sophomore year was to be elected to one of the university’s exclusive final clubs. Neither his father nor his brother had succeeded in getting elected to a club—largely because of anti-Irish prejudice. But Jack worked hard to be accepted. Despite his uncertain health, he continued to try out for football and the junior varsity swimming team, but failed to win letters. He became a member of the Hasty Pudding Club and wrote occasionally for the *Harvard Crimson*. But his most important strength was his popularity. His loyal friends helped him get elected to the Spee Club. He so valued his acceptance that he spent almost all of his free time in the elegant clubhouse.³³

After a term taking courses in political science and international relations (and receiving better grades than in the past), he took a leave in the spring of 1939, his junior year, to do research for his senior thesis. But his thesis took second place to a great event in the Kennedy family. His father had been appointed the United States ambassador to Great Britain in 1938. It was a position of particular pride to Joe given the long tradition of Anglo-Saxon appointments of ambassadors. Jack was drawn to England for research for his thesis topic. But he was also drawn to the dazzling new life of his family in London. Jack toured the capitals of eastern Europe and the Middle East, cared for at each stop by American diplomats. He spent much of his time in Paris, “living like a king” and staying at the American embassy.³⁴ The beleaguered diplomats working feverishly in the shadow of war were often irritated to have to serve the needs of what seemed a pampered son of a wealthy and powerful man. But they gave him material and arranged interviews, nevertheless. Jack also found time, as he always did, for “recreation”—including a luxurious September vacation in Antibes, where he learned of the outbreak of war.³⁵ He returned to Harvard as determined as before to understand the crisis in Europe.

Joe Kennedy, like most Americans, was opposed to U.S. intervention in the European war. And, not surprisingly, Jack shared Joe’s belief that neither Britain nor America was equipped to defeat Germany. Jack argued for a negotiated end to the war, mediated by President Franklin Roosevelt, which would allow the Third Reich to survive and grow but would permit Britain and France to remain independent. With this unpromising premise, Jack began to write his senior thesis, which he called “Appeasement at Munich.” Characteristically, he enlisted help from a network of helpers: his father’s diplomatic colleagues, who scoured libraries and research centers in Britain for materials to send him; research assistants, who did his legwork in Harvard’s Widener Library; typists and stenographers, who helped him write the manuscript.³⁶

The final draft of his thesis was respectable and impressively ambitious—better than most of his earlier, mostly undistinguished academic work. His advisers admired the importance of the topic and the intelligence that went into the thesis. But it was also cumbersome, with a somewhat muddled argument and a text filled with grammatical and punctuation errors. Some of his readers found it excessively wordy, and none of them imagined it to be a significant work of scholarship. “Badly written, but a laborious, interesting, and intelligent discussion of a difficult question,” his adviser wrote. He received a magna cum laude grade for the effort.³⁷

The thesis had two major assets. One was its timing. He finished it in the midst of a global crisis and despite its weaknesses it addressed a critical question: “Why was England so poorly prepared for the war?” The other asset was his connections—the efforts by his father and many colleagues and friends who gathered around on Jack’s behalf and helped him make a “typical undergraduate effort (as one historian wrote at the time) into a published book.”³⁸ Jack, somewhat presumptuously but characteristically, drew distinguished people to his assistance. “Arthur Krock ... feels that I should get it published,” he wrote his father.³⁹ Krock, an eminent columnist for the *New York Times* with many lucrative ties to Joe Kennedy, helped rewrite the thesis (how substantially is not known) and provided a new title—*Why England Slept*, derived from a contemporaneous book title of Winston Churchill, *While England Slept*.⁴⁰

Jack, for his part, revised his argument about Britain’s lack of preparedness. Originally, he had said that the British public was the source of the problem because voters were unwilling to support strengthening the military. Democracy “may be a great system of government to live in internally,” he wrote, “but its weaknesses are great.”⁴¹ In the book, Jack shifted more of the blame to British leadership—Prime Ministers Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain, both friends of Joe Kennedy. He was moving away from his father’s increasingly controversial views. Even as most American

were becoming more supportive of Britain, Joe was becoming an increasingly entrenched isolationist. Without informing Washington, Joe was looking for compromises with Hitler, even unsuccessfully seeking meetings with him. By November 1940, President Roosevelt recalled Joe from London—creating a deep and permanent rift between them and destroying what Joe had hoped would be a dazzling political career.

