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# The American Dream: Reality and Illusion

1945–1980 for AQA

VIVienne SANDERS

SECOND EDITION



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## CHAPTER 3

# Kennedy and the 'New Frontier' 1961–3

John F. Kennedy introduced his 'New Frontier' idea while campaigning for the presidency. This New Frontier set Americans challenges involving science and space, peace and war, ignorance and prejudice, and poverty and surplus. Kennedy said that, if met, these challenges would create a version of the American Dream that emphasised 'the public interest' rather than 'the private comfort' that characterised the Eisenhower years. This chapter explores whether Kennedy's new American Dream was realised, through sections on:

- ◆ The New Frontier
- ◆ Challenges to American power
- ◆ African-Americans in the North and the South
- ◆ The United States by 1963

The key debate on page 117 of this chapter asks the question: Was Kennedy a successful president?

### KEY DATES

<b>1960 Nov.</b>	Kennedy defeated Richard Nixon in presidential election	<b>1963 Feb.</b>	<i>The Feminine Mystique</i> published
<b>1961 Jan.</b>	Kennedy inaugurated	<b>April</b>	Martin Luther King Jr's Birmingham campaign began
<b>April</b>	Cuban fiasco (Bay of Pigs)	<b>July</b>	Kennedy proposed civil rights legislation
<b>May</b>	First American in space; Freedom Rides	<b>Aug.</b>	March on Washington
<b>June</b>	Vienna summit	<b>Oct.</b>	Nuclear Test Ban Treaty
<b>Aug.</b>	Berlin Wall erected	<b>Nov.</b>	Diem assassinated; Kennedy assassinated
<b>1962 Oct.</b>	Cuban missile crisis		

## 1 The New Frontier

■ *Were Kennedy's domestic policies new and successful?*

The presidential election of 1960 and reasons for Kennedy's victory

Kennedy's narrow victory over Republican presidential candidate, Vice President Richard Nixon, owed much to Republican errors, but also something to Kennedy himself.

## Eisenhower's errors

Eisenhower was not particularly helpful to Nixon's campaign. Perhaps he remained ambivalent about Nixon and his abilities (see pages 56–7), or perhaps he was a tired, tetchy old man, prone to errors.

Instead of promoting Nixon's candidacy, Eisenhower was furiously defending his presidential record against Kennedy's attacks on his policies on defence and poverty. When Kennedy claimed 17 million Americans went to bed hungry each night, Eisenhower snapped, 'They must all be dieting.'

Nixon's candidacy was damaged by two Eisenhower policy decisions:

- After the 1959 budget deficit of nearly \$13 billion, Eisenhower and Congress agreed huge spending cuts to ensure a surplus in 1960. Eisenhower ignored Nixon's warning that this would contribute to a recession and damage Nixon's campaign. Nixon was proved right.
- Eisenhower refused to refute Kennedy's inaccurate accusations of a 'missile gap' in the Soviets' favour, because it would expose covert U.S. actions and might prompt Khrushchev (see page 62) into a further arms build-up. This left Nixon looking weak on defence.

Nixon made his governmental experience central to his campaign, but when a reporter asked Eisenhower for an example of a 'major idea' of Nixon's that he had adopted, Eisenhower answered, 'If you give me a week, I might think of one.'

## John Fitzgerald Kennedy

<b>1917</b>	Born in Boston, Massachusetts
<b>1943</b>	War hero
<b>1947–53</b>	U.S. Congressman
<b>1953–60</b>	U.S. Senator
<b>1960</b>	Elected president
<b>1961–3</b>	President
<b>1963</b>	Assassinated in Dallas, Texas

John 'Jack' Kennedy was born into a wealthy, ambitious Irish-American family. After an undistinguished career in Congress, he defeated Richard Nixon in the 1960 presidential election.

Many have been fascinated by Kennedy's youth, charisma and assassination. After the grandfatherly Eisenhower, the movie-star looks of Kennedy and his wife Jackie brought unprecedented glamour to the

White House. The youth and charisma made Kennedy's assassination all the more shocking. Several images were seared on the nation's memory: Kennedy slumped in the car after being shot, Jackie in clothes spattered with his blood, and little 'John John' saluting his father's coffin as it passed by in the funeral procession.

The popular fascination with Kennedy has affected opinions of his presidential performance. He prioritised foreign policy and his presidency was characterised by crises, for which he and Khrushchev both bore some blame. He bequeathed a greatly escalated involvement in Vietnam to his successor, President Lyndon Johnson, whose domestic achievements were far greater than Kennedy's but owed something to Kennedy's death.





Eisenhower had been open about his health issues while president, so it is difficult to understand why he refused to allow Nixon to call for the candidates to make their health public. Although Kennedy looked fit, an aide followed him throughout the campaign with a black bag full of drugs for Kennedy's multiple ailments. When the bag was temporarily mislaid, Kennedy said 'it would be murder' if its contents became known.

