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John F. Kennedy

By Jane Runyon

The presidency of John F. Kennedy was unique from the beginning of his campaign. He was the first candidate to be involved in live, televised debates. He became the first Roman Catholic elected president. He was the youngest man to be elected president. He was the fourth president to be assassinated. He was the eighth president to die in office. He is one of the most remembered presidents.



John Fitzgerald Kennedy was born May 29, 1917, in Massachusetts. He came from a wealthy, prominent family. His father served as United States Ambassador to Great Britain from 1937 to 1940. Jack, as his family called him, was the second of nine children. There was always a lot of activity in the Kennedy household. Jack loved being part of all the activity despite poor health as a child.

Jack Kennedy graduated from Harvard University in 1940. He joined the navy and spent part of World War II as the skipper of a PT boat in the Pacific. In 1943, his boat was rammed by a Japanese destroyer and sunk. Kennedy was able to swim with his crew to safety. He pulled one crew member with him. The PT 109 crew credited Kennedy with saving their lives.

After World War II, Kennedy decided to try his hand at politics. He was elected to Congress as a representative from Massachusetts in 1946. In 1952, he ran against the popular Senator Henry Cabot Lodge. He won and took his place in the United States Senate.

While serving his first year in the Senate in 1953, Kennedy married Jacqueline Bouvier. The couple became a perfect example of Washington society.

In 1955, Kennedy required back surgery for a wound he received

in the war. While recovering, he wrote a book called *Profiles in Courage*. His efforts were rewarded in 1957 when he won the Pulitzer Prize for his book.

Kennedy's climb in politics continued. In 1956, he was a candidate for the vice presidential nomination at the Democratic Party convention. It was a close race, but he did not get the nomination. The next four years saw Kennedy setting the stage for a bigger nomination. He campaigned all across the country and won the Democratic nomination for president at the 1960 convention. His personality and leadership won over Democrats who worried about his young age and his religion. No Roman Catholic had ever been elected President of the United States.

Live television debates were set up between Kennedy and the Republican candidate, Richard Nixon. Many say that Kennedy's good looks and **charismatic** personality won him a lot of votes during these debates. Whatever the cause, Kennedy won the presidency by a very slim margin. The difference was 118,574 votes to be exact.

John F. Kennedy brought his idea for a "New Frontier" to the White House. He made civil rights problems at home a main issue. He challenged American scientists to win the "Space Race" with the Soviet Union. He instituted aid for the people in Latin America. He created the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps trained Americans to travel throughout the world and to share better ways of living with underdeveloped countries.

One of Kennedy's failures became known as the Bay of Pigs. He allowed trained Cuban exiles to attempt the liberation of Cuba from Communist leadership. They were not successful.

He was able to stand up against a threat from Russia that also involved Cuba. The Russians placed nuclear weapons on the island of Cuba. The weapons were pointed toward the United States, only 90 miles away. Kennedy called for a blockade of ships trying to reach Cuba. He also ordered the Russians to remove the weapons. For several days Americans waited to see who would blink first. In the end, the Russians removed their weapons. Relief could be felt throughout the nation.

John Kennedy's presidency was cut short by an assassin's bullet. It is widely believed that he was shot by Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas, Texas, on November, 22, 1963. Oswald was shot and killed by a Dallas businessman two days later. The details of the

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assassination and the reasons for it may never be known. John Kennedy left behind his wife, Jackie, and two children, Caroline and John, Jr. Another son, Patrick, died as a baby. Patrick is buried next to his father in Arlington Cemetery.

John Kennedy didn't just leave a family behind. He left a newly invigorated nation of people. He left plans for the future. His vision included equal rights for all Americans and a world of peace. He made the first steps towards this vision. We can only speculate how far we might have come had he lived.

John F. Kennedy

Questions

- _____ 1. John Kennedy represented the state of Massachusetts.
- A. False
 - B. True
- _____ 2. What kind of family did Kennedy come from?
- A. Small and poor
 - B. Large and poor
 - C. Large and wealthy
 - D. Small and wealthy
- _____ 3. What caused the injury to Kennedy's back?
- A. He was injured in World War II.
 - B. He fell while campaigning.
 - C. He was injured by his brother.
 - D. He was a sickly youth.

4. Given the title *Profiles in Courage*, what do you think Kennedy's book might be about?

- _____ 5. Which of these descriptions best fits John F. Kennedy?

- A. He was a Roman Catholic priest.
- B. He was unhealthy and Jewish.
- C. He was older than most candidates.
- D. He was young and energetic.

- _____ 6. What domestic issue was Kennedy interested in?

- A. The Peace Corps
- B. Latin America
- C. Civil Rights
- D. China

- _____ 7. John Kennedy was assassinated by a Dallas businessman.

- A. False
- B. True

8. What might have happened if the Russians had not taken their nuclear weapons out of Cuba?
