KENNEDY’S DOMESTIC POLICY

Kennedy came into the presidency promising a more activist government that would aggressively pursue items on the liberal agenda – civil rights, anti-poverty programs, tax cuts to stimulate the economy, aid to education.

On Civil Rights, the President faced an uphill battle because members of his own party opposed Civil Rights legislation. Southern Democrats dominated the Senate and House of Representatives largely because they held most of the committee chairs. Because the Democrats had no competition in the South (in the early 1960s, no Republican stood a chance of winning a House or Senate seat in the South), Southern Senators and Congressmen were often elected term after term. As a result, they gained seniority and the senior Senators and Congressmen chaired the important committees.

All bills must first go through committees before the entire Congress can vote on them. If the bill does not win the approval of the committee, it won’t even get to the floor of the House or the Senate for a vote. Southern Democratic committee chairs kept all Civil Rights bills “bottled up” in committee and so Civil Rights legislation had no chance of passing Congress. As a result, Kennedy could send bills to Congress that advanced the Civil Rights agenda, but they never became law.

Recognizing this reality, Kennedy backed off on Civil Rights legislation and instead urged passage of laws that were intended to help poor people (regardless of race). This would give all people equal opportunity to benefit from government programs.

Southern Senators and Congressmen, many of whom had large numbers of poor whites in their districts, were more open to these kinds of initiatives. Kennedy calculated that if new government programs intended to help poor people could be introduced, blacks, who were disproportionately poor, would benefit (and a clash over race and Civil Rights could be avoided.)

In time, however, the Civil Rights Movement protested Kennedy’s cautious approach and Kennedy himself became more morally committed to the cause of Civil Rights. Shortly before he was killed in November 1963, it seemed he fully intended to push as hard as he could for a Civil Rights Act in 1964.

Similarly, Kennedy faced opposition from Congress on his economic policies. He proposed a large tax cut that he hoped would help stimulate the economy. If people had
more of their own money to spend, this would enable them to buy the products manufactured in American factories and lead to economic growth.

Some believed that instead of cutting taxes, the government should raise them or keep them at the same level. The money could then be used for programs intended to help the most disadvantaged Americans – job training, welfare, preschool education – or to improve the nation’s infrastructure – bridges, roads, public transportation. This argument was still going on when Kennedy died.

KENNEDY: IMAGE vs REALITY

Those Americans today who have heard of John Kennedy are likely more familiar with the romanticized image of him rather than the reality of his record.

Hailed by some today as a “crusading liberal,” Kennedy was in fact a relatively moderate, pragmatic politician. He did seek to achieve goals that he shared with liberals, but he was more open to compromise and was reluctant to get behind causes he thought had little chance of success – even if the cause was righteous or moral. In the months before his death, it appeared he was moving to a more liberal position on a variety of issues, and so many have claimed in hindsight that had Kennedy lived, he would have flowered into a full-fledged liberal activist and achieved great legislative successes for liberal causes. Since the reality of Southern Democratic dominance of Congress would have remained even if Kennedy had lived, it is hard to see how this could have happened. Only with Kennedy’s death as a “martyr” did a window of opportunity open – an opportunity his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, took full advantage of.

“LET US CONTINUE”

After Kennedy’s tragic death, Johnson addressed the Congress and urged members to pass Kennedy’s legislative agenda as a tribute to the slain president. This was the very agenda that the southern members of his own Democratic party had refused to support during the previous two years. Now, however, the grieving public responded positively to Johnson’s efforts to push the Kennedy agenda, and Congress, sensing that opposing the public mood could be politically risky, allowed his Civil Rights bills to come to a vote.

Over the next two years, the landmark Civil Rights bills of 1964 and 1965 became law. The first ended segregation and empowered the federal government to enforce anti-segregation laws; the second gave black voters the protection of the federal government and kept white state and local governments from denying blacks their constitutional right to vote.

