

## John F. Kennedy And The Intellectuals

In the minds of many Americans, the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy—20 years ago this November—marks the symbolic beginning of that turbulent era known as the Sixties. But to a large extent, argues historian Allen Matusow, the '60s had their roots in the late 1950s, when a handful of East Coast intellectuals sought to revitalize American liberalism—and thereby the nation itself. The United States, they said, had gone soft. With the prosperity of the Eisenhower years had come moral and political lethargy. Ironically, that same prosperity bolstered the liberals' belief that the nation's domestic problems—unemployment, racism, and poverty—could now be rapidly solved while America defended freedom around the world. As a candidate for President in 1959–60, John F. Kennedy gradually embraced the liberal platform. He campaigned as a liberal after receiving the Democratic nomination. And after his death, his successor, Lyndon Johnson, went on to translate Kennedy's pledges into action at home and overseas. Unhappily, Matusow concludes, "like the premise of abundance that nourished the decade's idealism, the premises of its liberalism proved far more fragile than they seemed at the time."

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*by Allen J. Matusow*

The election of 1960 became a classic of American political history. It attracted the highest rate of voter participation in half a century (64 percent), marked the emergence of a glamorous new personality (John F. Kennedy), and restored to power, after an eight-year lapse, the normal majority party (the Democrats).

More important than the fate of men and parties, the Kennedy election initiated the resurgence of American liberalism, which had not

commanded the political landscape since the first term of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Broadly speaking, contemporary liberalism could claim legitimate descent from historic bourgeois liberalism, with its affirmation of reason, progress, order, and the rights of the individual within the context of capitalism. But liberals long ago had cut loose from the original faith in the invisible hand and the limited state. Confronted by the problems of 20th-



*John F. Kennedy appears before the 1956 Democratic Convention (with chairman Paul Butler), where he nominated Adlai E. Stevenson and nearly won his bid for the second spot on the ticket.*

century industrial society, proponents of liberalism had experimented with so many intellectual reformulations that liberalism seemed less a creature of the past than of mere mood.

The liberal mood of 1960 was largely defined by intellectuals residing on the East Coast, principally in New York City and Cambridge, Massachusetts. These intellectuals—nearly all of them liberals—shared a world view that profoundly influenced the political climate in this election year. The views of the elite intellectuals originated after World War II, when revulsion against Stalinism inspired a major reappraisal of beliefs. Liberal revulsion had little in common with popular anticommunism because it was that of a sinner in the throes of confession.

The alleged sin, committed in the Great Depression, was the sin of romantic delusion. As the intellectuals remembered the 1930s, too many of them had flirted with Marxism, dreamed of utopias, idealized common folk, joined popular front groups manipulated by Communists, and praised Russia as a progressive state. Because it was not wholly false, this caricature acutely embarrassed the intellectuals during the early years of the Cold War, and they did penance by eventually rallying to Harry Truman's ideological crusade against Soviet communism.

Living in the shadow not only of Stalin's purges but of Hitler's death camps, those intellectuals who had once harbored chiliastic hopes and radical illusions abandoned them. "More and more of us have come to

feel, with Melville, Hawthorne, and Dostoevsky," wrote Robert Nisbet of his fellow intellectuals, "that in men's souls lie deep and unpredictable potentialities for evil that no human institutions can control."

### Creating the ADA

The manifesto of postwar liberalism was Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Vital Center*, published in 1949. At 32 already a famous Harvard professor and winner of a Pulitzer Prize in history, Schlesinger took aim in this book at those "progressives" who, he said, were still clinging to the dreams of the 1930s, still believing in the perfectibility of man, still blind to Soviet imperialism and the malevolence of the American Communist Party.

Thanks to a "restoration of radical nerve," Schlesinger wrote, the vogue of the fellow traveller was diminishing. Liberals were prepared now to reject all forms of totalitarianism unequivocally and to affirm a realistic democratic creed. As Schlesinger described it, this liberalism inspired the formation of the anticommunist Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) in 1947. It favored containing communism in Europe and aiding progressive regimes in former colonial areas. It relied on piecemeal reforms to solve the remaining problems of capitalist society. And it

recognized the complexity of reality, the ineradicable sinfulness of human nature, the corruption of power, the virtues of pragmatism and gradualism, and the narrow possibilities of all human endeavor.