## Was Kennedy fit to be president?

Kennedy had Addison's disease (a life-threatening hormone imbalance), colitis (an inflammation of the colon), compression fractures of the spine and chronic prostatitis (inflammation of the prostate gland). These necessitated large quantities of medication, some of which was known to impact on personality and performance. Furthermore, Kennedy allowed a fashionable New York physician nicknamed 'Dr Feelgood' to inject him with painkillers and 'pep pills' (amphetamines). Historians have been reluctant to conclude that Kennedy's daily ingestion of a cocktail of drugs affected his presidential performance, although his health was such that some have wondered whether he would have survived a second term.

## Nixon's errors

Nixon did not let the popular Eisenhower campaign for him until October 1960. Nixon subsequently claimed he was responding to Mamie Eisenhower's pleas over Eisenhower's health, but he might also have wanted to prove he was his own man.

Nixon rejected Eisenhower's advice over televised debates with Kennedy. Eisenhower rightly pointed out that as Nixon was already well known, the debates would simply give Kennedy free advertising. While radio listeners gave Nixon a narrow victory, viewers favoured Kennedy, who looked better on television:

- While Kennedy looked straight at the cameras, Nixon looked sideways at Kennedy and projected shiftiness.
- After a weekend at **Cape Cod**, Kennedy seemed relaxed and a picture of glowing health, while Nixon was tired and recovering from an infection. Sweat streaked Nixon's make-up, his eyes were hollow and black-ringed, and his jowls drooped. 'My God! They've embalmed him before he even died', exclaimed Chicago's Democrat Mayor **Daley**.

Nixon's obvious exhaustion during the debates owed much to his foolish promise to campaign in all 50 states. Exhaustion perhaps explains his inaction over Martin Luther King Jr's arrest after participation in an Atlanta sit-in in October 1960. The Kennedy campaign made much of how Kennedy's calls to Coretta King and the Georgia authorities helped secure her husband's release. Eisenhower thought the call gained Kennedy black votes crucial to his victory. Eisenhower and Nixon blamed Nixon's running mate, Henry Cabot Lodge, for losing Southern white votes by promising the appointment of a black cabinet

### KEY TERM

**Cape Cod** A seaside resort in northeast USA.

### KEY FIGURE

**Richard J. Daley**  
(1902–76)

Highly influential Democrat Mayor of Chicago (1953–76), praised for his management and promotion of the city, but criticised by liberals for what is generally considered an excessively tough response to the race riots, and to the protests at the Democrat National Convention in 1968. He is often credited with helping Kennedy win in 1960 by disposing of Republican voting ballots – it is said he had them thrown in the Chicago River.

## KEY TERMS

### **'It's not the Pope I'm afraid of, it's the pop'**

Truman was more frightened of John Kennedy's powerful father (noted for having advocated appeasement of Hitler) than of the possibility that the Roman Catholic Kennedy would put loyalty to the Pope before loyalty to America.

### **Anti-Catholicism**

The influx of Catholic immigrants from Ireland and southern Europe in the nineteenth century generated great anti-Catholic prejudice in the USA.

member. Meanwhile, Kennedy defied his closest advisers and chose a running mate who helped him win the South, Lyndon Baines Johnson.

## Kennedy's performance

Kennedy's father was an electoral disadvantage. Many openly asserted that Joseph Kennedy was trying to purchase the presidency for his son (he used his money and influence effectively in the 1960 campaign). Press coverage mattered here, and while Nixon had no rapport with journalists ('They are all against me'), Kennedy charmed them with wit and modesty, as in 1958 when he joked that he had 'just received the following wire from my generous daddy – DEAR JACK – DON'T BUY A SINGLE VOTE MORE THAN IS NECESSARY – I'LL BE DAMMED IF I'M GOING TO PAY FOR A LANDSLIDE.'

Although Harry Truman famously said '**It's not the Pope I'm afraid of, it's the pop**', Kennedy's religion was more of a problem than his father. **Anti-Catholicism** remained strong. Kennedy pointed out that no one had asked his religion when he fought in the Second World War and assured voters that his first loyalty was to his country and not to Rome. The narrow margin of his victory in terms of the popular vote owed much to Protestant reluctance to vote for the first Catholic president of the United States.



## SOURCE QUESTION

In Source A, what does Senator Kennedy see as the main issues in the 1960 presidential election?

## SOURCE A

From Senator Kennedy's speech to Protestant ministers at the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, 12 September 1960 (available from [www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/address-to-the-greater-houston-ministerial-association](http://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/address-to-the-greater-houston-ministerial-association)).

