

Introduction

John F. Kennedy, at age 43, was the youngest man ever to be elected President of the United States. He also was the first President born in the 20th century, and the first to be a Roman Catholic. Kennedy was a popular figure who was handsome, intelligent, and a hero of World War II. He called his administration the **New Frontier** and set his sights on making the United States a better place for the rich *and* the poor, the young *and* the elderly, and white *and* African Americans alike.



President John F. Kennedy

He took office in 1961, the beginning of a decade that looked bright with promise. His short administration, however, was filled with many of the same problems previous Presidents had faced. The United States and the Soviet Union were still fighting the Cold War in many parts of the world. And at home, African Americans were still working for fair and equal treatment.

Conflicts with Cuba

Fidel Castro had set up a Communist government in Cuba, an island just 90 miles south of the tip of Florida. Castro accepted financial and military aid from the Soviet Union. This meant that the Soviet government had gained a foothold in the Western Hemisphere. The United States saw this relationship between Cuba and the Soviet Union as a potential threat.

The Bay of Pigs

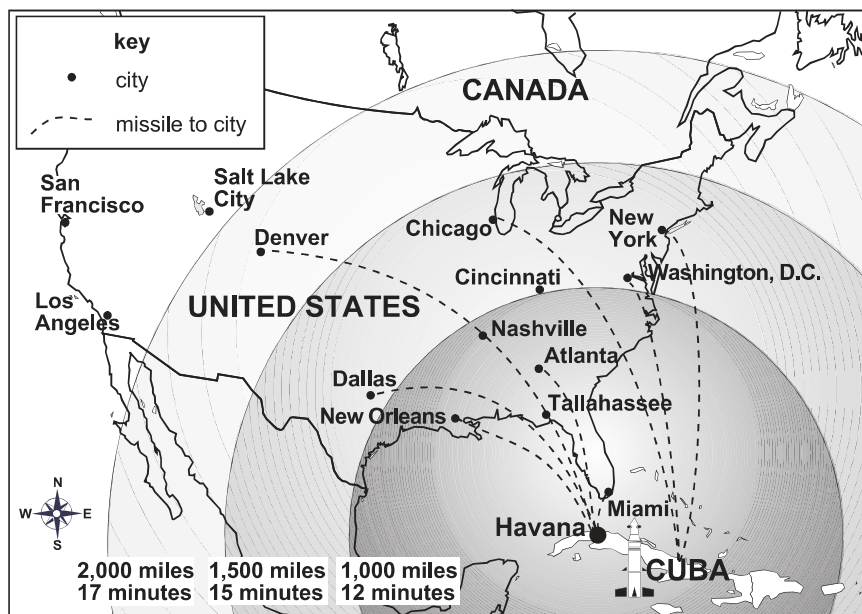
In April of 1961, the **Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)**—the agency set up to gather information on foreign countries and affairs—informed President Kennedy of a plan to invade Cuba, which had been formulated by the previous President. The CIA believed that, with American help, the Cuban people would overthrow the Castro government. President Kennedy approved the plan for 1,500 **anti-Castro** Cubans trained by the United States to carry out the invasion. *Anti-Castro* Cubans opposed Fidel Castro and the government he led.

The invasion took place at the **Bay of Pigs** in Cuba on April 17. However, the anti-Castro Cubans did not receive enough support from the Cuban

people. Instead, all anti-Castro forces were captured or killed. The next day Soviet Premier *Nikita Khrushchev* told the United States to stop any further military action against Cuba or the Soviet Union would help Castro.

Embarrassed, President Kennedy halted any further invasion. The remaining 1,113 troops captured by Cuba were **ransomed**, or exchanged for money, and freed. The Soviets continued to help Cuba and cause problems for President Kennedy.

The Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962



The Soviets were secretly building missile bases on Cuba and some missiles could reach United States cities in minutes. If missiles had been launched from Cuba, they could reach 1,000 miles in 12 minutes, 1,500 miles in 15 minutes, and 2,000 miles in 17 minutes.