Jack, however, was moving along with most of the public toward a belief in the importance of supporting the war against Germany. He never openly repudiated his father, but he slowly distanced himself from Joe's unpopular stances on the war. His increasing internationalism encouraged Krock to provide Jack with an agent, who passed the manuscript around through many rejections until the small publishing house of Wilfred Funk agreed to publish it. The publishers were much encouraged by an admiring introduction from Henry R. Luce, the publisher of *Time*, *Fortune*, and *Life* magazines. Luce cannot recall a single man of my college graduation," Luce wrote, "who could have written such an *adult* book on such a vitally important subject during his Senior year at college."⁴² By then, the writing was smoother, the argument clearer. But its timeliness may have been its most important strength. The book was well reviewed and widely read. It helped establish Jack Kennedy—after years of mediocrity at multiple schools—as a serious thinker and an emerging leader of his generation.⁴³

At the core of *Why England Slept* were Jack's first significant steps toward the muscular vision of American power that would characterize his future career. Jack stopped short of advocating American intervention in the war (although he was beginning to see it as inevitable). He made a strong case that Britain and the United States could become together the great world powers to defend against the spread of totalitarianism. But most of all, he laid out what he considered the great challenge to democracy. How can a free society mobilize its citizens for war? How can it "compete with the new totalitarian system based on an economy of rigid state control?"⁴⁴ Britain's failure to prepare, Luce wrote, was in part "a great lack of young progressive and able leaders"—a statement that irritated some of Joe's friends in the diplomatic corps.⁴⁵ But again and again, Jack returned to the "weaknesses" of democracy in the face of crisis. Dictators, he warned, have almost always been ahead of democracies in preparing for war. "To say that democracy has been awakened by [the fall of France] ... is not enough. Any person will awaken when the house is burning down. What we need is an armed guard that will wake up when the fire first starts, or better yet, one that will not permit a fire to start at all."⁴⁶

It was a measure of how little intellectual power had been targeted toward the strengthening of democracy against totalitarianism that a young college graduate could attract so much attention to his modest book. But it was also an early sign of what would become a hallmark of Kennedy's mature career: his strong belief in the importance of a robust democracy for what he later called the "long twilight struggle" against the growing power of the communist world.

* * *

The success of his book did little to settle Kennedy's plans. He briefly considered enrolling in law school. He spent a few months at Stanford University, hoping to improve his once-again deteriorating health and applying to Stanford Law School (as he had done at Yale Law School before). He traveled with his family and vacationed at Hyannis Port. But like many other young men in the year before Pearl Harbor, he was waiting for what he now understood to be the inevitability of America joining the war. He worried that his poor health would bar him from the military, and his fears were justified when he failed the physical exams for both the army and the navy in early 1941. But a few months later, Joe Kennedy arranged for another physical exam for his son, this time clearly rigged, that four

no serious health issues. In October, he entered the Office of Naval Intelligence in Washington.⁴⁷

The work was dull, he told Billings, but he was enjoying an active social life, including his first serious romance—a relationship with a Danish journalist, Inga Arvad, who had become a friend of Jack's sister Kathleen. Arvad was a beautiful woman (rumored to have been a Miss Denmark). She was a few years older than Jack. She was married, but in the process of divorce—a fact that, had Rose Kennedy known, would have horrified her. More important, however, were the growing rumors that Arvad was a spy—a rumor that had emerged from her assignment as the German correspondent for a Danish paper and her appearance in a few photographs with Hitler and Göring. There was no evidence that she was engaged in espionage, but the likelihood of a scandal grew once the FBI became interested. With Joe Kennedy's encouragement, the navy quickly moved Jack out of Naval Intelligence and to the navy yard at Charleston, South Carolina, leaving Arvad behind. The relationship soon ended painfully.⁴⁸

By then, the United States was at war with the Axis powers, and Jack was eager to be assigned to combat duty. New bouts of illness—severe back problems, continuing stomach problems, and other ailments, some of them hidden from the naval doctors—kept him out of active duty. But in July 1942 he entered midshipman's school to train as a combat officer.