*While the so-called religious issue is necessarily and properly the chief topic here tonight, I want to emphasize from the outset that we have far more critical issues to face in the 1960 election; the spread of Communist influence, until it now festers 90 miles off the coast of Florida – the humiliating treatment of our President and Vice President by those who no longer respect our power – the hungry children I saw in West Virginia, the old people who cannot pay their doctor bills, the families forced to give up their farms – an America with too many slums, with too few schools, and too late to the moon and outer space.*

*These are the real issues which should decide this campaign. And they are not religious issues – for war and hunger and ignorance and despair know no religious barriers.*

*But because I am a Catholic, and no Catholic has ever been elected President, the real issues in this campaign have been obscured – perhaps deliberately, in some quarters less responsible than this. So ... [I] state once again ... I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute – where no Catholic prelate would tell the President (should he be Catholic) how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote – where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference – and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the President who might appoint him or the people who might elect him.*

In the face of much comment and anxiety about his youth, Kennedy helped turn it to his advantage. Unlike Nixon, Kennedy was an exceptionally personable candidate whose film-star looks attracted people as he worked the crowds (one reporter complained the campaign was 'just an effective presentation of a celebrity'). Kennedy's most effective use of his youthfulness lay in his exploitation of the contrast with the elderly Eisenhower (Kennedy privately called Eisenhower 'that old asshole' and Eisenhower called Kennedy 'that young whippersnapper'). Kennedy encapsulated this campaign theme in his slogan, 'LET'S GET THE COUNTRY MOVING AGAIN', which suggested a dynamic contrast to Eisenhower and stagnation. Kennedy emphasised that not all Americans participated in the American Dream under Eisenhower, citing 7 per cent unemployment and underemployment.

#### SOURCE B

From *New York Post* columnist William Shannon, writing in 1957, quoted in Robert Caro, *The Passage of Power*, Random House, 2012, p. 52.

*There is a growing tendency on the part of Americans to 'consume' political figures in much the same sense we consume entertainment personalities on television and in movies. Month after month, from the glossy pages of Life to the multicolored cover of Redbook, Jack and Jackie Kennedy smile out at millions of readers; he with his tousled hair and winning smile, she with her dark eyes and beautiful face. We hear of her pregnancy, of his wartime heroism, of their fondness for sailing. But what has all this to do with statesmanship?*

## The ideas behind the New Frontier

In his presidential nomination **acceptance speech** at the Democratic **National Convention** in July 1960, Kennedy introduced his New Frontier, a revised version of the American Dream that offered something more than just prosperity. The ideas behind the New Frontier give considerable insight into Kennedy's personality and his victory in 1960.

#### SOURCE C

John Kennedy's acceptance speech, July 1960 (available from [www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/JFK-Speeches/Democratic-Party-Nomination\\_19600715.aspx](http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/JFK-Speeches/Democratic-Party-Nomination_19600715.aspx)).

*The New Deal and the Fair Deal were bold measures for their generations – but this is a new generation ... Too many Americans have lost their way, their will, and their sense of historic purpose. It is a time, in short, for a new generation of leadership – new men to cope with new problems and opportunities ... I stand tonight [in Los Angeles] facing west on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretched 3000 miles behind me, the pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build a new world here in the West ... Their motto was not 'every man for himself' – but 'all for the common cause' ... We stand today on the edge of a New Frontier – the frontier of the 1960s – a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils ... The New Frontier of which I speak is not a set*

#### SOURCE QUESTION

In what ways is Source B dubious about Kennedy's political ambitions?

#### KEY TERMS

##### Acceptance speech

A candidate's speech agreeing to be his party's nominee for the presidency.

##### National Convention

A few weeks before the presidential election, the Republicans and Democrats both hold National Conventions in which each party selects or confirms its candidate for the presidency.

#### SOURCE QUESTION

What do you suppose some voters might find  
a) appealing or  
b) unappealing in Source C?



*of promises – it is a set of challenges. It sums up not what I intend to OFFER the American people, but what I intend to ASK of them ... Beyond that frontier are the uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, and unanswered questions of poverty and surplus ... The choice our nation must make [is] ... between the public interest and the private comfort.*

### ? SOURCE QUESTION

How does Source D help to explain Kennedy's popularity?