The Cuban Missile Crisis

The next big conflict with Cuba came in October of 1962. Photographs taken by an American U-2 spy plane showed nuclear missile bases in Cuba. The Soviet Union was moving nuclear missiles onto these bases. The failed *Bay of Pigs* invasion convinced the Soviets that the United States would *not* resist Soviet expansion in Latin America. Once in place, these missiles could be fired at American cities. Advisers urged President Kennedy to attack Cuba and take the nuclear missiles, but Kennedy resisted because he feared the Soviet Union would attack the United States as a result.

Instead, on October 22, he went on television to tell Americans about the missiles. He also warned Khrushchev to stop sending missiles into Cuba. He announced that the United States would place a **naval quarantine**, or blockade, around the island. No ships carrying nuclear weapons would be allowed to dock at Cuban ports.

Some Soviet ships were already on their way to Cuba. For three days, the world waited to see what Kennedy and Khrushchev would do. Nuclear war seemed likely. Then Khrushchev made personal contact with President Kennedy, and the two men discussed a solution. The Soviet ships heading for Cuba turned back at the blockade. On Sunday, October 29, Khrushchev announced that the missiles would be removed from Cuba. The **Cuban Missile Crisis** had ended. After this incident, Kennedy and Khrushchev set up a *hot line* between Washington and Moscow. This telephone line would enable the two leaders to discuss a future problem before it turned into a crisis. This incident struck fear in many Americans. Some families even constructed bomb shelters, or reinforced underground dwellings, to protect themselves from possible attack by other countries.

Hot Line

In 1963 the United States and Russia established a *hot line* between the White House and the Kremlin. The hookup enabled leaders of the two countries immediate teletype communication should another crisis arise. This was another indication that the Cold War was thawing.



Alliance for Progress

In August of 1961, Kennedy arranged for a program of financial aid to many Latin American countries. He called his program the **Alliance for Progress**. The United States gave Latin American countries \$80 billion to help reduce their poverty and build their industry. The nations accepted this aid, but some people felt that the leaders of these nations often misspent and wasted the money.

Much of the money went to governments who were anti-Communist but were headed by dictators. Many Latin Americans felt the *alliance* was aimed more at stopping communism than improving their lives. In the end, the Alliance for Progress did little to end poverty or improve relations with Latin America.

The Berlin Wall

A divided Germany continued to cause problems between the United States and the Soviet Union. Khrushchev wanted all of Berlin. He demanded that France, Great Britain, and the United States leave West Berlin by the end of 1961. In response, Kennedy decided to increase military support of West Berlin to protect it from a Soviet takeover.

Suddenly, in August of 1961, the East German and Soviet soldiers began to build a wall to separate East and West Berlin. Khrushchev wanted the world to see the wall as a symbol of Communist strength. He really built the wall, however, to keep East Germans from escaping to West Germany.

Kennedy responded to the wall by sending an additional 1,500 soldiers to West Berlin. In 1963 Kennedy made a personal trip to West Berlin to show that the United States intended to stand by the city. The **Berlin Wall** remained, but the President had stood up to the Soviet Union without going to war.

Trouble in Asia

During the 1960s, the United States sent troops and money to Asia to fight the spread of communism. The United States tried to help countries who were America's friends. The Soviets, Chinese, and other Communist groups were doing the same to gain allies.

Laos

Laos is a small country in Indochina next to Vietnam. During Kennedy's administration, Laos had a **pro-Western** government, or one that was friendly to the United States and its allies. Some Laotians, however, were Communists. They wanted to overthrow the *pro-Western* government. These Communists were supported by the Soviet Union.

President Kennedy was advised to send in American troops to defend Laos's anti-Communist government. To help avoid any military confrontation, the British arranged for United States and Soviet representatives to meet at a conference. The representatives worked out a plan for a **coalition government** in Laos. In a *coalition government*,

opposing political parties take part in running the country's government. The coalition worked for two years. Then the Communists withdrew, and fighting began once more.

