

RONALD E. POWASKI

A watercolor illustration of the Statue of Liberty, rendered in shades of blue and green. The statue is shown from the waist up, holding a torch in her right hand and a tablet in her left. The background is a soft, textured wash of light blue and white, with some darker blue and green splatters at the bottom. The overall style is artistic and evocative.

American Presidential Statecraft

DURING THE COLD WAR AND AFTER



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Ronald E. Powaski

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During the Cold War and After

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Ronald E. Powaski
Cleveland State University
Euclid, Ohio, USA

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To Kimberley, Andrew, Leslie, Juliana, Kenneth, and Daniel

PREFACE

This is the second volume of a two-volume collection of case studies that examine a number of critical episodes in which presidents engaged in statecraft, either successfully or unsuccessfully.

This volume, *American Presidential Statecraft During the Cold War and After*, begins with an introductory chapter which discusses some of the personal and impersonal factors that influence statecraft.

Chapter 2 examines the factors that account for President John F. Kennedy's success in defusing the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, the most dangerous crisis of the Cold War era.

Chapter 3 explains why President Lyndon Johnson decided to escalate US military involvement in the Vietnam War, despite his realization that his decision would jeopardize his Great Society domestic program.

Chapter 4 examines the factors that account for President Richard Nixon's success in ending US involvement in the Vietnam War in 1973, and also his inability to prevent the collapse of South Vietnam two years later.

Chapter 5 discusses the factors that were responsible for President Ronald Reagan's ability to wind down the Cold War with the Soviet Union by the time he left the White House in January 1989.

Chapter 6 explores the reasons behind George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq in 2003.

The concluding chapter summarizes some of the key personal and impersonal factors that were important in the statecraft of the presidents examined in the previous chapters.

Volume 1, entitled *American Presidential Statecraft from Isolationism to Internationalism*, begins with an introductory chapter which attempts to identify a variety of personal and impersonal factors that influence statecraft.

The second chapter attempts to explain how and why President Theodore Roosevelt acquired the Panama Canal Zone in 1903–1904.

Chapter 3 explores the unsuccessful effort by President Woodrow Wilson to gain ratification of the Treaty of Versailles and, with it, US membership in the League of Nations.

Chapter 4 discusses the unsuccessful effort of Herbert Hoover, first as secretary of commerce and then as president, to bring about a new era of world peace and prosperity following World War I.

Chapter 5 explains why President Franklin D. Roosevelt was unable to avoid war with Japan in 1941, despite his determination to do so in order to concentrate US resources on helping Britain resist Nazi Germany.

Chapter 6 examines why President Harry Truman was unable to avoid the breakdown of World War II “Grand Alliance” with the Soviet Union and the subsequent onset of the Cold War between 1945 and 1947.

The concluding chapter summarizes some of the key personal and impersonal factors that were important in the statecraft of the presidents examined in these chapters.

Each of the case studies consists of a narrative background describing how and why a particular foreign policy was initiated, the nature of the opposition it encountered, and why the president succeeded or failed in achieving its objectives. In so doing, each case study will draw upon a sampling of analytical interpretations by leading historians of the subject. In addition, a number of primary source documents and suggested readings accompany each of the case studies in order to provide readers with additional opportunities for further in-depth study.

Hopefully, the case studies will provide the reader with a deeper appreciation of the complexities of the foreign policy process and an understanding of the characteristics of successful presidential statecraft.

In a work of this scope, I am indebted to many individuals whose written accounts helped me to describe the personalities and events that make up the case studies. I have attempted to acknowledge my debt to them in the endnotes near the end of each chapter.

I also want to thank my editor, Kristin Purdy, who encouraged me to proceed with the project, and Jessica Wheeler, who helped guide it to completion.

This book is dedicated to my children and step-children, Kimberley Sirk, Andrew Powaski, Leslie Sirk, Juliana Powaski Kachmarik, Kenneth Powaski, and Daniel Sirk, who have enriched my life immeasurably.

As always, this book and others I have written would not have been possible without the help, encouragement, and forbearance of my wife and best friend, Jo Ann.

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Introduction

Alert Americans who read the newspaper or watch news programs cannot fail to realize how much their destinies, as well as the fate of all the world's inhabitants, have been influenced—if not largely determined—by foreign policy decisions made by American presidents. One of the best illustrations of this fact occurred during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. Would any of us be here today if President John F. Kennedy had not handled this crisis with skill and wisdom?

Because the president plays the central role in the foreign policy process—indeed, in the destiny of the United States and the rest of the world—it is necessary, as historian Barton Bernstein advises, to focus upon “the president’s personality, values, aspirations, hopes and anxieties, and his background to explain important foreign policy decisions.”¹

What characteristics of effective leadership did Kennedy display in bringing the Cuban Missile Crisis to a satisfactory conclusion? What skills, values, aspirations, and anxieties did he demonstrate during the crisis? On the flip side, what were his shortcomings as a statesman? Why do some presidents succeed as statesmen and others fail?