Similarly, Johnson was able to convince Congress to pass Kennedy’s tax cut and to take up legislation intended to fight poverty. (This was the beginning of the “War on Poverty” – more associated with the Johnson administration, than the Kennedy
administration, but part of the same liberal, activist approach to government that characterized the first half of the 1960s.)

1964-1965 marked the high point of post-World War II liberalism. When Johnson won a landslide victory in the presidential election of 1964, it appeared that liberalism had secured a place as the dominant political ideology in the United States. Conservative Republican Barry Goldwater was only able to win his home state of Arizona and a handful of southern states that had turned against President Johnson due to his support for Kennedy’s Civil Rights agenda.

Nonetheless, within eight years the country would turn sharply to a more conservative position (obvious if one looks at the electoral maps of 1964 and 1972).

WHY THE SUDDEN “FALL” OF LIBERALISM?

In short, the escalation of the Vietnam War and the limited success of the War on Poverty (followed by urban unrest in black neighborhoods) turned many voters away from liberalism.

Johnson’s handling of the war angered voters and sharply divided public opinion. Most Americans believed he should either pull out of Vietnam altogether or should take steps to win the war immediately (perhaps even using nuclear weapons to do so). Johnson’s approach – a middle course in which neither U.S. victory nor North Vietnamese defeat seemed anywhere near in sight – had virtually no support by mid-1968.

White, working class voters 55 years of age and older whose sons were serving in Vietnam opposed the war (even more than young people 18-29, who, in the aggregate, expressed strong support for the war). However, they did not approve of the loud minority of anti-war protesters. They viewed the protestors, fairly or not, as privileged, over-educated, spoiled, and un-American – despite agreeing with them that the Vietnam war was ill-advised. College educated protesters were able to avoid the draft, however the sons of the working class ended up doing the fighting and dying in Vietnam. This created sharp divisions within the nation based on class.

The Johnson administration’s domestic policies also sparked divisions within the country. After focusing so intently on Civil Rights legislation and on improving living conditions for blacks through his anti-poverty programs, Johnson expected blacks to be grateful. Instead, beginning in 1965 in Watts, a series of riots broke out in American northern and western cities.

The reaction to and assessment of these riots depended largely on one’s point of view (and, to be sure, one’s race). Blacks saw the riots as an explosion of frustration on the part of inner city residents who did not have access to decent jobs or housing and who were the victims of police brutality. Segregation may have been illegal, but blacks still lived in segregated ghettos with poor schools, marginal public services, violent streets,
and terrible housing. They had seen little improvement in their daily lives despite the
millions that had been spent on the War on Poverty.

Many whites who had originally supported Kennedy and Johnson’s liberal policies
reacted angrily to the riots and questioned why blacks would resort to violence and
destroy property in their own neighborhoods – particularly when it seemed the
government was doing so much to help them. In part, white reaction showed their own
unfamiliarity with conditions in the ghettos, but it also revealed their frustration and
worry that their own status was beginning to decline.

To them, Johnson’s programs seemed to focus on helping blacks at the expense of
poor and working class whites. The support these programs received from wealthy
white liberals also kindled resentment among poor and working class whites (and
amplified their resentment against the college-educated anti-war protesters). In this
sense, white resentment (or backlash) revealed both racial and class tensions. These
whites would soon be referred to as the “Silent Majority” (as opposed to the “noisy
minority” that was rioting in the streets or protesting the Vietnam War.)

Many of these whites had supported liberalism during the early 1960s, but by 1968, due
to the Vietnam disaster and urban unrest, they were well on their way into the
Republican party, fueling a rebirth of conservatism and making the country in 1972 what
one historian has called “Nixonland.” – a reference to the very same Richard Nixon who
had lost the presidency to John Kennedy in 1960, but who had won in 1968 and had
been re-elected in a landslide in 1972 (an even bigger landslide than Johnson enjoyed
in 1964).