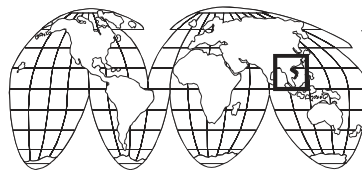
Vietnam

Another Asian country, Vietnam, also was the target of a Communist takeover. North Vietnam had a Communist government that was supported by the Soviet Union. The leader of North Vietnam was *Ho Chi Minh*. The government of South Vietnam was an unpopular pro-Western regime (form of government). Its leader was *Ngo Dinh Diem*. South Vietnam received aid from the United States.

Communist groups in South Vietnam, called *Vietcong*, wanted to overthrow Diem. The Vietcong wanted to reunite North and South Vietnam under one Communist government.

In 1959 Ho Chi Minh began supplying military arms to the Vietcong along a network of paths. The paths used the border of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia and became known as the *Ho Chi Minh Trail*. (See map above.)

President Kennedy sent United States military advisers to help South Vietnam resist the Vietcong. By 1963 there were 16,000 American military advisers in South Vietnam. However, Ngo Dinh Diem and his corrupt administration became very unpopular with his people. They said he was



Laos and Vietnam, 1959

not doing enough to improve their lives. On November 2, 1963, Diem was overthrown and murdered. After his death, the war between the Communists and pro-Western forces increased as the Soviet Union and the United States increased their military and financial support of North and South Vietnam.

A major factor which led to further United States involvement was the belief in the *domino theory*. The domino theory was the idea that the fall of one nation to communism would lead to the fall of its neighbors. The United States, therefore, felt that it was important to stop the spread of communism in Vietnam before it spread to the rest of Southeast Asia.

Achievements of the Kennedy Administration

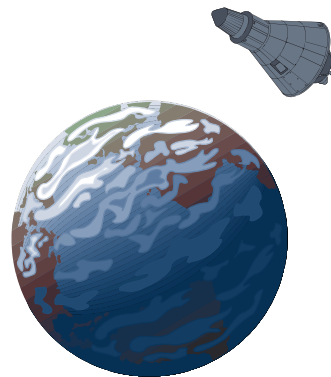
Not all of President Kennedy's time was spent on Cold War problems. He had many new ideas and programs to improve Americans' lives in the United States.

The Peace Corps

One of President Kennedy's favorite programs was the **Peace Corps**. The *Peace Corps* trained and sent thousands of young Americans to work in underdeveloped countries. They served as teachers, doctors, and engineers. They tried to help poor countries improve their way of life.

The Space Program

When President Kennedy took office, the Soviets were ahead in space research. They had sent *Yuri A. Gagarin*, a Soviet **cosmonaut**, into full orbit around the world. On May 5, 1961, *Alan B. Shepard* became the first American astronaut to experience space flight. However, his flight only went 115 miles into the sky and lasted about 15 minutes.



Kennedy had a vision of an American pioneer space effort. He asked Congress to provide \$40 billion for the space program. He promised the United States would land a man on the moon by 1970. The **National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)**, set up under Eisenhower in 1958, was in charge of America's space program.

The Nuclear Test Ban Treaty

By 1963 countries belonging to the Communist alliance began to split apart. This new climate encouraged President Kennedy to try to **ban**, or stop, certain kinds of nuclear testing.

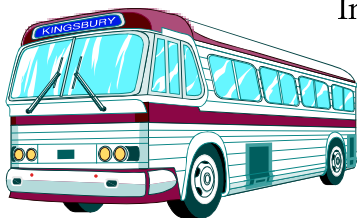
In September, the United States Senate approved a treaty between Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union. The countries agreed to outlaw nuclear testing above ground and underwater. More than 100 nations eventually signed the **Nuclear Test Ban Treaty**.

A New Frontier

President Kennedy called his domestic plan the *New Frontier*. He sent many bills to Congress he hoped would improve life for many Americans. Congress did approve funds for urban renewal and job training. Congress also agreed to increase the minimum wage to \$1.25 an hour and cover more workers under the Social Security Act. Congress, however, did not approve many of Kennedy's other plans such as providing medical care to the people who were 65 or over and giving financial aid to needy college students.