Prominent intellectuals not only declared for the West in the Cold War; they volunteered to be foot soldiers in the ideological battle. In 1950, a former Army colonel connected with the U.S. occupation in Germany organized the Congress for Cultural Freedom and invited intellectuals from Western countries to attend an inaugural session in West Berlin. The purpose of the Congress, which became a Cold War fixture, was to extol the virtues of intellectual life in the West.

### A Truce

In the United States, the affiliate of the Congress was called the American Committee for Cultural Freedom, whose membership included some of the brightest liberal intellectuals: Schlesinger, David Riesman, Daniel Bell, Reinhold Niebuhr, Sidney Hook, Dwight Macdonald, Richard Rovere, Lionel Trilling, James Wechsler, and the coeditors of the *Partisan Review*, Philip Rahv and William Phillips. Most of the Americans affiliated with the Congress presumably did not know that its activities were partly subsidized by

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CIA funds laundered through dummy foundations.

As the intellectuals rallied to the defense of America during the early 1950s, they retreated from their role as critics of society. For one thing, there no longer seemed much to criticize. After the war, the crisis of capitalism had failed to make its expected reappearance, and unprecedented prosperity began eroding the old liberal antagonism toward big business. Here, the representative figure was the Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith, whose *American Capitalism* (1952) codified the terms of the truce.

#### Enter 'Mass Man'

Galbraith's message was that liberals should quit worrying about contemporary capitalism. Governments knew enough Keynesian economic theory to prevent another depression. Large corporations were not the enemies of economic efficiency but the promoters of technological progress. And concentrated corporate power was now "held in check by the countervailing power of those who are subject to it," by big unions, cooperative buying organizations, and government actions to increase the market power of the economically vulnerable.

Liberals heeded Galbraith's message and relaxed.

The intellectuals also stopped worrying about economic inequality. Indeed, the condition of the masses during the 1950s occasioned more celebration than regret. Historian Richard Hofstadter observed that "the jobless, distracted, and bewildered men of 1933 have in the course of the years found substantial places in society for themselves, have become homeowners, suburbanites, and solid citizens." Only the

re-emerging issue of legal and political equality for Southern blacks engendered any passion.

Gone with the old issues was the old feeling of kinship with the masses. During the 1930s, intellectuals had expected politics to be the battleground of ideologies, the focal point of class conflict, the medium for translating the will of the people into policy. During the 1950s, "the people" were transformed into that scourge of the age—"mass man."

In *Quest for Community* (1953), Columbia's Robert Nisbet typically explained mass man as the end result of historical forces which, since the Middle Ages, had ground down the primary associations of family, village, church, and guild, reducing individuals to social atoms and depriving them of community. Demagogues achieved power in this century, Nisbet explained, by promising to lead the alienated and lonely masses "to the Promised Land of the absolute, redemptive state."

#### Hurray for Pluralism

When Senator Joseph McCarthy rose to prominence during the early 1950s by conducting an unscrupulous Red hunt, the liberals fit him neatly into their facile categories. He was only the latest totalitarian demagogue, mobilizing the masses by voicing their resentments and fears. By contrast, the conservative elite, which had once borne the brunt of earlier liberal attacks, seemed now to be the last principled defender of liberty left—except, of course, for the intellectuals themselves.

Sociologists David Riesman and Nathan Glazer observed that "Wall Street was much closer to the liberal intellectuals on the two issues that were still alive—civil rights and civil liberties— . . . than were the former

allies of the liberal intellectuals, the farmers and lower classes of the city." The problem of democracy, it now appeared, was how to save it from the people.

The problem had a solution that almost all the intellectuals advanced: pluralism, defined as a multiplicity of autonomous associations responsive to the genuine needs of individuals and strong enough to resist both the state and the destructive impulses of the masses.

