

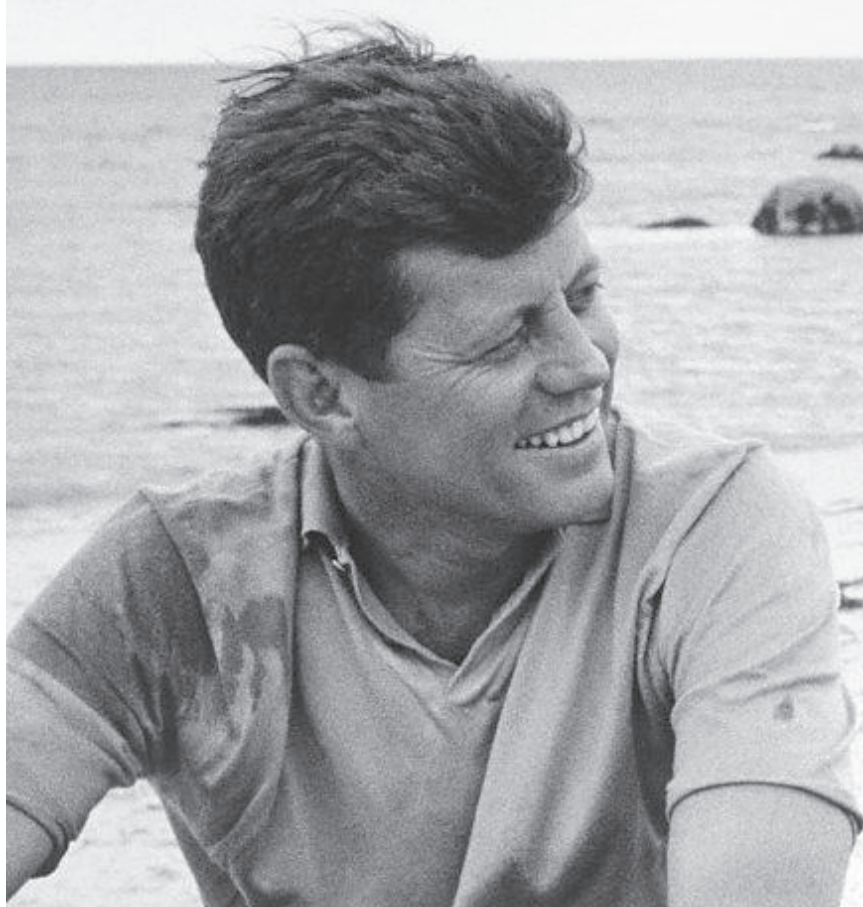
ALL HIS
BRIGHT LIGHT
GONE

The Death of John F. Kennedy
and The Decline of America

PETER MCKENNA

*When we go back to the
sea . . . we are going back
from whence we came.*

— John F. Kennedy



ALL HIS BRIGHT LIGHT GONE

The Death of John F. Kennedy and
The Decline of America

PETER MCKENNA



NEW FRONTIER PUBLISHING

NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK

Copyright © 2016 by Peter McKenna
All rights reserved.

ALL HIS BRIGHT LIGHT GONE, The Death of John F. Kennedy and The Decline of America,
by Peter McKenna

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the express written permission of the publisher, except where permitted by law.

ISBN 978-0-9971372-0-0

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Book Designer: Robert L. Lascaro
LascaroDesign.com

New Fronter Publishing
New York City, New York

Printed in the United States
on acid-free paper

This book is dedicated to my wife, Perrin.

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: The Sins of the Cold-Blooded	11
--	----

PART ONE

THE FORMATIVE YEARS.....	19
--------------------------	----

1. A New Appreciation of John Kennedy	21
2. Tragedy and Magic in His Soul	33
3. Thinking Out the Problems of the World	41
4. The Warrior No One Wanted.....	51
5. The Testing of Jack Kennedy	57
6. Hungry for Revenge	67
7. A Death Sentence	77

PART TWO

THE BIRTH OF A PUBLIC SERVANT	87
-------------------------------------	----

8. Using Politics to Express His Ideals.....	89
9. Greedy Men Hiding Behind Ideology.....	99
10. The Sickly Fellow Wins.....	105
11. An Old-Fashioned Patriot.....	111
12. The Miracle of 1960	117
13. The World That Awaited Him	125