PRESIDENTIAL STATECRAFT: THE PERSONAL FACTORS

Presidents who succeed as statesmen exhibit a number of personal qualities. Among them is the ability to think globally. They can see, for example, that what happens in the Eastern Hemisphere may affect, and often does affect, what happens in the Western half of the globe.

Successful presidential statesmen also display the ability to transform their knowledge of world affairs into a philosophy of international relations that blends both realism and idealism, the two fundamental philosophies that have influenced US foreign relations since the foundation of the Republic. Realism demands a clear view of US national interests and what is required—and possible—to secure them. Idealism, on the other hand, provides the inspiration that gives a foreign policy sustaining power in the halls of Congress and in the living rooms of the American people.

Effective statesmen also have the ability to transform their philosophy of international relations into specific foreign policy objectives and to identify and coordinate the means to attain them, including diplomacy, economic policy, and, if necessary, military action. This requires a president to get the foreign policy bureaucracy—including the State Department, the Defense Department, and the various intelligence agencies—to cooperate in formulating and implementing the desired policy.

In addition, to be successful in statecraft, a president must demonstrate an ability not only to conceptualize foreign policy goals, but also to explain them as coherently, and as simply, as possible to the executive bureaucracy, to the Congress, the media, and, ultimately, to the American people.

Although Americans as a whole are generally oblivious to foreign affairs—unless they can, or do, lead to US military engagement—public support can be the decisive factor in determining a foreign policy's success or failure, as Theodore Roosevelt, for one, demonstrated in achieving his goal of building a canal through Panama.

Obviously, successful practitioners of presidential statecraft must have above-average intelligence; in fact, without it, they would not have risen to the nation's highest public office in the first place. It also goes without saying that it is advantageous for presidents entering office to have considerable knowledge of world affairs and, ideally, some experience in dealing with other countries. But most new presidents do not, and consequently must resort to “on the job” training in statecraft. Our three most recent presidents—Barack Obama, George W. Bush, and William “Bill” Clinton—fit into this category.

But especially important in determining whether a president will be a successful statesman is the level of wisdom he or she possesses. Wisdom enables a president to determine whether a particular foreign policy is likely to be beneficial not only for the United States but also for the wider world community. Wise practitioners of presidential statecraft realize that

the pursuit of narrow national interests risks undermining the ability of the United States to play its leading role in world affairs.

Intelligence may be largely innate, but wisdom—if it is gained at all—is a product of personal experience that begins in the home, is nourished by educational institutions, and is reinforced by dealing with life’s problems, triumphs, and tragedies. In the process, a would-be president develops his or her character, which the late political scientist James Barber wrote, “encompasses his essential values and priorities, his sense of right and wrong” and “determines the ends to which his personal resources will be used.”² Kennedy biographer Thomas Reeves agrees with Barber that “good character is formed in large part at an early age. It is neither inherent nor reflexive, and it must be cultivated by concerned parents who afford moral guidance from infancy onward.”³

Interestingly, a president’s values usually affect, if not determine, his or her philosophy of international relations. At the risk of oversimplification, realists usually are more concerned about advancing national interests than they are about the morality of the methods by which they attempt to do so. Idealists, on the other hand, usually insist that moral considerations must be as important in the conduct of international relations as they are in one’s personal affairs. No statesman, of course, is a pure realist or a perfect idealist. But one of these philosophies usually predominates in the way he or she approaches the world. At the same time, the physical and mental health of presidents can, and usually does, affect the way they conduct foreign policy. For example, John Kennedy was almost always in constant back pain during his presidency, and he took a variety of drugs, some illicit, to deal with it. He privately admitted that his poor performance at the Vienna summit with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in 1961 was in part due to the excruciating back pain he endured during their two days of conversations.

The mental health of presidents can also affect his ability to conduct foreign policy. The stroke that Woodrow Wilson suffered during the summer of 1919, some believe, made him more irascible and less willing to make the compromises necessary to save the Treaty of Versailles. It also is generally recognized that President Richard Nixon possessed serious character flaws, including paranoia, which contributed to his forced resignation as a consequence of his involvement in the Watergate scandal. His resignation, in turn, contributed to the demise of the *détente* policy he had pursued toward the Soviet Union. Watergate certainly was instrumental in explaining President Gerald Ford’s inability to intervene militarily to prevent the collapse of South Vietnam in 1975.

Obviously, any attempt to arrive at an accurate psychoanalysis of a president, dead or alive, or an evaluation of his medical condition, will naturally be affected by distance in time and by the dearth of pertinent records. But this does not necessarily mean that mental and physical health factors do not play a significant role in explaining why a president acted as he did, only that the significance of these factors is difficult to substantiate. Moreover, the propensity of academic scholars to dismiss or overlook psychological factors has been more than matched in recent years by a growing recognition of the importance of psychological data.⁴ Accordingly, where pertinent, this study will include references to the mental and physical health of the presidents examined in the case studies and their possible, or even likely, effect on the foreign policies they pursued.

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

Presidents engaged in statecraft do not act in a vacuum. Their actions are greatly influenced by a host of environmental factors. Among those that influence a nation's foreign policy are its geography, including its location in the world, climate, terrain, water systems, and natural resources. Clearly, the United States has been blessed by very favorable geography. Throughout most of its history, it has been shielded from foreign invasion by two oceans. In addition, most of the United States possesses a temperate climate, rich soil, and abundant natural resources, all of which were conducive to the development of highly productive agriculture and industry.