His hope was to be the commander of a PT boat, a small and flimsy wooden craft that carried torpedoes and searched for Japanese vessels to attack. It was a prestigious assignment for a young novice officer, in part because of the heroic record of earlier PT commanders and in part because of the danger in serving on the fragile boats. Jack's health problems seemed almost certain to bar him from active duty. But his father intervened, once again providing more misleading medical records and convincing the PT officers that his presence would bring publicity to the fleet. That was not the last of the influential interventions that helped Jack on his way. Unhappy to be assigned to the Panama Canal, far from the fighting, Jack appealed to Senator David Walsh of Massachusetts, who arranged for him to be assigned to the South Pacific. Jack believed it was his duty to fight. He also knew that action in the war would help him in whatever career he might choose. In his competitively achievement-oriented family, it was almost unthinkable for him to spend the war anywhere but the front.⁴⁹

In the spring of 1943, Kennedy took command of PT 109 and soon found himself in a fleet of fifteen PT boats sent to torpedo a Japanese fleet trying to escape from the American navy. The attack was disastrous. The PT boats failed to damage any of the Japanese ships. One night, Kennedy's boat—alone without radio or radar communication in the dark of night—was idling with only one of three engines running as it awaited the enemy. Suddenly, a Japanese destroyer, fleeing the U.S. attack, appeared out of the dark on a direct path to PT 109. Kennedy had no time to move his sluggish, underpowered boat out of the destroyer's way, and the Japanese ship cut the U.S. craft in half—killing two of Jack's crew, with the remaining men clinging to the hull of the boat or floating aimlessly around it. Kennedy swam out to help guide the remaining men back to the hull, surrounded by machine gun fires, tugging a badly injured sailor with him. By the early afternoon of the next day, with the hull slowly sinking, Kennedy organized his men in groups to head toward the nearest island. It was a five-hour swim, during which he continued to drag his injured crewman with him, fighting exhaustion. The remaining crew made it to shore. When they encountered an English-speaking native with a canoe, Jack carved his location on a coconut shell and requested a boat to rescue them. Seven days after the collision, with the coconut message delivered, they were once again on a PT boat returning to the base.

Almost immediately, the PT 109 rescue became a highly publicized event—driven by the drama of

the crew's harrowing ordeal and the eminence of Kennedy's family. (Headlines almost invariably referred to him as "Kennedy's Son.") The story of his heroism became a staple of the press for weeks after his rescue, enhanced by his famous family. John Hersey chronicled the PT 109 story in the *New Yorker* in 1944 (decades later it was the basis of a successful film); Hersey portrayed Jack as a modest, self-deprecating hero.⁵⁰

Absent from these accounts were elements that did not fit with either Jack's or Hersey's need. Jack's heroic rescue of the crew might have been even more impressive if his physical problems had become part of the story, but he had hidden his pain when he joined the navy and had no wish to reveal his chronic illness and his deceptive health report. Hersey also ignored the murky circumstances that led to the destruction of Kennedy's PT boat and ignored criticisms, many of them unfair, that—according to Jack's superior officer later said—"he wasn't a particularly good boat commander."⁵¹ It was everyone's interest to shape the story as a tale of heroism and survival. Jack himself did little to tone down his sudden fame. He had no need to do so. His shipmates, the navy, the press, and his father did it for him.

