The 1960s

A PROMISING TIME?

As the 1960s began, many Americans believed they lived in a "promising time." The economy was doing well, the country seemed poised for positive changes, and a new generation of leaders was taking charge of the government.

Another conception of "a promising time" dealt less with a sense of hope and anticipation of better times ahead, but rather with the fact that during the early 1960s politicians were doing a lot of "promising." Often, they made promises without taking into consideration how realistic they were.

This would eventually prove problematic since people who are promised something and then are disappointed when the promise goes unfulfilled tend to be more resentful than those who had never been promised something in the first place.

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THE 1960 ELECTION

Two young candidates, Democrat John F. Kennedy and Republican Richard M. Nixon ran for president in 1960.

For the first time, both candidates were born in the 20th century, so in many ways the election marked the end of one era and the beginning of another, particularly since the outgoing President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, was the oldest man ever to hold the office.

Even the striking differences in the appearances of Jackie Kennedy and Mamie Eisenhower testified to the shift in the nation's cultural mood and style.

During the campaign, Kennedy, the Democrat, criticized the Eisenhower administration for not being activist enough.

He told voters that eight years of conservative government had left the country "soft," overly contented, lazy, and self-satisfied. As a result, the more dynamic Soviet Union was threatening to overtake the U.S. in the Cold War. (Kennedy cited the launching of Sputnik, which he claimed demonstrated that the U.S. had fallen behind the Soviets in satellite technology.)

The Kennedy campaign coined a slogan to express this sense that only by voting for Kennedy could the nation "catch up" in the Cold War: "It's time to get the country moving again."

The slogan was effective largely because it tapped into the sense that 1960 was a "promising time," but also because it was vague – it didn't state *where* the country should be moving, so each voter could assume that by voting for Kennedy, the country

would move in the direction *he or she* wanted it to move.

In fact, many did not interpret the slogan as a comment on the Cold War, but rather as a reference to civil rights, or economic policy, or the space program, or whatever *they themselves* cared about.

In November 1960, Kennedy won the presidency in one of the closest elections in American history. Looking at how close the vote was, it hardly seemed like a ringing endorsement for Kennedy or the Democrats, but in the days and weeks afterward – and particularly after Kennedy delivered his memorable inaugural address on January 20, 1961 – it began to feel like the new President had a significant mandate to lead the nation in a new direction.

Moreover, it appeared that the people wanted **an activist government** – a government that would intervene more aggressively to wage the Cold War against the Soviet Union and to solve the nation's domestic problems, particularly with regard to civil rights and the economy.

KENNEDY'S FOREIGN POLICY

Kennedy set out to be more pro-active than Eisenhower in stopping the spread of Communism. His rhetoric and his policies tended to be more aggressively anti-communist.

"MISSILE GAP"

During the 1960 campaign, for example, he had criticized Eisenhower for "allowing" a "missile gap." He claimed, falsely as it turned out, that the USSR had surpassed the US in its number of nuclear missiles. In fact, the US was far ahead, but Eisenhower could not (or chose not to) correct this false statement. Eisenhower did not want to make the U.S. advantage in missiles public knowledge since he feared it would force the Soviets to step up their construction of missiles to "catch up." In turn, this would force the U.S. to build still more missiles. Eisenhower, a fiscal conservative, opposed excessive spending – especially on the defense budget. It appears that Kennedy himself knew the "missile gap" did not exist, but was determined to seize on the issue as a way of distinguishing his "activist" approach to foreign policy from Eisenhower's "passive" approach.

CUBA

Kennedy also criticized the Eisenhower administration for allowing Cuba to "go communist." This was especially troubling since it appeared the Cubans themselves had chosen to support a Communist government; they had not been forced to do so by the interference of the Soviet Union. It was likely that the Cubans were more motivated by anti-American/anti-imperialist sentiment dating back to the Spanish-American War rather than any particular interest in Soviet-style Communism; nonetheless the fall of the U.S.-supported government in Cuba appeared to be a defeat for the U.S. in the broader Cold War. Eisenhower feared that the Cuban Revolution could precipitate similar revolutions in other Latin American nations.

So, too, did Kennedy. He believed that the Communist government in Cuba that had taken over in a revolution in 1959 posed a direct threat to U.S. national interests. If Cuba "went Communist," couldn't the rest of Latin America soon follow? He believed that to insure U.S. national security, Fidel Castro had to go.

In the first days of his administration, he agreed to sign off on a plan that would overthrow Castro. The plan, which entailed an invasion of Cuba led by Cuban exiles (funded by the American CIA), was referred to later as the **Bay of Pigs Invasion**.

The Kennedy Administration hoped that once the exiles landed in Cuba, the Cuban people would rise up against Castro and support their "liberators." This did not happen. (In 1961, most Cubans still supported Castro and had not grown disillusioned with the repressiveness of his Communist regime.) As a result, the invasion was a fiasco and failed spectacularly. It was a great embarrassment for the new Kennedy administration, even though the plan itself had been drawn up during Eisenhower's administration.