PART THREE

THE NATION KENNEDY WAS BUILDING 135

14. An Idealist Without Illusions 137

15. A Beacon to the World 141

16. A Step Backward 149

17. Face to Face with the Devil 155

18. Making War Insane 159

19. Getting Out of Vietnam 165

20. Kennedynomics 175

21. The Fight Against Greed 185

22. Confronting Racism 191

PART FOUR

THE NATION WE BECAME WITHOUT KENNEDY 197

23. What Kennedy Gave Us 199

24. Something Grotesque and Senseless 209

25. Tearing Down an Idol 219

26. The Common Cause Decays 229

27. Nixon Splinters the Nation 235

28. Reaganomics: The Final Blow 241

29: A Mentor for the Ages 261

Addendum: Conspiracy 279

Bibliography 283

Index 289

Acknowledgements 293

About the Author 295

This is the first of two books about the influence of the Kennedy family on the United States, focusing on the economic, political, and social changes that occurred after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. An upcoming book will cover the impact of losing Robert and Ted Kennedy.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Four months after President Kennedy's death, Jacqueline Kennedy appeared in a newsreel shown in movie theaters across the country and on television. She thanked the American people for their expressions of sympathy. One sentence of her remarks read simply, "All his bright light gone from the world." The title of this book comes from that sentiment.

*The soft, the complacent, the self-satisfied societies will be swept away
with the debris of history.—John F. Kennedy*

PROLOGUE

THE SINS OF
THE COLD-BLOODED

TOO MANY YEARS have gone by for me to recall exactly what I said in class that awful Friday morning. I remember only that it was my nature then to be arrogant and rude, that the classroom erupted in raucous laughter, and that the teacher, normally a placid man, angrily slammed a book on his desk and shouted for quiet. He glared at me for a moment, but just as he began to speak, the bell rang, cutting him off, and I bolted out the door to avoid his reprimand.

The passage of time, however, will never dull my memory of what happened next. In the hallway, students who should have been walking casually to their next class were instead gathering in small groups. The girl in front of me screamed and covered her face with her hands. A teacher wrapped her arms around the girl and drew her close.

Clearly, something was terribly wrong. I stood for a moment in utter confusion, unable to make sense of the nervous chatter that filled the hallway. Then from across the hall a friend noticed my bewilderment. He shouted: "It's Kennedy. He was riding in a convertible in Dallas and somebody shot him in the head!"

In my mind's eye, I saw Kennedy's face. I could not understand why anyone would want to hurt this man. When I pictured the damage a

bullet to the head would cause, I went weak in the knees, and for a moment, I was unable to form a coherent thought.

I cut my afternoon classes and went home to watch television. Before long, I heard Walter Cronkite say that Kennedy was dead, his words catching in his throat as he reported this shattering news. Immediately, I lapsed into denial, conjuring fantastic scenarios in which Cronkite was wrong and that Kennedy was still alive. It had all been a mistake.

As I awoke the next morning, I somehow sensed that once fully awake, I would have to admit that there had been no mistake, that my denial had been absurd, and that Kennedy was gone. So I tossed and turned, fighting desperately to remain under the protective blanket of sleep. But as sunlight brightened my bedroom, the events of the previous day came flooding back. I sat upright in bed, shuddered, and finally, I began to cry.

There was a reason for my intense reaction to Kennedy's death. I grew up in a lower-middle-class Irish family. My father was a cynical, irresponsible man, quick with his fists and his caustic tongue. He often called me "a dumb mick" and said that college "was for rich kids and Jews." I should be content, he insisted, with a lifetime of menial jobs and weekends sitting on a barstool.

I modeled my behavior on these low expectations. In high school, I was a habitual truant, contemptuous of the adults who tried to force me to care about things that did not matter. It took me five years to graduate dead last in my class. Like my father, I was a cynic, eager to find the worst in everyone.

One day in 1962, all this began to change. I picked up a newspaper and read an article about a White House dinner honoring Nobel Prize winners. President Kennedy began the evening by saying, "This is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone."

At the time, I was unaware that it was possible to convey a complex, meaningful thought with a mere handful of words. As I read and reread the article, I could see that Kennedy's purpose was not political; he was not pandering to voters. Instead, he was inspiring the citizens of this country to admire men who used their minds to improve the human condition. He was celebrating intellect and accomplishment, attributes that I had never considered important.