Despite the occasional aberration, most of the intellectuals believed America had already done a tolerable job of creating a pluralistic society and containing the masses. Politics in contemporary America was seen as a beneficent competition among interest groups, not as a struggle among ideologies with their pernicious tendency to arouse mass man.

#### Deploring Tail Fins

"The tendency to convert concrete issues into ideological problems, to color them with moral fervor and high emotional charge, is to invite conflicts which can only damage a society," wrote Daniel Bell in 1960. Fear of excited electorates was one reason why Bell hailed "the end of ideology."

Though contained politically, mass man dominated culture, the lone realm where the intellectuals continued to despise America. The trouble with the masses, they agreed, was their deplorable taste. *The Democratic Vista* (1958), by the Columbia literary critic Richard Chase, was characteristic.

On politics, Chase was brief: "For the moment, American politics and economics, on the domestic scene, appear impenetrable, mysterious, and roughly successful. A revolutionary politics or economics makes no

sense to contemporary America. What do make sense are the liberal virtues: moderation, compromise, countervailing forces, the vital center, the mixed economy. . . ."

Though the middle way was acceptable in politics, Chase said, in culture it fostered complacency, orthodoxy, and conformism. The danger was that mass culture would boil all taste and opinion into a sort of middlebrow mush. Thus, while they no longer attacked big business, intellectuals railed endlessly against the organization man, Madison Avenue, hidden persuaders, television, tail fins on cars, and the grosser evidence of American materialism.

#### Thanks to Sputnik

As the 1950s began to wane, the intellectuals grew restless. They liked to think of themselves historically as the friends of progress and justice, but found themselves now in uncomfortable alliance with privileged classes and institutions. Arthur Schlesinger in 1957 noted the widespread feeling "that liberalism in America has not for 30 years been so homeless, baffled, irrelevant, and impotent as it is today."

In the end, it was the Russians who inspired a revival of liberal purpose. On October 4, 1957, two months to the day after Schlesinger's words appeared in the *New York Times*, the Soviet Union launched into orbit an 184-pound satellite called Sputnik, and in the process struck a devastating blow at America's self-regard and sense of security.

If the Russians had Sputnik, a host of commentators concluded, they probably had intercontinental ballistic missiles as well. If they were capable of concentrating resources inferior to America's to launch Sputnik, their will to prevail in the Cold

War just might be firmer than ours.

The conservative New Hampshire Republican, Senator Styles Bridges, for once catching the national mood, declared: "The time has come clearly to be less concerned with the depth of pile on the new broadloom rug or the height of the tail fin on the new car and to be more prepared to shed blood, sweat, and tears."

### **An Affluent Society?**

But concern about the nation's purpose found its chief spokesmen among the liberal intellectuals. Sputnik gave a point to their invocations against complacency and hedonism. It lent urgency to their preference for community well-being over narrow personal pursuits. And it made social criticism fashionable again.

J. K. Galbraith was writing another book in 1957. He had no high hopes for its reception until the Soviets launched their satellite. Then, he later recalled, "I knew I was home." A best-seller in 1958, *The Affluent Society* took exception to what it claimed to be the preeminent social goal of the American people—the perpetual increase of production for private use.

In a society where the real wants of most people were already satisfied, Galbraith argued, more private consumption meant less production for the public sector, social imbalance, and public squalor amid private opulence. Accordingly, Galbraith advocated higher taxes to divert wealth from private consumption into schools, parks, police departments, hospitals, slum clearance, and scientific research. One benefit of spending more on schools and slum clearance would be the reduction of such poverty as still existed.

As he knew it would, Galbraith's

call for less materialism and more attention to the public welfare perfectly suited the nation's post-Sputnik temper.

The attacks on Galbraith's book were as important as the book itself. Leon Keyserling, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers under President Truman, took aim at the heart of Galbraith's argument by denying that the United States was an affluent society.

Not only did most families not live in luxury, a huge minority—25 percent—were actually poor. Poverty on this scale could be diminished neither by spending more on public services, as Galbraith argued, nor by redistributing the wealth, as Galbraith did *not* argue. Poverty could be reduced in the future mainly as it had in the past—by large increases in production for private use and hence in general living standards.