The question later arose, Why would Kennedy authorize such a dubious plan? In part, he did so because he assumed that the plan, devised by the Eisenhower administration, would eventually become public. If he did not agree to go forward with it, even after Eisenhower had approved it, he would look weak. Even though he expressed grave doubts about the feasibility of the plan, Kennedy feared that if he did not follow through with it, his political enemies would claim that he had "lost his nerve." On the other hand, if he did follow through and the plan failed, he (and not Eisenhower) would take the blame. Because he had criticized Eisenhower for not being assertive enough against Cuba, he worried he would look especially weak (and hypocritical) if he didn't take a tough stand against Castro.

Since the whole theme of his presidential campaign had been to make U.S. foreign policy more dynamic and to demonstrate U.S. "strength" in the world, he felt he had little choice but to proceed with the invasion, despite his misgivings.

The invasion was a failure on numerous levels – it did not remain "secret"; US involvement was revealed in the American press, embarrassing the Kennedy administration; the Cuban exiles had no support; and the bungled logistics had left the exiles defenseless against Castro's forces who massacred and imprisoned most of them. Moreover, it had the effect of creating the very situation Kennedy had hoped to avoid, namely, that the Soviet Union and Cuba would now move closer together.

Castro had not depended heavily on the Soviets to secure his revolution. Though he was advised by Cuban Communists (including his brother) who had close ties to the Soviets, the revolution's success did not hinge on assistance from Moscow. In fact, Castro did not want to create a situation in which his nation broke free from the dominance of one superpower (the U.S.) only to fall under the influence of another (the Soviet Union).

In the wake of the Bay of Pigs invasion, however, Castro became convinced that having failed once to overthrow his regime, the U.S. would try to do so again. He knew that he needed outside support to keep this from happening. He decided at this point to appeal

for assistance to Nikita Khrushchev, leader of the Soviet Union. Khrushchev gladly agreed to help the Cubans, realizing that this could lead to a Soviet presence ninety miles from the continental U.S. It would also be a major Cold War propaganda victory.

Over the next year, Khrushchev got Castro to agree to allow the Soviets to secretly place missiles on Cuban soil. This, he assured Castro, would deter any future American attempt to invade the island. Khrushchev also believed that installing missiles could close the "missile gap" by increasing the number of missiles that could directly target the US.

Unfortunately for the Cubans and the Soviets, American spy planes spotted the missiles being installed and Kennedy revealed to the world what the Soviets were doing. He insisted the missiles be removed, and, in the end, succeeded in getting the Soviets to back down and remove them. (Kennedy did not know, however, that there were already some missiles in Cuba that were operable and ready for launch. Of even more concern was that Cubans, not Soviet military personnel, had control of the missiles.)

Interestingly, throughout the crisis, the Soviets negotiated and acted without ever consulting Castro or the Cubans, suggesting that Moscow respected the Cubans no more than did the Americans. Though Castro was livid at how he had been treated, there was little he could do. He had cast his fortunes with the Soviets and now would come under their influence. He consoled himself in the belief that the Soviets would be his "socialist brothers" (and, indeed, the Soviets agreed to buy Cuban sugar to help keep the wobbly Cuban economy from collapsing) but in reality, by making Cuba so dependent on the Soviets for its defense, Castro had severely undermined his original goal of securing Cuban independence and ridding Cuba of imperialism.

Initially, the Cuban Missile Crisis appeared to be a clear victory for the U.S. in the Cold War. After all, it was Khrushchev, not Kennedy, who had backed down. But, in hindsight, the outcome is less cut and dried. Despite his belligerent rhetoric (and despite putting the missiles in Cuba in the first place), Khrushchev was open to negotiating with Kennedy to de-escalate the Cold War. He hoped that an easing of tensions would enable the Soviet government to spend less on the military and focus on improving the standard of living for the Russian people (in part by producing more consumer goods.)

But, having "lost" the Cuban standoff, Khrushchev also lost face in Moscow. Within two years he would be deposed in favor of more hard-line leaders less willing to negotiate with the U.S. Thus, though the Kennedy Administration got the immediate foreign policy "victory" it had been looking for in forcing the Soviets to remove their missiles from Cuba, in the longer term, this victory seemed less resounding since the U.S. government had lost what might have been an opportunity to work with a more open-minded Soviet leader.

VIETNAM

Vietnam had a long history of resisting occupying powers and fiercely defending its own independence and ethnic culture. For centuries the Vietnamese had been fighting Chinese influence and occupation in their country. After finally achieving a degree of independence, they were subjected to French colonization in the 19th century. When

France surrendered to the Germans in 1940, however, it lost its colonies in Asia. Vietnam was then occupied by Germany's ally, Japan, for the remainder of World War II. When the Japanese surrendered in 1945, the Allies forced them out of Vietnam and the Vietnamese Communists under Ho Chi Minh expected that the country would finally gain its independence.