* * *

Only ten days after his rescue, Jack returned to duty, back on PT boats. But by December 1943, his health was deteriorating again, and he was ready to go home. His doctors agreed. He left the Pacific front in December, arrived in San Francisco in early January, and a few days later checked into the Mayo Clinic once again, the beginning of several months of off-and-on hospitalization to deal with his many problems. The worst, as usual, was his back—a problem that was not caused by the PT 109 ordeal (although it had aggravated the already-existing pain), nor by playing football at Harvard (as his mother told reporters). It was an earlier chronic problem made worse by several failed operations and frequent treatments with steroids. But he received a much greater blow that summer. On August 12, 1944, Joseph P. Kennedy Jr.—Jack's brother, role model, and avid competitor—piloted a bomber dangerously packed with TNT destined for Germany. The plane exploded before it left Britain. Joe's body was never recovered.⁵²

The death devastated the family. Joe Sr. was inconsolable. For weeks, he stayed alone in his room in Hyannis Port, hardly seeing his wife and children. When he emerged from his solitude, he was a broken and embittered man who blamed his son's death on Roosevelt's march to war. Joe Sr. may also have feared that his son had taken this terrible risk in part to help restore his father's reputation. Jack was shattered too, perhaps worried that Joe's reckless flight was partly an effort to outdo him ("Where the hell were you when the destroyer hove into sight ... and where the hell was your radar?") Joe Jr. had written Jack after reading the Hersey *New Yorker* article, still competing.)⁵³ To console himself, Jack set out to assemble a privately published book of remembrances of his brother, *As We Remember Joe*.⁵⁴

In the face of his grief over Joe's death, the end of his active duty in the war, the loss of his relationship with Inga Arvad, and his continuing health problems, Jack was uncertain what to do next. He was officially discharged from the navy in March 1945, somewhat aimless. A few months later, he traveled to San Francisco to write for the Hearst newspapers about the creation of the United Nations. And shortly after that he flew to Britain to begin a tour of Europe that, once again, drew him into the world of politics and diplomacy.⁵⁵

He kept a diary of his experiences. He was skeptical of the United Nations treaty, which "suffered from inadequate preparation and lack of fundamental agreement among the Big Three ... I doubt it will prove effective."⁵⁶ In Britain, he followed Winston Churchill's doomed campaign for reelection

noting that the Labour victory was “a good thing” because it would require the party to make peace with capitalism.⁵⁷ In Ireland, he was disturbed by reports of President Eamon de Valera’s wartime hostility to Britain. And he joined a tour of the postwar ruins of Germany with Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal. He was impressed by the “perfect” discipline of the American occupation troops, and he noted the disappointment of Germans that the U.S. Army had not occupied eastern Germany before the Russians did: “One opinion here is that the Russians are never going to pull out of their zone of occupation but plan to make their part of Germany a Soviet Socialist Republic.”⁵⁸ But he was not uncritical of the American troops in Germany either. “Americans looted towns heavily on arrival,” he noted. He was fascinated by his visit to Hitler’s destroyed home in Berchtesgaden, and he was strangely interested in Hitler himself.

You can easily understand how that within a few years Hitler will emerge from the hatred that surrounds him now as one of the most significant figures who ever lived.

He had boundless ambition for his country which rendered him a menace to the peace of the world, but he had a mystery about him in the way that he lived and in the manner of his death that will live and grow after him. He had in him the stuff of which legends are made.⁵⁹

Kennedy was not an admirer of Hitler. But this strange diary entry suggests his interest in the exercise of power—an interest that almost allowed Hitler’s historical importance to overshadow the horrors of his regime.

Kennedy returned from Europe still uncertain about what to do with his life, but gradually dawned on him that his future might be in politics. Joe Jr.’s death inevitably elevated Jack to become the carrier of the family’s hopes. Despite Joe Sr.’s doubts about his second son’s political skills, he began encouraging him to take Joe Jr.’s place and run for office. Jack was skeptical at first, but he soon began thinking about a political career himself. He had considered and rejected a career in the law. He had tried journalism and decided it was not for him. (“A reporter is reporting what happens. He is not *making* it happen,” he said years later.)⁶⁰ “Nothing could have kept Jack out of politics,” Leo Billings wrote. “I think this is what he had in him.”⁶¹ Jack had spent his young years thinking about and studying politics and international relations, and he was now beginning to consider a life dealing with the great challenges facing the country in the aftermath of the war.