### **Faster Growth**

Thus, while Galbraith ridiculed growth, Keyserling sang its praises. He blamed the Eisenhower administration for an annual growth rate in GNP of only two percent in 1953–57 and advocated policies to increase it to five percent a year. Thanks in large measure to Keyserling, the issue of faster economic growth became a deepening liberal concern as the decade neared its end.

After Sputnik, liberal anxiety over national security became obsessive. When liberal intellectuals talked about reviving the public sector, they usually included building nuclear missiles, improving conventional military forces, and increasing economic aid to progressive noncommunist regimes in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. The Yale economist James Tobin, a liberal, a Keynesian, and a future member of Kennedy's

Council of Economic Advisers, asserted in 1958 that if the nation's leadership would only inform the people of the dangers, they would willingly "pay the taxes necessary to keep the Western World ahead in basic science, in weapons research and development, in armaments. . . ."

### **Tough on Ike**

The liberal intellectuals, who had entered the 1950s in retreat, were departing the decade in a fighting mood. Inspired by Galbraith, they summoned the nation to a higher purpose than mere production for private consumption. Persuaded by Keyserling, they demanded a national commitment to increased economic growth. They urged the nation to repair the public sector, and they pleaded with it to spend more to win the Cold War.

But though more aggressive than in the early 1950s, the liberals had amended none of the premises with which the decade began. Their program contained no hint of radicalism, no disposition to revive the old crusade against concentrated economic power, no desire to stir up class passions, redistribute the wealth, or restructure existing institutions. The liberals remained dedicated to that Pax Americana whose benefits to mankind would seem less evident later than at the time. At the end of the decade as at the beginning, the intellectuals were holding fast to the vital center.

Thanks to the anxieties provoked by Sputnik, the elite intellectuals found the public increasingly attentive to their exhortations.

Democratic politicians were especially receptive, since the critique of the intellectuals lent itself readily to partisan purposes. The nation was threatened by a missile gap, the

Democrats said, but Eisenhower was more worried about the budget. The nation needed spiritual inspiration, but Eisenhower was playing golf. The nation needed strong leadership and an activist government, but Eisenhower was old, tired, and increasingly dominated by reactionary advisers.

During the first half of 1960, a presidential election year, American self-esteem suffered its worst setbacks since Sputnik, making prophets of the intellectuals and issues for the Democrats.

In January, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev alarmed the gullible by boasting again that he had nuclear rockets capable of wiping any country "off the face of the earth." In May, the Russians shot down an American U-2 spy plane and captured its pilot. In Paris for a summit meeting, Eisenhower endured Khrushchev's denunciations of the spy flights, refused to apologize, and finally left deeply depressed. In June, as Eisenhower was preparing to depart for Japan, anti-American riots in Tokyo forced his hosts to withdraw their invitation.

### **The National Purpose**

Communist influence, meanwhile, was increasing in the Middle East and Africa, the military situation was deteriorating in Southeast Asia, and Fidel Castro was rapidly leading Cuba into the Soviet bloc.

Liberal intellectuals and Democrats led the nation in an orgy of self-flagellation. "If I wanted to destroy a nation, I would give it too much and I would have it on its knees, miserable, greedy, and sick"—so wrote novelist John Steinbeck. "With the supermarket as our temple and the singing commercial as our litany, are we likely to fire the world with an ir-

resistible vision of America's exalted purposes and inspiring way of life?"—that was Adlai Stevenson.

One evidence of the spreading malaise was the search in 1960 for the national purpose. President Eisenhower appointed a commission to define it. *Life* magazine engaged distinguished Americans to recover it. The Junior Chamber of Commerce exhorted its 200,000 members to discuss it. The national purpose eluded all pursuers, but one thing was certain. Whoever was the Democratic presidential candidate in 1960 would insist on its restoration.