In fact, the Vietnamese Communists did establish a government in the northern half of the country, but in the South the French returned to reclaim their old colony. Fearing the expansion of Communism, especially after the Communists took control of China (which bordered Vietnam to the north), the United States backed the French and the anti-communist Vietnamese in the South. The Vietnamese Communists declared war on the French, a war that lasted until the French finally withdrew in 1954.

During this war, the U.S. continued to support (and fund) the French. When the French left, the Eisenhower administration pledged to support the anti-Communist Vietnamese in the South. When Kennedy took over, he continued this support and even hoped to escalate the U.S. role if that could insure the defeat of the North Vietnamese Communists – or at a minimum that the North would not expand into the South. The goal, in short, was *containment* – to halt the further spread of Communism to other nations.

After the French lost, there was to be an election in which both North and South Vietnamese would vote for a government that would unify the country. Fearing that the Communists would win the election and that the anti-communist South Vietnam would cease to exist, the US opposed the election and it was never held.

Most Vietnamese, however, saw the war in their nation as less a Cold War struggle between Communism and democracy and more an anti-imperialist war waged to expel foreigners (of any kind) from Vietnam. Vietnamese in the North and the South were just as suspicious of the Americans as they had been of the Chinese, the French, and the Japanese. It should be added, however, than many South Vietnamese (and some North Vietnamese) were wary of Ho Chi Minh's Communist government.

Accordingly, Ho Chi Minh had to play down his support for Communism in favor of nationalist and anti-imperialist rhetoric. When he tried to enact Communist policies, he met opposition in the North. Only when he spoke out against the American "imperialists" did he consolidate his support.

The Americans continued their support of the South Vietnamese convinced that the US would succeed where the French (and Chinese and Japanese) had failed. It was hard to determine why US officials were so convinced of this, but Americans in a **"promising time"** genuinely believed their nation could achieve its goals because Americans were simply superior to the French. America was a more powerful nation than North Vietnam, so how could the North Vietnamese defeat the US?

Still, into the 1960s, Ho Chi Minh continued to be popular, even among many Vietnamese in the South. His call for unification of the country and the expulsion of foreign powers won support among many who did not necessarily support Ho's Communism.

South Vietnam was led by Ngo Dinh Diem who did not enjoy the same popularity as Ho. He was seen as the puppet of the US government (and did all he could to shed this image, only to annoy his patrons in Washington.) Rather than seeing to the needs of his people, he did all he could to consolidate his own power. The army became his own personal security force rather than presenting a coordinated resistance to the North. He was also the Catholic president of a majority-Buddhist population. His oppression of the Buddhists would ultimately be the catalyst that caused his downfall and assassination in November 1963. Though it is not clear that the US approved the decision of Diem's generals to assassinate him, the US did nothing to discourage the plan.

When Kennedy died – some three weeks after Diem – some believed he was having second thoughts about the U.S. intervention in Vietnam, though there is no way of knowing with any certainty if he would have changed the U.S. policy had he lived. His successor, Lyndon B. Johnson further escalated the U.S. presence in Vietnam, believing that he was following Kennedy's wishes. The controversy over Vietnam would come to dominate American politics in the mid- to late 1960s and, in many ways, contribute to the end of the "promising time" and fuel the divisions that characterized American society after 1965.

Overall, Kennedy's promise to pursue an activist, anti-communist foreign policy had decidedly mixed results. Despite the successful conclusion of the Cuban Missile Crisis, it was fair to ask whether such a crisis would have ever happened had not Kennedy backed the Bay of Pigs invasion. It is also fair to ask whether US intervention in Vietnam would have been pursued as aggressively had Kennedy not made promises to make the US appear more "activist" in the fight against communism.

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 is very hard to get it 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.)

Civil Rights leaders – including Martin Luther King – were disappointed with Kennedy's pragmatic approach and demanded that he take a more forceful stand against segregation and discrimination.

The wider Civil Rights Movement protested Kennedy's cautious approach and, over time, Kennedy himself became more morally committed to the cause of Civil Rights, particularly after local political officials in the South (and some southern governors) tried to undermine his administration and refused to abide by federal laws. 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. Whether it would have the votes to pass, however, remained an open question.

In sum, after a rocky start on the issue of Civil Rights, Kennedy decided to back the Freedom Struggle and put the power of the presidency solidly behind the Civil Rights Movement. This was in keeping with his campaign pledge to bring change and progress in a promising time.

He also put together an anti-poverty agenda that was intended to help both poor whites and poor blacks gain access to the same economic opportunities that the affluent middle and upper classes enjoyed. This "war on poverty" would take center stage during the administration of his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson.

As for the promise to cut taxes, Kennedy faced stiff opposition in Congress, particularly from conservative Republicans who feared a tax cut might cause inflation. At the time of his death, the tax cut still did not have enough votes to pass.

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, making it a federal crime for white state and local officials to deny 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).