Civil Rights

Kennedy wanted to do more for African Americans, but southern members of Congress opposed his ideas. In 1962 he signed an order to desegregate public housing. In addition, he appointed several African-American men to serve on federal courts. He also set up a committee to study equal employment opportunities.



In 1961 people of different races called **freedom riders** rode buses from the North to the South to protest segregation in bus stations. When they reached the South, white mobs attacked and burned their buses. The Interstate Commerce Commission, however, banned segregation in interstate bus terminals.

In 1962 riots broke out when an African-American man, *James Meredith*, enrolled at the University of Mississippi. President Kennedy sent in several thousand federal troops to restore peace. Throughout the South, **sit-ins** and demonstrations were staged to end segregation in schools, hotels, and restaurants.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr

Dr. *Martin Luther King, Jr.* and the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)**—an organization committed to ending racism across the United States—led nonviolent demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. They were attacked by the police, who used electric cattle prods and fire hoses on them. In June, *Medgar Evers*, head of the Mississippi National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), was murdered. The same month, Alabama Governor *George C. Wallace* prevented two African Americans from enrolling at the University of Alabama. Wallace promised to uphold segregation forever.

Americans no longer could ignore the racism against African Americans in the United States. Television brought each violent event directly into their homes. It was clear that new federal laws were required to provide civil rights protection for African Americans. President Kennedy sent a new civil rights bill to Congress in June of 1963 to increase and protect the rights of African Americans.

The March on Washington

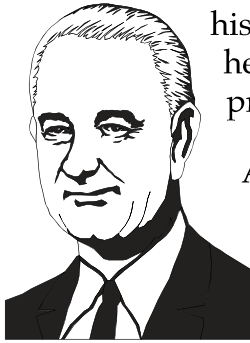
Supporters of the new bill organized a march on Washington to put pressure on Congress. The chief organizer was *Bayard Rustin*, who had helped King form the SCLC and was now his main advisor. The march in Washington on August 20, 1963 became known as the *March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom*. Estimates on the size of the crowd varied from between 250,00 to 400,000. Speakers included *Phillip Randolph*, *Floyd McKissick*, *John Lewis*, *Roy Wilkins*, *Whitney Young*, and *Walter Reuther*. King was the final speaker. He made his famous speech “I Have a Dream,” and he described his vision of an America where everyone was free and equal.

The march was televised. Viewers all over the country could see and hear Dr. King give his powerful speech. Television was helping slowly to change the way Americans felt about civil rights and equal opportunity in the United States.

The President Is Assassinated

In the fall of 1963, President Kennedy traveled through the South to build support for his domestic programs. He went first to Florida and then to Texas. He received an enthusiastic welcome.

On November 22, 1963, President Kennedy planned to make a short stop in Dallas, Texas. He drove in a motorcade through Dallas. As his car passed Dealey Plaza, the President was shot in the head and through the neck. President Kennedy was pronounced dead by the time his car reached the hospital.



Vice President Lyndon
B. Johnson

An investigation was set up by Chief Justice *Earl Warren* to establish the facts surrounding the President's murder. The Commission found that a gunman named *Lee Harvey Oswald* acted alone in the killings. Since the investigation, evidence has been found that has led some to believe a larger conspiracy was behind the act.

Summary

President John F. Kennedy's administration faced many of the same foreign problems President Dwight D. Eisenhower had encountered. Kennedy was able to solve some of them, including the *Cuban Missile Crisis* and Khrushchev's threat against West Berlin. However, the United States continued to be drawn deeper into the Vietnam conflict and its civil war.

At home, President Kennedy worked to improve the lives of Americans. He persuaded Congress to fund many programs that helped people. During his administration, television became an important source of information for everyone and helped alert people to some of the injustices practiced against African Americans. African Americans organized marches and other protests that led to fairer treatment. President Kennedy was assassinated before the end of his first term in office.