Jack may not have needed pressure from his father to choose a career in politics, but he continued to need Joe Sr. to make that career possible. Late in 1944, Joe began quietly negotiating with James Michael Curley, the colorful former mayor of Boston who was now serving in Congress. Curley, now for the first time, was having trouble with both money and the law. Kennedy offered to pay off Curley’s debts and help him with his legal problems in exchange for vacating his seat in the House of Representatives. Jack may not have known about his father’s intervention with Curley, but he understood that without his father’s help the likelihood of political success would be slim. “I just called people,” Joe later told a journalist asking about the beginnings of Jack’s political life. “I got in touch with people I know. I have a lot of contacts.”⁶² In December 1944, his father’s support assured Jack wrote Billings, “I have my eyes on something pretty good now if it comes through.”⁶³

The Uncertain Politician

As Jack Kennedy took his first steps into electoral politics, he was surrounded by the doubts of many friends and family members who were worried about his suitability for public life. He was not yet an effective public speaker; audiences found him awkward, stiff, and insecure. When he mingled with voters (which he was reluctant to do), he seemed aloof and uncomfortable. He was careless with his schedule; audiences were often left waiting an hour or more. His health remained poor, and he seemed to lack the strength for a rigorous campaign. When asked about why he was running for office, Jack often said that he was taking over from his brother Joe. Most of the people who became part of Jack's first campaign for Congress in 1946 were chosen by his father. They saw his son as a work in progress. Despite his achievements—the well-regarded book, the impressive war record, the prominent name—he remained a young, inexperienced political unknown. His opponents ridiculed him as a carpetbagging rich kid with no qualifications other than his father's money.¹

But Jack had qualities that were not immediately visible. In the absence of his intimidating parents, he could be a charming, magnetic, sociable figure. He had a large circle of loyal and admiring friends from Choate, Harvard, the navy, and other places. In many ways, he was a more appealing young man than his serious, competitive, and temperamental older brother. And like other young men entering politics in 1946, he had the advantage of a heroic war record—a record already highly publicized (and to some degree romanticized) by an eager press. Once, when he attended a meeting of Charlestown Gold Star Mothers (women who had lost sons in the war), he told them, “I think I know how all your mothers feel because my mother is a Gold Star Mother, too.” The remark seemed to create a “magic link” with the women in the room.²

Jack benefited as well from another and even more important advantage: his father's money and influence. Jack himself paid little attention to how his campaign was being financed. He focused on his speeches, rallies, and meetings. For a while, his grandfather, the former mayor, tried to help organize the campaign, but there was no room for him once Joe Kennedy took over. Joe did the dirty work—distributing money to ward bosses, paying for leaflets and billboards, hiring a public relations firm, creating phone banks. He staged elaborate events, including a vast “tea” at an elegant hotel in Cambridge where members of the Kennedy family—the men dressed in white tie and tails and the women in Paris dresses—stood in line to shake hands with fifteen hundred women. As much as \$300,000 went into Jack's congressional campaign, far more than the money raised by all the other candidates combined. Joe's money remained a critical, indeed indispensable, element of his political rise. “We're going to sell Jack like soap flakes,” Joe Kennedy is said to have boasted. He was “the mastermind” of Jack's campaign, a colleague recalled. “He was completely in charge of every detail.”³

The campaign itself was largely contentless. Jack spoke often about his wartime experiences and the heroism of his navy friends, some of whom joined him at rallies. (Joe reprinted John Hersey's *New Yorker* piece on Jack's PT 109 ordeal and distributed a hundred thousand copies to voters.) Jack was mostly interested in international questions and tried to make the state of the world his principal

theme. But his speeches—despite their occasional eloquence—were vague and unspecific: “The people of the United States and the world stand at the crossroads. What we do now will shape the history of civilization for many years to come. We have a weary world trying to bind up the wounds of a fierce struggle ... The days which lie ahead are most difficult ones.”⁴

Voters in 1946 were more concerned about economic issues, and so Jack began to respond by parroting standard New Deal positions. But the most frequent elements of his campaign were still his youth, his war record, and his slogan: “The New Generation Offers a Leader.”⁵