Kennedy's idealism, expressed so briefly and so beautifully, to borrow a phrase from Emily Dickinson, "took the top of my head off." I became enchanted by the English language.

It occurred to me that a president who possessed both the ability and the inclination to heighten our awareness of intellectual brilliance was unique. I began to follow his progress by reading newspapers and watching his press conferences. To gain a better understanding of the issues he discussed, I read books about history, politics, and current events. And I read everything I could find about Thomas Jefferson.

One day, in study hall, a teacher accustomed to my disdain for anything in print snatched a book out of my hands, no doubt expecting something pornographic. The book, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, was about Franklin Delano Roosevelt. We fell into a discussion of the Roosevelt years, and then I recited for him a short biography of each member of Kennedy's cabinet. His stunned disbelief was proof of my change. I had to build a makeshift bookshelf to hold the growing number of books I now eagerly consumed.

As I followed Kennedy, I also came to admire his idealistic approach to government. At a press conference, he said politics was a "noble profession," the mechanism used to fashion policies that make the United States a magnificent country. I thought of Washington, D.C., as an almost sacred place. I vowed to visit that city one day.

THEN CAME THAT AWFUL FRIDAY in November when I stood in the hallway at school, struck dumb by a thunderbolt of shock and sadness. Two days later, I stood on line for six hours, waiting to walk by Kennedy's flag-draped coffin in the Rotunda of the Capitol. My pilgrimage to Washington had come far sooner than I expected.

I had gained enough self-respect to understand that spending my life working menial jobs would be unproductive, wasteful, certainly not a life that Kennedy would approve of. It was too late to undo my appalling performance in high school, so I took night courses to prove to college admissions officers that I was not an imbecile, that I was serious about getting a degree. Eventually, I graduated from college and then earned a master's degree in journalism. Because John Kennedy awakened my interest in language, I have worked as a writer for more than 25 years.

While Kennedy was alive, I was elated just knowing that such an enlightened man was leading the country. But after he was gone, in

the decades after Dallas, I slowly lost the thread of what he meant to me. For a few years, on each anniversary of his death, I would listen to replays of his speeches, and old emotions would be rekindled.

But those moments gradually fell away, as did my interest in politics and history. The presidents who followed Kennedy in office seemed one-dimensional, so different from Kennedy; they spoke with passion only about the issues that promoted their narrow political agendas. Politics no longer seemed like a noble profession, and John Kennedy faded from my thoughts.

I now realize that a countless number of Americans experienced Kennedy in a similar manner. He inspired them to improve their lives, making his death particularly shattering. But as the shock of his death wore off, the best parts of him, his intelligence and uplifting spirit, became less immediate, and his impact on their lives gradually dissipated.

My indifference to politics lasted more than 40 years, until midway through the presidency of George W. Bush, when I could no longer ignore what was happening in this country. Bush was making a colossal mess of things, almost as if he spent each day trying to find ways to weaken our economy, our political system, and our morale.

In 2008, as the economy faltered and nearly collapsed, costing countless Americans their jobs, their homes, their health care, and their pride, Kennedy again became an important figure in my life. The economy had become my specialty as a writer. It occurred to me that this misery would not have occurred on Kennedy's watch. He was simply too intelligent to have promoted policies capable of tearing our economic system to shreds.

Could this vague feeling be true? Under John Kennedy's leadership, would the nation have suffered a crisis comparable to the horrific meltdown of 2008?

My search for an answer to this question became an obsession. I studied Kennedy's life and presidency in detail. To put his presidency into context, I also studied this nation's economic and political history, from its founding to the present day.

During this research, I discovered that Kennedy was indeed too sophisticated to have allowed a massive collapse of the U.S. economy. But this was just the beginning, the proverbial tip of the iceberg. As improbable as it sounds, the loss of Kennedy's overall approach to

government has changed this country more profoundly than is commonly believed. Without his leadership, the United States has become a bewildered nation, awash in childish political bickering and unable to resolve or even intelligently address the political and social issues that determine the quality of our lives.

You will find the reasoning behind these assertions in the body of this book. As a prelude, however, I offer the following: Our current understanding of Kennedy, who he was and what he meant to this country, even with five decades of hindsight to draw from, is immature and incomplete.