### Superman

As it turned out, that candidate was John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

The intense national interest in the campaign of 1960 owed as much to the personality of John Kennedy as it did to the somber character of the issues. The man intrigued nearly everybody, including novelist Norman Mailer, who wrote the year's most interesting appraisal of the candidate for *Esquire* magazine.

Mailer dismissed Kennedy's public mind as "too conventional" but hailed him nonetheless as "a great box-office actor," a character of genuine mystery and heroic dimension. Mailer sensed that Kennedy as hero would have a more profound impact on America than Kennedy as statesman, that a Kennedy Presidency might give "unwilling charge" to energies now confined to the American underground.

Kennedy, Mailer thought, might rescue mass man from the supermarket of contemporary culture by reviving the myth that every American is potentially extraordinary. Mailer entitled his piece "Superman Comes to the Supermarket."

Was Kennedy really extraordi-

nary? To some extent Mailer was the victim of supermarket advertising in buying the Superman image.

Kennedy was hailed as a naval hero of World War II for rescuing his crew after a Japanese destroyer rammed his PT boat in the Pacific in 1943. But his fatally bad judgment at moments during this episode might have earned him a court martial as easily as the Navy Cross.

He wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning book in 1955, *Profiles in Courage*, about courage in the Senate, but he himself had demonstrated precious little of it in his eight years as a member of that body. Kennedy was, as advertised, an extremely intelligent man, but his was an intelligence concerned with process and technique, not with ends and values.

### Politics First

He was an expert practitioner of the cool style so much in vogue in his time—self-mocking, detached, ironic, graceful under pressure. But the cool style made a virtue of stunted feelings, in Kennedy's case not only for people, women especially, but for the causes that stirred other men.

In truth, legions would follow Kennedy not because he was extraordinary but because he might be, not for his achievement but for his promise. If not Superman yet, he might become Superman, and this was the secret of his personal and political magnetism.

Mailer found the political Kennedy uninteresting, but it was only as a politician that Kennedy might truly be described as extraordinary. "Kennedy became a statesman," his close political aide Lawrence F. O'Brien has written, "but he was a politician first, a tough and resourceful one, the best of his time." Here



was an aspect of the man of which there had been no early hint.

Kennedy won election from Massachusetts to the U.S. House in 1946 and to the Senate in 1952 on no more than his good looks, his father's money, and his war record. In Congress, he attempted neither to gather power nor to wield influence, content to remain on the fringes and play the loner. But during the mid-1950s, he emerged as something of a Washington matinee idol—author and war hero, husband of a beautiful socialite, a millionaire who enjoyed the pleasures of the world. These qualities were enough to bring him within a few votes of the nomination for Vice President at the 1956 Democratic convention.

#### **Dips in the Pool**

Only then did Kennedy determine his true vocation, which was to secure the top spot for himself in 1960.

His mission set, Kennedy rapidly developed into the complete politician. In 1957, he began crisscrossing the country, sizing up local politicians, learning the terrain in strange regions, charming audiences, making friends. To set the stage for his presidential bid, he sought and won a massive majority in his campaign for re-election to the Senate from Massachusetts in 1958. The following April, Kennedy met with his closest advisers at his father's house in Palm Beach and between dips in the pool planned the most effective national machine in the history of presidential politics.

Two weeks later, Larry O'Brien began touring the primary states to gather intelligence and seek alliances. "I kept waiting for the opposition to show up, but it never did," O'Brien recalled. The opposition consisted of Senator Stuart W. Sy-

nington of Missouri, whose main advantage was that he had few enemies; Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas, the Senate majority leader who nurtured the fantasy that influence in Washington could produce delegates at the convention; Adlai E. Stevenson, the darling of the liberals and two-time party nominee, longing to be drafted for one more try; and Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, the talkative liberal from Minnesota with a legislative record that put Kennedy's to shame.

#### **The Catholic "Issue"**

After he announced his candidacy in January 1960, Kennedy plunged into the primaries. He had to enter several and win each one to convince the party managers that a Catholic at the head of the ticket would not bring ruin in November.