As a consequence, millions of people from Europe and Asia were encouraged to emigrate to America. (Additional millions of African immigrants were brought to the New World in chains.) The rapidly increasing population of the nation, in turn, provided an abundant supply of workers and consumers for America's new industries, while its capitalistic economic system created a favorable environment for their establishment and growth.

MILITARY POWER AND FOREIGN POLICY

Military power is another important factor affecting a nation's foreign policy. Militarily weak nations have very limited influence in the affairs of the world.

When Theodore Roosevelt (TR) entered the White House in 1901, the United States was the world's preeminent industrial power. But the industrial might of the United States had not yet been transformed into military power. TR would begin that transformation by constructing a modern navy and using it as a "big stick" to support his vigorous diplomacy.

During Woodrow Wilson's presidency, the United States, for the first time, played a major military role in a European conflict, which mushroomed into World War I. In that conflict, more than one million US troops fought in Europe and played a crucial role in the defeat of Germany. However, for a variety of reasons, Wilson was unsuccessful in translating America's military and economic might into a diplomatic triumph. The Senate rejected the treaty Wilson negotiated, the Treaty of Versailles, with the result that the United States returned once again to relative non-entanglement in the military affairs of Europe.

With the rise of the Axis powers during the 1930s, President Franklin Roosevelt felt compelled to undo the nation's traditional aversion to military involvement in non-hemispheric conflicts. American military and economic power, which was enhanced by technological advances like the atomic bomb, played a prominent role in winning World War II. As a consequence, by the time FDR died, in April 1945, the United States was the world's preeminent economic and political power.

For over four decades after World War II, the main threat to a world order dominated by the United States was Soviet communism. From Harry Truman to Ronald Reagan, US presidents engaged the Soviet Union and its allies and clients by using military force, or threatening the use of military force. In addition, the presidents of the Cold War era employed a variety of other methods to "contain" the spread of Soviet influence, including alliances, covert operations, military and economic assistance, secret diplomacy, and even assassinations. Both superpowers also engaged in a costly and dangerous nuclear arms race, which, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, almost produced a nuclear holocaust.

By the time George W. Bush entered the presidency in 2001, the United States was the world's sole superpower for almost a decade. Its military and economic power far outstripped any other nation. Yet that superiority did not necessarily translate into foreign policy success, as Bush's disastrous war in Iraq demonstrated. Abundant military and economic power, in short, does not guarantee successful foreign policy. What a president does with that power—or does not do with it—is a critical factor in determining whether or not he is a successful statesman.

THE CONGRESS

The nature of the American political system is another very important factor that presidents must consider in making foreign policy. The US political system can be characterized as democratic, representative, and federal in nature. The powers of the federal government and its three branches—the executive, legislative, and judicial branches—are enumerated in the US Constitution. By specifying separate powers for each of the three branches, and providing for a system of checks and balances, the Constitution attempts to ensure the proper functioning of each branch.

The separation of powers principle, for example, is evident in the Constitution's assigning to the president the responsibilities for conducting the nation's foreign policy and commanding the armed forces. Congress, for its part, can affect the nation's foreign policy through its power to approve or reject appropriations, taxes, and the institutional structures of foreign relations. Moreover, the Constitution gives Congress the power to declare war. However, the Senate alone has the responsibility to approve treaties and presidential nominations.

Yet in spite of the Framers' attempt to delineate separate powers for the executive and legislative branches, both have engaged in periodic foreign policy conflicts. Presidents have often sought autonomy in conducting foreign policy, while Congress has often worked to restrain autonomous presidential action. Moreover, modern presidents increasingly have attempted to circumvent the Senate's foreign policy role in order to avoid opposition from that body.

One way presidents have tried to get around the Senate is by concluding executive agreements with foreign countries, rather than by authorizing presidential action via the treaty route. In 1940, for example, FDR used an executive agreement, rather than a treaty, to transfer US destroyers to Britain. He feared that congressional and public opposition to US involvement in World War II would block the transfer of the warships had he attempted to bring it about by means of a treaty with Britain. Afterward, the use of executive agreements increased rapidly. Between 1940 and 1970 about 95 percent of the formal understandings of the United States with other nations were in the form of executive agreements.⁵

THE BUREAUCRACY

The Senate has not been the only potential source of trouble for presidents. The executive bureaucracy also can create problems. The State Department, which is charged with the responsibility of assisting the president in conducting the nation's foreign relations, has often been criticized by chief executives for being too unimaginative in its thinking and too resistant to new foreign policy initiatives. Believing this to be the case, President Richard Nixon launched a number of foreign policy initiatives without the participation, or even the knowledge, of the State Department.