Jack easily won the Democratic primary for Massachusetts’ Eleventh District. But because of the presence of ten other candidates in the race, he ended up winning with only about 12 percent of the total vote. In the general election, in which Jack was a prohibitive favorite in the heavily Democratic district, he tried to speak more broadly about his goals. In a well-publicized speech, titled “Why I Am a Democrat,” he continued to support the Democratic platform, but he provided new ideas of his own. For example, he relied on his warnings of the dangers of the Soviet Union and its “program of world aggression.” But at this point, it hardly mattered what he said. In the midst of a Republican landslide through most of the country, he won his solidly Democratic congressional seat with 73 percent of the votes.⁶

* * *

The 1946 congressional elections produced Republican majorities. But they also brought a wave of young war veterans into Congress from both parties. Jack Kennedy was one of the most visible of the new crop. There were others who also made names for themselves rapidly—among them Republicans such as Representative Richard Nixon of California and Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin. But unlike Nixon and McCarthy, who would come to prominence for their work in congressional committees, Kennedy had almost no interest in the work of the House. He built a large and competent staff—one of the biggest of any office on the Hill, thanks to his father—which allowed him to evade the many political chores he disliked. He avoided meeting constituents. With the help of his father’s intervention, he became a member of the House Education and Labor Committee and the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee, both of them important and prestigious given the economic turmoil of the transitional years after World War II. But Jack in fact knew little about the work of either committee and came to their meetings late (or not at all). His own constituency was dominated by working-class people about whose needs Kennedy knew or cared little. To whatever degree he paid attention to domestic issues, he mostly denounced deficits and urged Congress to reduce appropriations to make sure there was enough funding for defense. A notable exception was his support for federally supported housing, a major issue in 1946 after the long Depression and wartime slump in construction—although he clumsily alienated the American Legion by denouncing the organization (not inaccurately) as a “legislative drummer boy for the real estate lobby.”⁷ He was reliable but not very ardent opponent of the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which reduced the power of labor unions.

Kennedy remained primarily interested in international affairs, an area in which he had no responsibilities nor influence in Congress. He supported the Truman Doctrine, which laid the foundation of containment—the American response to the Cold War. Even before the end of his first term, he was already planning a statewide campaign—perhaps for governor, perhaps for the Senate. Both of them were up for election in 1948, and he based his plans for higher office on what he considered his strength on international affairs. But Jack abandoned his plans for higher office once it became clear that the odds were strongly against a largely unknown candidate with just one term

experience in the House of Representatives. He easily won reelection to his congressional seat, and dutifully supported legislation that would help his constituents. But his heart was not in it.

* * *

One of the things that distinguished Kennedy from most other representatives was his frequent absences from Washington. He spent long weekends in Hyannis Port (not in the Boston district he represented). He vacationed at the family home in Palm Beach. He traveled to California, Ireland, and England. And as always he spent much time in pursuit of women almost everywhere he went. But it was not only his restlessness that kept him from the Capitol. It was also, as always, his health. His back pain was getting worse. He continued to have multiple illnesses that still defied explanation.

During a 1947 trip to England, he became so ill that he received the last rites of the Catholic Church in a London hospital. But finally a British physician recognized his symptoms. Kennedy was suffering from Addison's disease, a rare and dangerous disorder that is a product of the adrenal glands not producing adequate hormones. Adrenal insufficiency causes multiple problems, which make diagnosis difficult—part of the reason Kennedy's problems went unknown for so long, despite the discovery of the disease in the nineteenth century. The identification of Addison's disease probably saved Kennedy's life. Untreated, it is usually fatal. But regular treatments of cortisone, although not without side effects, could keep the disease under control. And while Kennedy continued to experience severe back pain and other maladies, the life-threatening illnesses that he had experienced for much of his life seemed to recede not long after treatment began. The cortisone also contributed to what appeared to be his ruddy tan and his no-longer-scrawny body.⁸