Only Hubert Humphrey was willing to contest the primaries with him. Kennedy hoped to finish off Humphrey with a crushing victory in Wisconsin in April and then march through the rest of the primaries unopposed. But when Kennedy scored a less impressive victory in Wisconsin than anticipated, the dogged Humphrey pursued him into West Virginia, a Bible-Belt state not famous for charity toward the Catholic Church. For the first and only time of the campaign, gloom descended on the Kennedy camp.

But Kennedy's people blitzed the state, and the candidate himself, never more effective, disarmed bigots by forthrightly discussing the issue of religion. Kennedy's victory in the West Virginia primary in May was a dazzling achievement that assured his nomination at the July convention in Los Angeles.

Kennedy was not equally successful with all groups. Notably resistant

to his embrace and hostile to his heroic poses were the liberals, especially the liberal intellectuals.

They remembered that the candidate's father, Joseph P. Kennedy, American Ambassador to Great Britain before the United States entered World War II, had supported the appeasement of Hitler. They remembered Jack Kennedy's irresponsible charge from the floor of the House in 1949 that procommunists were influencing America's Far Eastern policy. They remembered Kennedy's comment to an interviewer in 1953 that he was not a true liberal and did not feel comfortable with people who were. And they remembered, indeed could not forget, that the entire Kennedy family had regarded Senator Joe McCarthy as one hell of a fellow.

#### Wooing the Eggheads

But Kennedy needed the liberal intellectuals, the soul of the Democratic party, the guardians of its ideals; in 1959 he set out to win them too. He began making occasional trips to Boston to meet with Cambridge academics, soliciting their advice, sometimes even taking it. Some of the professors agreed to write position papers for his campaign. In 1960, Kennedy flooded the intellectual community with copies of his campaign tract, *The Strategy of Peace*. In primary states he made contact with groups of local intellectuals, flattering them with his attentions.

Most of all, Kennedy's speeches that spring reflected the concerns of liberal intellectuals with such fidelity that he was indistinguishable on the issues from his major liberal rivals, Humphrey and Stevenson.

Though still sentimentally attached to Adlai Stevenson, most liberals were preparing for a realistic switch of allegiance to the new

power in the party as the Democrats met in Los Angeles, July 11, 1960.

Kennedy nearly lost the liberals again when, after his first ballot nomination, he chose Lyndon Johnson as his Vice President. The conservative Texan was a man whom liberals could not abide. Before the balloting, they rejoiced as Kennedy deftly dispatched Johnson's bitter challenge for control of the convention. Now Kennedy was cynically resurrecting Johnson to buy the loyalty of Southern Democrats. The liberals went home angry and stayed angry into the next month.

#### Winning Cold Wars

On the eve of the campaign against the Republicans, late in August 1960, the national board of the Americans for Democratic Action met in secret to endorse candidates at the Congressional Hotel in Washington, D.C. The most important voice of independent liberalism in the United States, the organization's national leadership urged unqualified support for Kennedy and Johnson. But, as Arthur Schlesinger reported in a letter to Kennedy, delegates from the local chapters either opposed endorsement or favored it with "utmost tepidity." Schlesinger had expected to find apathy for the ticket at the meeting, but not the hostility he actually encountered. He warned Kennedy that he was in danger of losing the liberals and the intellectuals, "the political crusaders in the Democratic party—the issue-oriented people who would ordinarily by this time be covering their cars with Kennedy stickers, arguing with their friends, sending letters to the papers, manning local organizations, canvassing their neighborhoods, and, in general, charging the campaign with emotion and zeal. . . ."



*Vice President Lyndon Johnson confers with Kennedy in 1963. Looking back on his own Presidency, Johnson confided to historian Doris Kearns: "I constantly had before me the picture that Kennedy had selected me as executor of his will, it was my duty to carry on. . . ."*

Schlesinger urged Kennedy to make use of liberals in the campaign and to run as a liberal himself. He need not have worried. Kennedy had been running as a liberal for some time and did not intend to change course now. When that became clear, as it soon did, most of the ADA types, who had cursed the candidate in August, would find him no less extraordinary, no less heroic, than did Norman Mailer.