The nation's military chiefs also can complicate the president's ability to formulate and conduct foreign policy. Since the unification of the armed forces in 1947, military advice has been the responsibility primarily of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), complemented by the civilian secretary of defense and his subordinates, the secretaries of the Army, Navy, and Air Force. Yet presidents do not have to accept the advice of the nation's military leaders any more than they have to accept the counsel of the State Department, and at times they have not. In 1941, for example, FDR ignored the advice of his chief military advisers, who wanted him to avoid policies that would provoke a war with Japan. They wanted the United States to concentrate on assisting Great Britain to resist Adolf Hitler.

Even America's intelligence agencies can cause problems for presidents. In 1961, John F. Kennedy was humiliated as a result of believing the CIA's estimate that the Cuban people were eager to overthrow the government of Fidel Castro. Acting on that estimate, Kennedy approved an invasion of Cuba by a brigade of CIA-trained Cuban exiles. Castro's military forces easily defeated the invaders, who landed on Cuba's Bay of Pigs coast. Kennedy subsequently felt compelled to publicly accept responsibility for the failure of the operation.

In order to assist the president in coordinating information provided by the intelligence agencies with his domestic, military, and foreign policies, in 1947 Congress created the National Security Council (NSC). Its members include the president, the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, the chairman of the JCS, and the director of the CIA, among others.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower relied very heavily on the NSC, but subsequent presidents have not. Kennedy, for example, considered the Eisenhower NSC system, "with its interlocking committees that led to

countless position papers but little policy,” inefficient and ineffective.⁶ As a consequence, Kennedy frequently turned to his chief national security advisor, McGeorge Bundy, for advice on foreign policy, even more so than he did to his Secretary of State Dean Rusk.

However, under Ronald Reagan, the NSC staff became a means not merely for managing the foreign policy bureaucracy, but for circumventing it. Allegedly without the knowledge of Reagan, the NSC staff conducted an illegal transfer of funds to anti-government forces (the “Contras”) in Nicaragua by selling US weapons to Iran. The so-called Iran–Contra affair could have resulted in the impeachment of Reagan had he not been so close to the end of his second term in office. Nevertheless, it was, at the very least, an acutely embarrassing episode for him.

Personal as well as philosophical differences among presidential advisers also can complicate the foreign policy process. For example, there were frequent policy clashes between President Reagan’s secretary of state, George Shultz, and his secretary of defense, Caspar Weinberger. Among other differences of opinion, the more pragmatic Shultz believed it was important to engage the Soviets in negotiations to reduce the risks of a nuclear war. However, Weinberger, an ardent cold warrior, believed that more, not less, nuclear weapons were necessary to deter Soviet aggression. Consequently, he opposed Shultz’s effort to initiate arms reduction talks with the Soviets.

The differences between Shultz and Weinberger were personal in nature as well as philosophical. The two men had been business rivals before they entered government. During the Nixon administration, Shultz had served as an economic adviser to the president, while Weinberger was secretary of education. In the end, with considerable assistance from the president’s wife, Nancy Reagan, Shultz prevailed over Weinberger and negotiated an agreement with the Soviets, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which eliminated a whole class of nuclear weapons and, in the process, helped Reagan wind down the Cold War.

PUBLIC OPINION

Public opinion is another significant factor that presidents must consider in conducting the nation’s foreign policy. Although Americans as a whole are generally oblivious to foreign affairs—unless they can, or do, lead to US military engagement—public support can be the decisive factor in determining a foreign policy’s success or failure. When, in 1968, it

was obvious that Lyndon Johnson had lost the support of the American people for his Vietnam War policy, he abandoned his quest for reelection to the presidency.

To be sure, scholars debate the nature and impact of public opinion on the policymaking process, but presidents usually regard it as significant. No president was more sensitive—perhaps overly sensitive, some critics argue—to public opinion than FDR. Eager to do what he could to check Axis aggression in the face of overwhelming isolationist sentiment in the nation, FDR delivered a speech, in October 1937, in which he called for a “quarantine” of the “aggressor” nations. But he dropped the proposal after it provoked a hostile reaction from the news media and the Congress. Yet some historians believe Roosevelt may have misjudged the strength of that hostility because he himself had no way of precisely measuring the impact of public opinion. Accordingly, this view holds, he erred on the side of caution.

Effective presidential statesmen realize that a high degree of public support is the foundation of a successful foreign policy. However, to obtain it, presidents frequently have felt compelled to oversell their foreign policy initiatives—often in the strongest and starkest terms—in order to bring the Congress and the American people along. For example, George W. Bush exaggerated the nature of the threat posed by Iraq’s Saddam Hussein—a dictator who was supported by the Reagan administration during Iraq’s long war with Iran in the 1980s—in order to persuade Congress to authorize military action against Iraq in 2002. Such presidential manipulation of public opinion can backfire on a president, as it did for Bush in Iraq. After it became obvious that the war not only would not be over as quickly as Bush had promised, but also was unnecessary, his Iraq policy lost public support, his image as a statesman was discredited, his party lost control of Congress, and a Democrat, Barack Obama, won the presidential election of 2008.

NOTES

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2. James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance*, 2nd ed. (1977), x–xi, 3–14.

3. Thomas C. Reeves, *A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy* (1961), 16.
4. James Gilbert, "Wilson: A Psychological Profile," <http://www.vqronline.org/articles/1983/winter/gilbert-wilson-psychological-profile/>
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6. Nathan and Oliver, 31.