THIS NATION BEGAN AS A DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC. If it is to succeed, it must remain a democratic republic. Kennedy governed through the lens of this sentiment. He did everything he could to preserve and protect the principles of government that make this republic strong; he brought them to life for the American people. This was his genius.

After Kennedy's death, his approach to government slowly disappeared and the United States became a hollowed-out version of the country he had left behind. Less competent presidents ignored the principles that Kennedy honored, replacing them with a system that slowly destroyed the values of a republic. Their desperate attempts to perpetuate this system have created a form of government-by-ideology that would make the Founding Fathers and John Kennedy apoplectic with rage.

Here is an unconventional way of making the same point. In filmmaking, there is a mechanism called "the inciting incident," an event that determines what will happen during the remainder of the film. In the first minutes of a film, for example, if a man leaps from a tall building, we understand that all that follows will be devoted to explaining why he jumped. Everything evolves from this incident.

The film, *Hud*, was released the year Kennedy died. It explores the ethical dilemma faced by an elderly cattle rancher in the Texas Panhandle. The "inciting incident" occurs when he unknowingly buys a herd of cattle infected with a fatal disease. He faces two options: He can have the ranch quarantined and the cattle destroyed before the disease spreads, driving the ranch into bankruptcy, or he can quickly sell the cattle to unsuspecting buyers.

The rancher decides not to sell the infected cattle to others, an act of honesty that infuriates his son, who will now inherit a worthless ranch. The son berates his father, saying that he is out of touch with reality, too old to understand that turning a profit is all that matters.

The old man endures his son's tirade and finally defends his ethical stance by saying: "Little by little, the look of the country changes because of the nature of the men we admire."

The loss of John Kennedy's influence on our society was an inciting incident. In 1963, the nation did not admire men who believed that the accumulation of wealth was more important than integrity. Instead, we admired and often tried to emulate a president who urged us to heighten our sense of accomplishment, our respect for government, and our feelings of empathy for others.

But after Kennedy's death, we began to admire political leaders who, like the son in the scenario above, believed the accumulation of wealth should be our guiding principle. They told us that greed was good. We gave them respect and political power, and little by little, the look of this nation began to change.

Kennedy was once asked to contrast his style of leadership with that of his political opponents. Quoting Franklin D. Roosevelt, he said:

We have all made mistakes. But Dante tells us that divine justice weighs the sins of the cold-blooded and the sins of the warm-hearted on different scales. Better the occasional faults of a party living in the spirit of charity than the consistent omissions of a party frozen in the ice of its own indifference.

In this book, we are going on a journey through the life and times of John Kennedy. We will learn that he possessed the intelligence and vision to promote the values that make us an honorable people and an honorable nation.

We will learn that in the absence of this type of leadership, the quality of our lives has declined. We will learn that Kennedy's focus on improving the common good rather than individual greed was based on principles passed down to us from the Founding Fathers.

We will learn that it is time to return to the type of government he so briefly gave us, a government that weighs the sins of the cold-blooded and the sins of the warm-hearted on different scales.

And we will learn that to repair the damage inflicted on our democracy after 1963, we must acknowledge the following: President Kennedy gave us a prototype of what government in America should be. If we have the courage, we can use this prototype to ensure that “Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the Earth.”

Finding the courage to make this change, to use Kennedy as our teacher, is what this book is all about.

Peter McKenna
January, 2016



Kennedy arrives in New York in September 1938 after a trip to Europe. He became obsessed with learning about foreign governments, eventually visiting nearly every continent on the globe.

PART ONE

THE FORMATIVE YEARS

CHAPTER ONE

A NEW APPRECIATION OF
JOHN KENNEDY

We are creating a culture that is not conducive to good policy or good politics. — President Barack Obama.

A HALF-CENTURY AGO, on a cool November evening, an enormous jet landed at an airport near Washington, D.C., and taxied into the harsh glare of klieg lights. A truck with a hydraulic cargo lift mounted on the back sped across the tarmac to an open door at the rear of the plane. In the doorway, several men in dark suits struggled with the weight of an ornate wooden coffin as they carried it onto the lift and set it down at their feet.