From the opening address of his campaign in Detroit's Cadillac Square on Labor Day to his tumultuous homecoming in Boston on election eve, Kennedy appealed for votes using the issues developed by the intellectuals during the late 1950s. They saw complacency, lethargy, im-

minent decline and decay. So did he. They called for national sacrifice, for energetic executive leadership, for the will to repel communism abroad and repair the public sector at home. So did he.

Kennedy's main issue was the Cold War and how to stop losing it. "My campaign for the Presidency," he reiterated, "is founded on a single assumption, the assumption that the American people are tired of the drift in our national course, that they are weary of the continual decline in our nation's prestige . . . and that they are ready to move again."

To discourage Russia from launching a surprise attack, he pledged to build more missiles. To stamp out "brush fire wars," he promised to

procure more conventional weapons. He would never be content with second place in the space race, with producing fewer scientists than the Russians, or with an economy that grew one-third as fast as Russia's.

### Wiping Out Poverty

Second only to the Cold War as an issue in Kennedy's campaign was economic growth and how to increase it. Faster growth would keep us ahead of the Russians, impress the uncommitted peoples, cure unemployment, and pay for improvements in the public sector.

Too busy to learn much about the growth issue before his nomination, Kennedy sought expert guidance soon after he won it. On August 3, 1960, the candidate spent several hours on his yacht off Cape Cod, conferring with liberal economists J.K. Galbraith, Paul Samuelson, Seymour Harris, and Richard Lester. (Galbraith was there mainly for the sunshine and Bloody Marys, since growth was hardly his issue.)

The economists told Kennedy that faster growth depended on getting businessmen to increase their rate of investment in new plants and equipment. How could the government induce businessmen to invest more? Simply by lowering interest rates to reduce the cost of borrowing, the professors explained.

But nothing is really simple in the arcane world of economics. Cheap money posed dangers of its own, Samuelson warned, because it could trigger inflation. To avoid inflation, Kennedy would either have to put a brake on the federal budget or raise taxes on individuals. In his summary of the meeting, Samuelson wrote: "Thus an over-balanced budget or one with a lower deficit would be the counterpart of the investment-

inducing easy-credit policy."

Kennedy found the advice of Samuelson and company to his liking. "I think it was the first real education he had in modern fiscal policy," Seymour Harris said later. In his campaign, Kennedy promised to reverse the disastrous Republican policy of tight money and to run a budget surplus in good times, thereby achieving faster growth without inflation.

Repair of the public sector was Kennedy's other (Galbraithian) variation on the theme of getting the country moving again. He promised to clear the slums, wipe out poverty, bring prosperity to depressed areas, provide a decent education to every school child, restore dignity to the aged, and remove the hardships resulting from automation.

### A Dilemma

A large gap separated these goals from Kennedy's specific proposals, which turned out to be merely the piecemeal reforms advocated by the Democrats unsuccessfully in recent Congresses. They included more urban renewal, federal loans to businessmen locating in depressed areas, Medicare, federal aid to help build classrooms and pay teachers, and higher minimum wages. These were mere extensions of the welfare state perhaps, but sufficient to permit the candidate to run in the tradition of Wilson, Roosevelt, and Truman.

Finally, there was the issue of civil rights, fast becoming the most emotionally charged topic in American politics. It posed an apparently insoluble dilemma for Kennedy. To win the election he needed the black vote and would have to support the cause of civil rights to get it. But he also needed white Southern votes, which he might lose if he pressed the issue too hard.

Throughout August, Kennedy wrestled with the political dilemmas of the civil rights issue. Among those in his camp urging Kennedy to go all out for the Negro vote was Harris Wofford. A friend of Martin Luther King, Jr., and a former staff member of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, Wofford left a post at the University of Notre Dame Law School in the spring of 1960 to join the Kennedy staff. By August, he had emerged as a key figure in the campaign's civil rights division.

#### **A Stroke of the Pen**

Wofford found his candidate neither knowledgeable about the civil rights problem nor committed to a position on it. One morning in August 1960, Kennedy spotted Wofford looking for a cab and gave him a lift to the Senate Office Building. Kennedy was driving his red convertible fast, Wofford recalled, "and his left hand was tapping on the door. . . . And he said, 'Now, in five minutes, tick off the ten things that a President ought to do to clear up this god-damn civil rights mess.'"