John F. Kennedy, the Hawks, the Doves, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962

On October 16, 1962, President John F. Kennedy was informed that an American U-2 spy plane had photographed Soviet intermediate- and medium-range ballistic missile deployments in Cuba, only 90 miles from the Florida coast. The ensuing crisis proved to be the closest approach to a super-power nuclear war during the entire Cold War era. The crisis pitted Kennedy against Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union, and Fidel Castro, who had seized power in Cuba in 1959.

What factors, both personal and environmental, were responsible for this most dangerous crisis? Why and how was Kennedy able to prevent a nuclear conflict? What characteristics of statesmanship did he display—as well as lack?



Photo 2.1 President Kennedy meets with Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna, June 1961

WHO WAS JOHN F. KENNEDY?

John F. Kennedy (JFK) was born in Brookline, Massachusetts, on May 29, 1917, the second son of Joseph (“Joe”) Kennedy and Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy. Although Joe Kennedy’s grandfather had arrived penniless in America from Ireland in 1848, he himself had become a millionaire by the age of 35 by investing in real estate, motion pictures, liquor importing, and merchandizing. His marriage in 1914 to Rose Fitzgerald, the daughter of Boston mayor John “Honey Fitz” Fitzgerald, produced nine children, one of whom he lived to see become president of the United States.¹ Even though Joe Kennedy’s business ventures required him to be absent from home for extended periods, he was, as Rose admitted, “the architect of our lives.”² Joe Kennedy imprinted his children with his values, which biographer Thomas Reeves summed up as, “Life was primarily about getting what you want, about winning—no matter what the cost, no matter whom it hurt.”³

JFK was plagued by poor health, not only as a child but also throughout his adult life. He was born with what a family physician later called an “unstable back,” a deformity that, as an adult, would cause acute pain lasting weeks. As a child, he had scarlet fever, whooping cough, measles, and chicken pox. In 1931, at the age of 14, he had an appendectomy. Three years later, during his junior year at Choate, an elite private prep school for boys, he was diagnosed with colitis. Yet, despite his illnesses, Kennedy did well at Choate and graduated in June 1935. That fall, he enrolled in Princeton University, but soon was compelled to withdraw after being hospitalized for possible leukemia. Fortunately, he did not have that disease and, the following September, he enrolled in Harvard University.

During the summer of 1938, Kennedy sailed to England with his father, who had been appointed US ambassador to Britain by FDR. Two years later, Kennedy’s Harvard senior honors thesis, a study of Britain’s failed attempt to appease Adolf Hitler, was published as a book. Entitled *Why England Slept*, it soon became a bestseller. The study convinced Kennedy that the United States must be actively engaged in international affairs and militarily prepared to resist aggressor nations.⁴

In June 1940, Kennedy graduated cum laude from Harvard with a degree in international affairs. The following spring, he volunteered for the US Army, but was rejected, mainly because of his troublesome back. However, thanks to his father’s influence, he got into the US Navy in September of that year, and was assigned to the Office of Naval

Intelligence. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he was given the command of a patrol boat, *PT-109*. While taking part in a nighttime patrol in the Solomon Islands on August 2, 1943, Kennedy's boat was rammed and cut in half by a Japanese destroyer. In spite of re-injuring his back, he swam to a nearby island while towing a wounded crewman. He returned home a hero, but forever would loathe the carnage of war.

JFK's older brother, Joe Jr., was not so fortunate. He was killed in 1944 when his plane exploded over England. His death shattered his father, who had been convinced that his eldest, and favorite, son would be president of the United States someday. Joe Kennedy now assigned the task of fulfilling that dream to John. "It was like being drafted," JFK recalled years later. "My father wanted his eldest son in politics. 'Wanted' isn't the right word. He demanded it."⁵ Until then, however, Kennedy had no ambition to be a politician. After his return from the Pacific, he worked briefly as a news reporter. But he soon succumbed to his father's pressure to run for political office. With the help of his hero's record, and his father's money and connections, he won election to the US House of Representatives in 1946, at the age of 29. Six years later, he won a seat in the US Senate by defeating the incumbent Republican senator, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., the grandson of Woodrow Wilson's nemesis, Henry Cabot Lodge Sr.

In 1953, Kennedy also married Jacqueline Lee Bouvier. Together they had two children, Caroline and John Jr., as well as two children who did not survive infancy. A year after his marriage, Kennedy was so crippled with back pain that he decided to undergo two risky spinal operations, the second of which brought him perilously close to death. He survived, but his back pain would accompany him to the presidency, along with his other health problems, particularly periodic infections that were aggravated by adrenal deficiency, a by-product of his Addison's disease.⁶

One infection, according to Dr. Nassir Ghaemi, a professor of psychiatry at Tufts University, came very close to killing Kennedy, barely five months after he became president. Examining JFK's medical records, which became accessible to scholars in 2002, Ghaemi discovered that on the night of June 22, 1961, the president developed a high fever, indicative of a systemic infection, which, because of his Addison's disease, was life-threatening. Doctors saved his life by giving him high doses of antibiotics and even more steroids to help his immune system fight the infection. Still, it was not until July 3 that the crisis had passed and the president could resume his normal activities.⁷

Kennedy's serious health problems, obviously, had not stopped him from running for the presidency. He competed for the Democratic Party's vice-presidential nomination in 1956, but failed to get it. Despite this defeat, he received considerable national exposure, which helped him to win the Democratic presidential nomination in the summer of 1960. He then narrowly defeated Vice President Richard Nixon in the November election.