Throughout his youth, Jack had surrounded himself with many friends. But once he committed himself to politics, he began to withdraw from them. With the exception of Lem Billings and a few others, he saw little of his former friends. Nor did he make many new ones, although he, like most famous people, had many acquaintances who posed as friends. Even in his own family, he had a distant relationship with most of his siblings, who were much younger than he and who had rarely seen Jack during his years in boarding school, college, and the navy. His closest sibling, after Joe Jr.'s death, was his sister Kathleen, who had settled in England during World War II. Her first husband, the Marquess of Hartington, had died during the war. Not long after the war, she began a romance with Peter Fitzwilliam, the eighth Earl Fitzwilliam. Their romance appalled Rose Kennedy, who promised to disown Kathleen should she marry Fitzwilliam, who was in the process of divorce and who was not a Catholic. Kathleen, with Jack's support, continued the relationship despite Rose's threats. But in the spring of 1948, she and Fitzwilliam—despite warnings of perilous weather—insisted on taking a private plane to the south of France. En route in impenetrable weather, they were killed when the plane crashed into a mountain. It was the second grievous loss within the family. Jack spent weeks distracted and depressed. Over time, he would become closer to his younger siblings—especially his sister Eunice and his brother Bobby. But for a while, he felt especially alone.⁹

* * *

In this dark moment of his life, Jack immersed himself as never before in the political world. After he won reelection to his congressional seat easily, he continued to find the work of the House of Representatives often tedious, and he remained a largely absentee congressman. He usually returned to Massachusetts for much of the week, delegating the work of his Washington office to his large and talented staff. He was mostly focused again on a run for statewide office—the U.S. Senate seat that

was up for election in 1952. He began traveling around the state to make himself more familiar outside of his district, and he learned how to communicate more effectively with voters. When he talked about issues, he continued to speak mainly about foreign policy, communism, and the Cold War—subjects that were largely uncontroversial among Massachusetts voters. If anything, he was a more belligerent Cold Warrior than President Harry Truman, the leader of his party. He joined the attack on such China experts as Owen Lattimore, John King Fairbank, and State Department officials for allowing the Chiang Kai-shek regime to fall in October 1949. “What our young men had saved [in the war],” he said, “our diplomats and our president have frittered away.”¹⁰ Kennedy was not an anticommunist demagogue, but for a time he loyally supported his friend Joe McCarthy, whom as late as 1952 he called “a great American patriot.”¹¹ And he voted enthusiastically for the controversial McCarran-Walter Act, which Truman vetoed and liberals deplored. Congress overrode the president’s veto of the law, which required communists to register with the government. And it required the Justice Department to investigate their activities. Such positions would come back to haunt Kennedy years later when he was seeking support from more liberal Democrats.¹²

By early 1952, Kennedy had cleared his path for a Senate race against the Republican incumbent Henry Cabot Lodge, grandson of the powerful Massachusetts senator of the same name who had battled Woodrow Wilson over the League of Nations. Lodge was seeking a fourth Senate term, and he appeared to be a formidable opponent. But he also had significant handicaps. He was the campaign manager for Dwight Eisenhower’s 1952 presidential campaign, which reduced his ability to campaign for his own Senate seat. And his prominent support for Eisenhower had alienated some Massachusetts Republicans who had favored the more conservative Robert Taft for the party’s nomination.

But Lodge faced an even larger disadvantage in 1952: Joe Kennedy. As before, he was active in almost every aspect of his son’s campaign—sometimes unknown to the candidate himself. He organized his own, invisible campaign organization for Jack, largely separate from the public one. Joe’s lifelong aides quietly managed Jack’s appearances, published and distributed campaign materials, and most of all helped distribute the money that flowed to committees and interest groups that could turn out voters. Joe fired one of Jack’s most trusted aides and replaced him with Jack’s younger brother Robert—who quickly became a capable and indispensable political organizer in his own right. Bobby soon replaced Joe as the most visible campaign manager. But Joe did not rest. He quietly persuaded the publisher of the *New Bedford Standard-Times*, which had supported Taft, to urge conservative Republicans to vote for Jack. He also secretly met with John Fox, the publisher of the *Boston Post*, who had already promised to endorse Lodge. Joe persuaded him to change his mind. Shortly after the meeting, Joe provided the financially strapped Fox with a half-million-dollar loan.¹³

Jack complained occasionally about the role his father played in his campaign, but given his own lackadaisical campaigning style, he had little choice but to cede virtually all responsibility to his father. He almost never asked where the money came from or how it was spent. And he continued to use his family as props for his appearances.¹⁴