By the time the campaign opened in September, Kennedy had decided to run as the civil rights candidate, as the liberals had urged. He promised to offer a bill early in the next session of Congress to implement the civil rights pledges of the Democratic platform. He said that with "a stroke of the presidential pen," he would do what Eisenhower had not done—end bias in federally aided housing. He even gave oblique sanction to the growing campaign of civil disobedience against segregation.

The President, he said, had to exert moral leadership "to help bring equal access to facilities from churches to lunch counters, and to support the right of every American

to stand up for his rights, even if on occasion he must sit down for them."

When the presidential campaign began in early September, the polls rated the contest a tossup, but seasoned observers gave the edge to the Republican nominee, Vice President Richard M. Nixon. As it turned out, the election was the closest in history. Kennedy won 49.7 percent of the popular vote to his opponent's 49.5 percent, and his plurality was only 118,550 votes.

In a close election, of course, every strategem, every accident, the contribution of every voting bloc can be made to seem decisive. The results in 1960 were due to many things: to economic recession, to Kennedy's performance in four televised debates with Richard Nixon, to his success in defusing the issue of religion, to his running mate's exertions among white Southerners, to much else besides.

#### **Raising the Issues**

Yet, from hindsight, not the least of the causes of Kennedy's victory were the issues that he raised. By appropriating the critique of the liberal intellectuals, Kennedy acquired a political identity, gave contour and content to his candidacy, and invested his campaign with a sense of historic purpose. No one, in the end, was more impressed by the performance than the liberals themselves, imitation being the highest form of flattery.

As it turned out, Kennedy's liberalism had been just another ploy in his brilliant campaign. Only in the realm of foreign policy did the new President promptly honor his promises, initiating a major arms build-up soon after his inauguration and deploying American power in a campaign to "assure the survival

and the success of liberty."

In 1961, when his Council of Economic Advisers urged Kennedy to adopt Keynesian measures to restore vigor to the domestic economy and reduce unemployment, he turned them down rather than offend corporate prejudices. When the civil rights lobby demanded the legislation pledged during the campaign, Kennedy not only reneged, he crafted a strategy calculated to avoid a challenge to Southern segregationists. When, in 1961, he proposed a series of social welfare programs that were merely warmed-over measures from the 1950s, Oscar Gass, speaking for many other liberals, accurately remarked in *Commentary*: "How small a gap separates the critics of the Affluent Society from the most devoted spokesmen for the affluent."

Kennedy's caution owed something to the slim margin of his victory in 1960 and the continuing domination of Congress by Republicans and Southern Democrats. It owed not a little also to his instinctive conservatism that the rhetoric of the 1960 campaign had been designed to obscure. But Kennedy was an intelligent conservative capable of responding flexibly to events.

The event that educated him and millions of other Americans during the early 1960s was the growing black protest movement, gaining

force year by year and rapidly moving north, a movement that painfully clarified the interconnection among unemployment, poverty, and racism. When that movement mobilized tens of thousands to march in the streets, as it did in 1963, Kennedy responded as any intelligent conservative would. To forestall radicalism and diminish the threat of violence, he moved to redress the grievances of the oppressed.

It was then that he turned to the liberals for guidance.

In January 1963, he endorsed a judicious application of Keynesian principles in the form of a \$10 billion tax cut to revive the economy and reduce unemployment. In June, following Martin Luther King, Jr.'s showdown with segregation in Birmingham, he sent Congress the most far-reaching civil rights bill in American history. And that same month, his chief economist, Walter Heller, reflecting Kennedy's expressed concern, began working toward an anti-poverty program.

By the end of his abbreviated tenure, Kennedy had become the President the liberals always hoped he would be. If some of the programs he helped to launch proved inadequate, flawed, or badly conceived, the fault would lie less with him than with the liberals and intellectuals whose instrument he had belatedly become.