THE CHARACTER OF JOHN F. KENNEDY

Kennedy's election brought to the White House a young (43), handsome, and very intelligent individual with a beautiful wife and two small children. His public image was enhanced by his membership in a rich and famous family, a Harvard degree, and a heroic reputation earned in World War II. Moreover, Kennedy had a gift for oratory, delivering words—largely fashioned by his chief speechwriter, Ted Sorenson—whose idealism inspired many Americans. The famous challenge expressed in his inaugural address, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country,” is still recalled in schools across the nation.⁸

However, Kennedy remains an enigmatic character. His ever-present pain, his fear of an early death, and his life in a very competitive family had helped to make him physically brave and mentally tough. Like FDR, Kennedy was extremely energetic—except when experiencing an acute medical crisis—highly sociable, witty, and charismatic. Both presidents also were highly open to new experiences, and loved to read, think, plan, and talk. In addition, they were both skeptical of conventional wisdom.⁹

Yet a negative, and potentially very damaging, characteristic that JFK possessed was a highly unusual degree of personal recklessness, particularly in his sex life. Any one of his extramarital affairs—with a wide variety of women that included prostitutes, a Mafioso's girlfriend (Judith Exeter), and an alleged East German spy (Ellen Rometsch)—could have destroyed his presidency had they been exposed before he was assassinated. Kennedy was able to keep these affairs out of the public eye, historian Robert Dallek explains, because of “a journalistic taboo on violating a president's privacy.”¹⁰

Apparently, however, Kennedy worried more about the public exposure of his health problems than his sexual behavior. He tried to relieve his chronic back trouble with painkillers, antispasmodics, steroids, and occasional injections of vitamins, amphetamines, and other drugs by the

well-known celebrity physician Dr. Max “Feel Good” Jacobson. (The State of New York deprived Jacobsen of his medical license in 1971 after concluding that his injections were dangerous.)¹¹ Dallek believes that Kennedy’s performance as president was not adversely affected by either his sexual behavior or his health problems. However, Dr. Ghaemi thinks that JFK’s frequent infections were caused largely by his extramarital sex life and his misuse of anabolic steroids—the same drugs used by body-builders—and that they did adversely affect his performance as president, at least until 1962, when his doctors got rid of Dr. Jacobson and brought the president’s drug usage under control.¹²

Yet historian Bruce Miroff believes that if Kennedy’s health and sexual behavior did not adversely affect his performance as president, his psychological condition did. Miroff argues that Kennedy suffered from an acute inferiority complex, which was manifested in a perverse need to prove himself—to his father primarily—as sufficiently worthy to wear his dead brother’s mantel. In his book *Profiles in Courage*, Kennedy wrote that “great crises produce great men and great deeds of courage.” But he also realized that great crises rarely occur in the domestic arena; only the field of foreign relations, Miroff writes, could have satisfied Kennedy’s thirst for greatness. And only the global struggle with the Soviet Union could provide the ultimate test of his courage.¹³

As with most Americans of his era, Kennedy considered the Soviet Union a threat to the United States. But he had a propensity to describe that threat in apocalyptic terms. For example, on January 30, 1961, he told a joint session of Congress that “the tide of events has been running out, and time has not been our friend.”¹⁴

In particular, Kennedy was alarmed by a speech delivered by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev on January 6, 1961. In it, the Soviet leader declared that his country would support “wars of national liberation” in the underdeveloped world. Kennedy insisted that the United States would have to confront Khrushchev’s Third World challenge in order to convince the Communists that “aggression and subversion will not be profitable routes to pursue.”¹⁵

THE BAY OF PIGS INVASION, APRIL 1961

Cuba was the scene of Kennedy’s first Third World confrontation with the Soviet Union. By the time he entered the White House, on January 20, 1961, Cuban leader Fidel Castro had openly aligned his country

with the Sino-Soviet bloc, and Kennedy's predecessor, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, had broken off US diplomatic relations with Castro's government. Moreover, on March 17, 1960, Eisenhower approved a top secret CIA plan to train 1400 Cuban émigrés to invade their homeland and lead an insurrection against Castro. In addition, Eisenhower authorized a CIA program to assassinate the Cuban leader. In all, eight assassination attempts were made on Castro's life, all of which, obviously, were unsuccessful. Finally, Eisenhower broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba, early in January 1961. Shortly before Eisenhower left the White House, later that month, he informed Kennedy about the CIA's planned invasion of Cuba. However, he left the decision to implement it to the new president.

