

# John F. Kennedy as President

*Read about the election, presidency, and assassination of President Kennedy.*

## Overview

- John F. Kennedy narrowly won the 1960 presidential election against Richard Nixon by carefully cultivating the news media and crafting an effective public image.
- Once in office, Kennedy prioritized domestic economic growth, cutting taxes and boosting federal spending.
- During Kennedy's brief presidency, the United States experienced both foreign policy triumphs and tragedies, including the **Bay of Pigs invasion** and the **Cuban Missile Crisis**.
- Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963.

## The Election of 1960



*Figure 1: Still from the first presidential debate between Kennedy and Nixon. This was the first nationally-televised presidential debate, and Kennedy's good looks and charming demeanor on screen gave him an edge over Nixon.*

The 1960 presidential election, which has been described as the “first modern presidential campaign,” pitted Republican **Richard Nixon**, who had served as Vice President under Dwight D. Eisenhower, against Democratic Senator **John F. Kennedy**, scion of the elite Kennedy clan of Massachusetts. Kennedy ran on a strong civil rights platform, hoping to offset the expected hostility from Southern Democrats by adding Texan Lyndon B. Johnson to the ticket as his vice president.

Though Kennedy and Nixon often have been portrayed as ideological opposites, they both agreed on the necessity of US global leadership in the [Cold War](#). Both men were firmly anti-communist and emphasized the importance of maintaining and strengthening US military supremacy.

There were, however, some substantial differences between the two candidates. While Kennedy pledged to revive the economy by strengthening the public sector, Nixon promised to slash federal spending. Kennedy rhetorically embraced the goals of the [Civil Rights Movement](#), while Nixon largely neglected civil rights issues. Unlike Nixon, Kennedy was Roman Catholic, and his campaign dealt with accusations that his loyalty to the Pope would trump his loyalty to the United States.

There were also significant stylistic differences between the two candidates, which were magnified by their appearances on television. The first nationally-televised presidential debate occurred on September 26, 1960. Kennedy appeared charismatic and handsome, and was very effective at crafting a likable on-screen persona. Nixon, on the other hand, frequently seemed sweaty, nervous, and brooding. Those who listened to the debate on the radio thought that Nixon had won, while those who watched on television agreed that Kennedy was the winner. The election was extremely close, but Kennedy ultimately triumphed over Nixon by a slender margin.



Figure 2: Presidential photo portrait of John F. Kennedy. Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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Once in office, Kennedy embraced an economic model centered on federal tax and spending policies. Originally proffered by the economist John Maynard Keynes, **Keynesian economics** theorized that federal deficit spending could boost economic growth and lower unemployment.

The Kennedy administration approved a series of stimulus measures to combat the recession, including the extension of social security and unemployment benefits, and a twenty percent increase in military spending. The minimum wage was raised and over \$4 billion was allocated for housing construction. Kennedy also announced that he would ask Congress for a \$10 billion tax cut unaccompanied by decreases in federal spending. He argued that an economic boom would result from such an approach, and thus tax revenues would be higher despite lower tax rates. While such measures did stimulate the economy and reduce unemployment, they also led to an increase in inflation and set the stage for conflict between corporations and labor unions over wages and prices.

Although he had campaigned on a strong civil rights platform, Kennedy adopted a much more cautious approach once in office. This was partly due to the power of Southern Democrats in Congress, who were threatening to block the president's entire civil rights agenda. Nevertheless, Kennedy appointed several African Americans to high-profile positions in the federal government and judiciary. In 1963, he introduced comprehensive civil rights legislation, which Congress was still debating at the time of Kennedy's assassination. The bill he introduced eventually would be passed as the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#), during the administration of Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson.

The Kennedy administration's foreign policy included triumphs, tragedies, and everything in between. The [Cuban Missile Crisis](#) brought the world to the brink of nuclear annihilation. Though Kennedy's vacillation and indecisiveness about the [Bay of Pigs](#) invasion had contributed to the missile crisis in the first place, his determined statesmanship helped defuse tensions and negotiate a peaceful resolution to the crisis. Kennedy authorized the Alliance for Progress, a major trade and aid initiative designed to encourage democratic reform and prevent violent revolution in Latin America. Kennedy also set the stage for increased US involvement in Vietnam by supporting a military coup in South Vietnam.

## Kennedy's Assassination

The presidency of John F. Kennedy was tragically cut short by an assassin's bullet on November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas. **Lee Harvey Oswald**, an unstable ex-Marine with ties to the Soviet Union and to the Cuban émigré community in Miami, shot Kennedy from the window of a book depository while the president was riding in a convertible limousine as part of a motorcade. Oswald himself was then murdered while in police custody, by **Jack Ruby**, a Dallas nightclub owner with ties to organized crime. Because of the peculiar circumstances surrounding the Kennedy assassination, numerous conspiracy theories have arisen, though the preponderance of evidence suggests that Oswald acted alone. Kennedy was succeeded in office by his vice president, [Lyndon Baines Johnson](#).

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## What do you think?

1. Why did Kennedy win the 1960 presidential election?
2. What were Kennedy's greatest accomplishments? What were his most significant shortcomings?
3. Which do you think was more successful: Kennedy's foreign policy or his domestic policies? Why?