#### ONLINE EXTRAS

WWW

Test your knowledge and understanding of the outcome of the 1960 election by completing Worksheet 15 at [www.hoddereducation.co.uk/accesstohistory/extras](http://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/accesstohistory/extras)

#### ONLINE EXTRAS

WWW

Test your knowledge and understanding of John F. Kennedy's presidency by completing Worksheet 16 at [www.hoddereducation.co.uk/accesstohistory/extras](http://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/accesstohistory/extras)

#### SOURCE D



John F. Kennedy was a particularly photogenic politician. This photo shows him sailing with his fiancée Jackie Bouvier in 1953.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

Kennedy defeated Nixon in 1960 because he was more personable and made fewer campaign errors. Kennedy sought a contrast with Eisenhower and a new kind of liberalism – hence the New Frontier. Kennedy was an intelligent, pragmatic politician, advised by ‘the best and the brightest’, but despite some measures to help the poor, their legislative record was unimpressive. Kennedy’s most important adviser was his brother Bobby. Kennedy’s support for civil rights was muted and mostly symbolic, although the sit-ins, Freedom Rides, Birmingham campaign and March on Washington kept black inequality on the national political agenda. White Southerners strongly opposed black equality, Northern whites were frequently unsympathetic, and the civil rights bill was stuck in Congress at Kennedy’s death.

Both the Americans and the Soviets perceived the Berlin Wall as a triumph for their side. Kennedy had one clear disaster (the Bay of Pigs) over Cuba, and one generally acknowledged success (the Cuban missile crisis). He also greatly increased the U.S. commitment to Vietnam.

The USA remained the world’s wealthiest nation in 1963, but roughly 20 per cent of the population were poor and the economy was increasingly prone to recessions and trade deficits. African-American protests stimulated change, which encouraged some women to demand progress over inequality and/or unfulfilled suburban lives. Some groups of young people, especially students, became deeply critical of American values and behaviour.

### Refresher questions

Use these questions to remind yourself of the key material covered in this chapter.

- 1** Give five reasons why Kennedy defeated Nixon in the 1960 presidential election.
- 2** Choose three important individuals in the Kennedy administration and give their job title, functions and influence.
- 3** Explain the ideas behind Kennedy’s New Frontier speech in 1960.
- 4** Why was Khrushchev anxious about Berlin?
- 5** What was the significance of the Berlin Wall?
- 6** Why and with what results did Kennedy back the Cuban exiles’ invasion at the Bay of Pigs?
- 7** What was the significance of the Cuban missile crisis?
- 8** To what extent had Kennedy committed the United States in Vietnam?
- 9** Why and with what results did Martin Luther King Jr campaign in Birmingham in 1963?
- 10** How did Kennedy promote the desegregation of universities in the South?
- 11** Why did Kennedy struggle to get his civil rights bill through Congress?
- 12** Give arguments for the propositions that  
a) America had nothing to fear from the Soviet Union and b) America had a great deal to fear from the Soviet Union.
- 13** What was SDS’s version of the American Dream?
- 14** Why did *The Feminine Mystique* sell so well?
- 15** What economic problems did the United States face in 1963?

## Question practice

### Essay questions

- 1 'Kennedy defeated Nixon in the 1960 presidential election because of the televised debates.' Explain why you agree with or disagree with this view. [AS level]

**EXAM HINT** Explain factors to agree and to disagree with the quotation. Reach a carefully argued judgement explaining why one set of factors seem more important than the other.

- 2 'Kennedy's New Frontier ideas failed to result in any significant achievements during his presidency.' Explain why you agree with or disagree with this view. [AS level]

**EXAM HINT** You need to analyse carefully several of the ideas and then assess whether there were significant results by November 1963. Reach an overall argued judgement.

- 3 'Kennedy met the Communist challenge more successfully than Eisenhower.' Assess the validity of this view. [A level]

**EXAM HINT** Be careful to avoid a narrative descriptive approach. Consider how you think 'success' should be judged – and then argue accordingly.

- 4 'Betty Friedan was the most important factor behind the increased pressure for change from women during the 1960s.' Assess the validity of this view. [A level]

**EXAM HINT** Analyse several factors which led to pressure from women for change, including that of Betty Friedan. Reach an argued conclusion.

### Source analysis questions

- 1 With reference to Sources J (page 115) and K (page 116), and your understanding of the historical context, which of these two sources is more valuable in explaining the growing pressures for social change by 1963? [AS level]

**EXAM HINT** Analyse the content in relation to your contextual knowledge and evaluate the provenance of the two sources, and reach a detailed judgement on which is more valuable for understanding the growing pressures for social change in the early 1960s.

- 2 With reference to Sources I (page 109), J (page 115) and K (page 116), and your understanding of the historical context, assess the value of these three sources to a historian studying the extent to which the American Dream was a reality during Kennedy's presidency. [A level]

**EXAM HINT** Analyse the content and evaluate the provenance of each source separately. Make sure that you focus on the phrase '... the extent to which the American Dream was a reality'. There is no need to reach an overall judgement, just on each one separately.

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Vivienne Sanders writes bestselling books on American history in the *Access to History* series. She taught A-level History for over 30 years and is currently a full-time writer and occasional guest lecturer.

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