Kennedy reluctantly approved the CIA's invasion plan. However, for a variety of reasons, the operation, which began on April 17, 1961, ended in humiliating failure. For one, Castro found out about the planned invasion from spies in the Cuban exile community. In addition, because JFK feared condemnation by the international community, he refused to permit direct US military involvement in the operation. As a result, Castro's air force sank two of the invaders' four ships, and his ground forces compelled them to surrender after only three days of fighting. The surviving invaders, numbering 1189, were imprisoned until December 1962, when Kennedy bought their release by providing Cuba with \$53 million worth of tractors and medical supplies.

Kennedy was personally humiliated by the Bay of Pigs fiasco. He was not accustomed to losing. His disposition was not helped by the fact that, prior to and during the invasion, he struggled with "constant, acute diarrhea" as well as a urinary tract infection.¹⁶ Privately, he lashed out at the CIA for advocating the plan, and the JCS for supporting it. CIA Director Allen Dulles, who had assured the president that the invasion could not fail, was compelled to resign.¹⁷ Kennedy also learned later that the JCS had only reluctantly supported the invasion in order to avoid challenging the CIA. Privately, he complained, "Those sons-of-bitches, with all their fruit salad [medals], just sat there nodding, saying it would work."¹⁸

Yet Kennedy also realized, and publicly admitted, that he had primarily himself to blame for the Bay of Pigs fiasco. "How could I have been so stupid as to let them go ahead?" he asked Ted Sorensen privately.¹⁹ For one reason, he had been reluctant to cancel a plan that had been initiated by Eisenhower, fearing that Republicans would criticize him for being soft on communism. At the same time, Kennedy did not want Castro or

Khrushchev to think that the United States would tolerate a Soviet puppet state in the Western Hemisphere. He also brushed aside the warnings of more perceptive minds who opposed the operation. Among them were Truman's secretary of state, Dean Acheson, and Senator William Fulbright (D-Ark.). At the end of March 1961, Acheson had told Kennedy that it "did not take a Price-Waterhouse accountant" to figure out that some 1400 Cuban exiles could not defeat Castro's army of some 25,000 troops.²⁰ Fulbright told the president that Castro was a "thorn in the flesh" but not a "dagger in the heart." He recommended that Kennedy cancel the invasion and simply isolate Cuba.²¹

The Bay of Pigs affair prompted JFK to change his mode of decision-making. He realized that he had not only listened to too few advisers but also given the issue too little time before making a decision. Afterward, he added to his White House staff Army General Maxwell Taylor, who had a reputation for challenging Pentagon thinking, in order to interpret and assess future advice from the Joint Chiefs.

The Bay of Pigs fiasco did not, however, change Kennedy's determination to get rid of Castro. To that end, the president asked the Joint Chiefs to develop "contingency" plans for a US invasion of Cuba. Ironically, the target date for implementing the plan was October 1962, the month in which the Cuban Missile Crisis would take place.²² In November 1961, Kennedy also approved a CIA-drafted program, called "Operation Mongoose," which was designed to undermine Cuba's economy, sow the seeds of discontent among the Cuban people, and set the stage for a US invasion of the island nation.²³

It is also possible, if not probable, that Kennedy authorized the continuation of the Eisenhower-initiated CIA program to assassinate Castro.²⁴ Amazingly, the CIA acted in consort with members of the Mafia who still had connections in Castro's Cuba, believing that they would provide cover for US involvement. But, again, several attempts on the Cuban dictator's life were unsuccessful and, years later, the CIA's connection with the Mafia ultimately was exposed.²⁵

THE VIENNA SUMMIT, JUNE 1961

In the wake of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, and against the recommendation of his advisers, Kennedy agreed to meet with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna in early June 1961. The CIA had warned him that Khrushchev might deliberately try to knock him off balance in Vienna. However, the

president believed that his refusal to see the Soviet leader would be interpreted as an admission of weakness.²⁶

Before the Vienna summit, the CIA had prepared for Kennedy a “personality sketch” of the Soviet leader. It included a reference to Khrushchev’s “hypomania,” which is commonly associated with “lability of mood and with rapid shifts to anger or depression.” However, Khrushchev’s wife, Nina Petrovna Khrushcheva, described him more simply: “He’s either all the way up or all the way down.”²⁷

Over the course of two days of talks, on June 3 and 4, Khrushchev’s pounding style of argument devastated Kennedy. He maneuvered the president into a debate on Marxist theory, an area in which Kennedy proved to be no match for the experienced Bolshevik agitator. Kennedy asked Khrushchev to agree to a standstill in the Cold War, in order to reduce the risks of a superpower war. The request was tantamount to asking the Soviet premier to discard his life’s beliefs and accept continued US world predominance.²⁸

Perceiving Kennedy as weak, Khrushchev brought up the Berlin problem the next day. His voice rising in anger, he called West Berlin “the bone in my throat.”²⁹ Thousands of East Berliners and other East Germans had escaped across the open border into West Berlin, causing serious doubt about the survivability of the communist regime in East Germany. Khrushchev hoped to stop the population hemorrhage by giving the East German government control of the crossing points into West Berlin. He demanded Kennedy’s consent to a German peace treaty that would finally and formally end World War II—and also terminate the Western military presence in West Berlin. However, Kennedy replied that any attempt to end the Western presence in the city would mean war. “It is up to the U.S. to decide whether there will be war or peace,” Khrushchev responded. “The Soviet Union will sign it in December if the U.S. refuses an interim agreement.” “Then it will be a cold winter,” Kennedy finished.³⁰