Almost immediately, someone threw a switch and the lift began to move down to the tarmac. But after it had gone just a few feet, it stopped and would go no farther, forcing the men in suits to jump down and remove the coffin by hand. They moved quickly, almost frantically, knowing that each moment of delay was an eternity for Jacqueline Kennedy, the bewildered young woman who stood at the edge of the lift, her eyes locked on the coffin.

Unobserved, Robert Kennedy had galloped up a boarding ramp and pushed his way through the plane to be with her. Now they stood to-

gether on the lift, holding hands as they watched the manic frenzy on the ground below them. The men in suits swarmed around the coffin and pushed it into the rear of an ambulance. Jacqueline Kennedy fell forward into the outstretched arms of a man in military uniform, and he gently lifted her down to the ground. There were dark stains on her skirt and stockings. She walked to the ambulance and tried to open the door. When it would not open, she stepped back, confused, unsure of what to do next. After several uncomfortable seconds, someone unlocked the door from the inside. Jacqueline Kennedy took a seat behind a curtained window, and the ambulance disappeared into the night shadows.

Millions of Americans watched this macabre homecoming on black and white televisions. Unheard was their collective gasp the instant the coffin came into view. Unheard was the skipped beat of their hearts when Jacqueline and Robert Kennedy held hands, a small moment of tenderness that for a fleeting moment softened the raw grief that was spreading across the nation. Unheard was their muffled cries when they realized the dark stains on Jacqueline Kennedy's clothing were remnants of her husband's destruction.

Three days of elegant solemnity would follow: a tribute from the woman who loved John Fitzgerald Kennedy and sat beside him when he died. But on this night, those who brought him home were engulfed by anguish so raw that it could be endured only if their emotions were temporarily shut down. The friends, aides, and political leaders who came to the airport to show their respect found themselves incapable of speech. A journalist who stood among them would later write, "One wished for a cry, a sob, any human sound" to break the desperate silence.

Lyndon Baines Johnson and his wife came down a stairway at the head of the plane and walked to a microphone. The new president spoke with little emotion; his words were neither profound nor comforting. He said the nation had suffered a loss that could not be weighed, that the assassination was a deep personal tragedy for him, and that he would do his best. Then he asked the nation, and God, to help him in the days ahead.

It was about him; not once did he mention the name of the extraordinary leader who moments before had been removed from Air Force One on a cargo lift and hauled away like excess baggage.

Nor did he tell us how to deal with the awful questions that were beginning to tear at our guts.

For a brief time, the nation had been under the spell of an eloquent, idealistic man who spoke with passion about our history and culture. He challenged us to meet our civic responsibilities and spoke about the joy that comes with “the pursuit of excellence.” We had come to rely on his ability to make us proud of our country and of ourselves.

Now, suddenly, he was gone. How could something like this happen in the most civilized country on earth? What would become of us without him? Why had he died?

Kennedy had himself wrestled with the “why” of senseless death many times. His brother, a bomber pilot during World War II, had died when his plane exploded. A few years later, his sister died in a plane crash, and he slid into a deep, paralyzing grief, crying for days and endlessly re-reading her letters. Men he had come to love died under his command in combat. He stood in stunned silence over the grave of a friend killed during the bloody fighting on Guadalcanal, unable to comprehend why such a good man was destined to meet such a gruesome end.

Later, to help others cope with their own times of loss, Kennedy spoke about what grief had taught him. “There is always inequity in life,” he said. “Some men are killed in a war, and some men are wounded, and some men never leave the country. It is very hard in military or in personal life to assure complete equality. Life is unfair.”

Now, on this cool November evening, as the nation began to realize that he was gone forever, the harsh truth of his own words became the only possible explanation for the “why” of his death: “Life is unfair.”

What should we make of him now, after all this time, this man whose death so devastated this country? A half-century after Dallas, we are still struggling with that question, still coming to terms with John Kennedy, his life and presidency. Did he leave behind enduring gifts or merely a few years of style and glamor? Was he a great president or, as some have argued, a great pretender?

The American people have never wavered in their estimation that Kennedy was a great president. In one poll, they ranked him as the second greatest president in history, a few percentage points behind Abraham Lincoln, an astonishing statement of respect. When asked in polls to name the past president they would like to see returned to office today, the people have consistently answered overwhelmingly, John Kennedy.