The careful, lavish efforts by Joe Kennedy and his colleagues were almost certainly decisive in Jack’s narrow victory over Lodge in 1952—a 3 percent margin of victory, about seventy thousand votes. But it was an impressive triumph nonetheless. He had defeated one of the most prominent Republicans in the nation, and he had done so despite the Eisenhower landslide and the Republican landslide in congressional elections across the country. “I kept thinking about my father,” Robert Kennedy said in an interview years later remembering John Fitzgerald, the former mayor. “In my mind, I kept picturing him as a little boy, huddled in the servants’ quarters at old Henry Cabot Lodge home as he warmed his shivering body from the cold of his newspaper route. In his wildest dream

that winter's night, could he ever have imagined how far both he and his family would come."¹⁵ For Rose, and to a significant extent for Joe, Jack's victory was a vindication—a kind of revenge for all the many years of anti-Irish bigotry and for the invidious and humiliating limits imposed on Irish families. To Jack, however, such long-standing grievances meant almost nothing. As the son of a wealthy and powerful man, he took for granted the cosseted life he had led and his easy assimilation into the world of the American aristocracy. Rarely did he reminisce about the old days of his Irish family. Instead, he looked forward.

* * *

Even as he moved toward becoming a United States senator, Jack was slow to grow up. He continued to rely mainly on a few close friends, Lem Billings still among them. He maintained his almost sophomoric ribald humor, his penchant for wild evenings, and his obsessive womanizing. There was a sense of detachment from the world he had chosen to enter. Nigel Hamilton, the author of a partly admiring study of Kennedy's early years, concluded: "He had the brains, the courage, the shrewdness, the charisma, good looks, idealism, money. Yet, as always, there was something missing—a certain depth or seriousness of purpose ... Once the voters or the women were won, there was a certain vacuousness on Jack's part, a failure to turn conquest into anything very meaningful or profound."¹⁶

But while Kennedy never fully overcame his recklessness and detachment, he became a more serious person as he moved up the ladder of his aspirations. His health was still precarious, but he was no longer a young man who half expected to die within a few years. Evidence of the change was his decision to marry.

Jacqueline Bouvier seemed an unlikely match for Jack Kennedy. She was aristocratic, fashionable, socially sophisticated, interested in art and literature. Jack, even though he was twelve years older, continued to live in many ways like a college student. He shared a house with male friends. He had few of Jacqueline's intellectual interests, just as she had few of his political ones. They met in 1951 through friends of the family. Despite their differences, they shared many things. The Bouvier family was aristocratic, but without great wealth. The Kennedy family was perhaps not yet quite aristocratic but enormously wealthy. Both had grown up with powerful fathers who dominated their lives and whose philandering humiliated their mothers—in Jacqueline's case, driving her mother into a second marriage to Hugh Auchincloss, a wealthy oil heir.

Jacqueline was different from any of the women Jack had known before. Almost all of them—from one-night stands to long-standing affairs—were mainly sexual partners and little more (with the exception of Inga Arvad). Jacqueline was certainly beautiful, which had always been a requirement for the women who were attractive to him. But Jacqueline interested him in other ways: her artistic interests, her willingness to challenge him, even her aloofness from the Kennedy clan. She had what Lem Billings described as "classiness." She was also, as it happened, a Catholic, which reduced at least some of the tension between her and Rose. They were married on September 12, 1953, at the lavish Auchincloss estate in Newport, Rhode Island. The ceremony was arranged almost entirely by the Kennedys—an early sign of the difficulties Jacqueline would have fitting into Jack's large, clannish family.¹⁷

Kennedy knew that as a rising political star his continued bachelorhood would be an obstacle to his ambitions. But he long remained reluctant to marry. As late as the spring of 1953, when he was thirty-six, already in a significant relationship with Jackie, he cooperated with the *Saturday Evening Post* on an article called the "Gay Young Bachelor."¹⁸ And as things turned out, his marriage did not significantly change what Jacqueline would later call his "violent independence," which included his

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