Following his last talk with Khrushchev, Kennedy returned to the US embassy pale and worn out. There he told *New York Times* columnist James Reston that Khrushchev had “beat the hell” out of him and treated him “like a little boy.”³¹ The fact that Kennedy had thrown his back out again did not help his performance. He was forced to sit upright for many hours over two days of talks and returned to the White House barely able to stand. Soon thereafter, he developed the systemic infection that nearly killed him.³²

Yet dismay with JFK's performance at Vienna was strongest among the generals and, in particular, the tough talking, cigar chomping, commander of the Strategic Air Command (SAC), General Curtis LeMay. Kennedy's "half measures" during the Bay of Pigs invasion, in LeMay's opinion, were primarily responsible for its failure and for Khrushchev's bravado in Vienna.³³ Kennedy, for his part, complained privately about LeMay's inability to understand anything outside the military box, particularly diplomacy and politics. Nevertheless, on June 19, 1961, he promoted LeMay to the JCS, as commander of the Air Force. Apparently, he did not want the outspoken general to retire and travel around the country accusing the administration of being "soft" on communism.³⁴

THE BERLIN CRISIS, 1961

In the two months following the Vienna summit, Khrushchev backed up his Berlin threat with action. On July 8, in response to Kennedy's March announcement that US conventional and nuclear forces would be increased, Khrushchev announced he would expand Soviet military spending by one-third. Kennedy considered Khrushchev's Berlin challenge a threat not only to the freedom of West Berlin but also to the US commitment to defend the entire free world. He also realized, however, that if he did not demonstrate US determination to maintain a presence in the city, he would jeopardize his own presidency.

Applying the lessons of the Bay of Pigs affair, however, Kennedy no longer relied solely on advice from the CIA, or from the JCS, for that matter. Instead, he turned to a wide variety of sources, including Dean Acheson, who emphasized that it was necessary to convince Khrushchev that the defense of West Berlin was linked to America's nuclear weapons. Khrushchev, Acheson wrote, "cannot be persuaded by eloquence or logic, or cajoled by friendliness."³⁵ For JFK, however, the prospect of resorting to nuclear weapons to defend West Berlin was unthinkable. The Pentagon had told him that an estimated 70 million Americans—almost half the nation's population—would die in an all-out nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union. Kennedy told his brother, Robert, "The thought ... of women and children perishing in a nuclear exchange, I can't adjust to that."³⁶

Also appalling to him was the possibility that the generals might acquire the right to use nuclear weapons. When General LeMay and Army Chief of Staff General Lyman Lemnitzer requested authorization to defend

Berlin with nuclear weapons, Kennedy walked out on them. “These people are crazy,” he told an aide. He then ordered General Taylor to prepare a directive ensuring that all decisions to use nuclear weapons would remain strictly with the president.³⁷

Rather than advice from the hard-liners, Kennedy decided to accept the recommendation of less hawkish advisors, including Secretary of State Dean Rusk and US Ambassador to the UN Adlai Stevenson, to combine negotiations with the threat of US conventional forces.³⁸ On July 25, he announced that he would ask Congress to approve \$3.25 billion in new defense expenditures and to authorize the tripling of draft calls, the call up of reservists, and the extension of military duty tours.³⁹

In addition to waving the sword, Kennedy also offered Khrushchev an olive branch. He said he was willing to participate in negotiations designed to resolve the Berlin crisis—as long as the talks did not attempt to diminish Western rights in West Berlin. Significantly, this concession gave Khrushchev a way out of the crisis, for Kennedy had refrained from demanding a Soviet guaranty for the continued freedom of movement between East and West Berlin. In other words, Kennedy was unwilling to risk nuclear war to defend the rights of East Berliners to travel to the West.⁴⁰

Khrushchev took advantage of Kennedy’s concession. On the night of August 12–13, the East German government began construction of the infamous Berlin Wall. Rather than reacting angrily, Kennedy was relieved. He saw the Wall as a symbol of Soviet acceptance of the status quo in Berlin. “It’s not a nice solution,” he said, “but a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war.”⁴¹

In contrast to his performance during the Bay of Pigs fiasco, JFK’s handling of the Berlin crisis, it is generally recognized, was brilliantly successful. Learning from his Bay of Pigs mistakes, he tackled the Berlin crisis systematically and acted only after he had consulted a wide variety of advisers. By combining a show of military power with an offer to negotiate, he demonstrated to Khrushchev that he could be firm as well as flexible.

KHRUSHCHEV’S GAMBLE: SOVIET MISSILES TO CUBA

By April 1962, however, Khrushchev had become convinced that the United States was about to invade Cuba. US military exercises in the Caribbean that month, combined with the CIA’s attempts to assassinate Castro (some of which Soviet and Cuban intelligence had uncovered in