The historians, political scientists, and pundits who assess the performance of presidents, however, believe the people love Kennedy because

his brutal death broke their hearts. They argue that he was not in office long enough to be considered great. To them, his legacy will forever be what he could have done had he lived. He was “a work in progress.”

In 1968, when he eulogized his slain brother Robert, Ted Kennedy said that he need not be “idealized in death beyond what he was in life.” According to the academics, the people have done exactly that with John Kennedy; they have irrationally elevated him to a status that he does not deserve.

James MacGregor Burns, a respected historian and Kennedy biographer, questioned the perception that Kennedy was a great president as follows:

His actual tangible material impact on history was not enough to justify this. After all, he was not a Churchill, he was not a Roosevelt. He didn't have time to be these people. Why did he have this kind of impact on the world? Was it a fabrication? Was it that he was handsome, his wife and kids? Was it civil rights?

There is some merit to this view. Only four presidents have been considered truly great: Washington, Lincoln, and Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt. George Washington led the revolution that created this nation and then set a high standard for future presidents. Abraham Lincoln transcended the presidency, preserving our unique system of democracy with his humanity and eloquence during a gruesome civil war that could have permanently torn the nation in two. Teddy Roosevelt ended years of government-sanctioned corporate greed and made this country a global power. Over a period of 11 years, Franklin Roosevelt, from his wheelchair, led us through the Great Depression and successfully fought a catastrophic world war.

Without the towering leadership of these men, the United States would be a vastly different country today. It is indeed irrational to rank Kennedy among these leaders. He was president for just 1,037 days, 103 days shy of a full term. Only five presidents in history served less time in office. He did not lead the nation through a prolonged crisis that tested his leadership abilities. He was Washington without the American Revolution, Lincoln without the Civil War, Franklin Roosevelt without the Great Depression or World War II.

Why, then, do the people insist, year after year, that Kennedy was

a great president?

A researcher who examines attitudes toward the presidency told the author, "I wish I had a dollar for every time someone told me that things were never the same after Kennedy died. They cannot explain exactly what changed, but they believe things went downhill after he died, and they miss him."

The emotional trauma caused by his death, as the academics contend, is certainly a factor. It is impossible to minimize the anguish the nation endured when Kennedy was murdered. If the shooting in Dealey Plaza occurred today, it would be captured by cell phone cameras and immediately uploaded to the Internet. We would be able to watch endless replays until we became numb to the horror.

But in 1963, we knew only that Kennedy had been shot in the head by a man using a high-powered rifle. This fate was too violent and hideous to comprehend. Our only recourse was to wrap Kennedy in a blanket of unconditional reverence.

The public may also believe that Kennedy was a great president because he possessed qualities often associated with great presidents. He could explain complex issues with the type of soaring eloquence that captivates and motivates people.

Having this ability, however, does not automatically elevate a president to greatness. Despite his charm and eloquence, Kennedy had not passed a prolonged test of his leadership. According him the mantle of greatness, under traditional standards, is impossible.

Should we say with finality that ordinary citizens are simply not as objective as historians, that their opinion of Kennedy is based on raw emotion rather than logic? Kennedy was a very good president who simply did not have the time to earn the greatness the people have bestowed on him. Would it be best to just let the matter rest with this assessment?

To do so would be a mistake. Kennedy's legacy is not what he could have accomplished if he had more time. It is instead what he accomplished in the short time he was given. His "actual tangible material impact on history" was enormous. His true legacy is the difference between the type of country he was building during his presidency and the type of country we became after his death.

What exactly is this "difference"? Consider the following: When a president enters the White House, he brings with him the characteristics that will shape his time in office. His genetic inheritance, family back-

ground, intelligence, education, and life experiences will determine his view of America and the methods he uses to promote this view.

A CHILD PRODIGY

IN THIS REGARD, KENNEDY WAS UNIQUE in our history. His early life was a perfect training ground for the presidency. He was, in fact, a child prodigy. As a boy, he spent countless hours reading about history, government, and world affairs, acquiring an adult's understanding of the very issues a good president should master. At boarding school, he read the *New York Times* every day. Then he would lie in bed and think about what he had just learned. A Kennedy family friend who visited him in the hospital said, [I found him] "so surrounded by books I could hardly see him. I was very impressed, because at that point this very young child was reading *The World Crisis* by Winston Churchill."

Kennedy was also no stranger to the brutal side of life. He endured the deaths of loved ones, the horror of war, and unrelenting physical illness and pain. He was rushed to a hospital, clinic, or infirmary, sometimes in a desperate attempt to save his life, 43 times in his 46 years. He received the last rites three times. He lived with the expectation that his life would be short.

Thus, by the time he reached the White House in 1960, Kennedy had lived through more intense, formative experiences than most people encounter in a lifetime. They endowed him with a sophisticated knowledge of government and a sense of empathy for the suffering of others. As president, he merged these attributes into a single, uplifting force that was unlike anything this country had ever seen. His goal was to use government to make our lives worth living during the short time we spend on earth.

STUDY AND TRAVEL

HISTORIANS TEND TO OVERLOOK the importance of the experiences that shaped John Kennedy. They are, however, the key to understanding what he accomplished as president. He studied government and political theory at Harvard, where he encountered the works of the great political and social philosophers, such as Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean Jacques Rousseau. One of his professors, Payson S. Wild, observed that he "had the ability to think deeply and in theoretical terms."

Then, to supplement his study, between 1937 and the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939, he traveled to nearly every continent on the globe, visiting France, England, Germany, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Scotland, Austria, Russia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, the Baltic Republics, Turkey, Egypt, Palestine, and eight countries in Central and South America.

As he traveled, he probed the minds of both those in high office and ordinary citizens, anxious to learn about the politics and economies of each country. It was during this study and travel that he began to develop the principles of government that he would bring to the presidency.

He came to believe, for example, that effective political leadership was a matter of intellectual and political courage. He felt that leaders in prewar Europe had lacked the courage to tell their people the truth about Adolf Hitler's intention to start another war in Europe.

Because their leaders had withheld this vital information, Kennedy reasoned, the citizens of England and France had been unable to comprehend the urgent need to prepare for war. They changed their views slowly, trapped by what Kennedy called "the inertia of human thought."

Based on what he had observed, Kennedy concluded that "for a free society to survive, to successfully compete, the leaders have to tell the truth." He believed that it was the duty of world leaders to urge people to confront reality.

Later, during his time in the House and Senate, Kennedy became contemptuous of political leaders who made decisions based on "doctrinaire beliefs" and ignored their obligation to promote the common good. In his view, political leaders must objectively diagnose problems and offer solutions based on facts, not on a predetermined set of beliefs or an overarching ideology.

Thus, Kennedy based his presidency on three basic principles, the product of his relentless study and travel:

1. It is the president's responsibility to identify threats to the nation's welfare.
2. It is the president's responsibility to inform the people about these threats truthfully, so they are prepared to react to them effectively.
3. It is the president's responsibility to provide the people with facts, not biased information clouded by "predetermined beliefs."

The purpose of this approach was to prevent the people from becoming uninformed and complacent. To reach this goal, Kennedy deliberately governed as if the nation faced a never-ending series of threats, and he deliberately involved the people in the process of dealing with these threats. In less than three years in office, he held more than 60 press conferences. Today, the media often recounts the humor he displayed during these televised meetings. More important, however, is that he used them to treat the people as if they were an essential component of government, elevating them to the status of concerned and involved citizens. He gave them the capacity to understand and embrace the need for action and change.

He also did something that few presidents have even attempted: He used the presidency to bring out the best aspects of human nature. He once described his vision of America as follows:

If we can make our country one of the great schools of civilization, then on that achievement will surely rest our claim to the ultimate gratitude of mankind...I am certain that after the dust of centuries has passed over our cities, we will be remembered not for victories or defeats in battle or in politics but for our contributions to the human spirit.

To elevate the human spirit, Kennedy cultivated the interior aspects of our lives, the qualities that make us better people, and thus better citizens. He challenged young people to join the Peace Corps, to begin their lives by leaving the comfort of their homes and traveling abroad to help the impoverished people of other nations.

With this approach, Kennedy tapped into something science has long known: human beings thrive when they are inspired and encouraged. Inspiration contains the kindness we all crave. It can lift people out of apathy and allow them to contribute to society.

Unlike any president who followed him in office, Kennedy had the capacity and the will to build a responsive government. During his time in office, there was a bond between government and the people; in fact, government actually nurtured them on a personal level. This is the real meaning of “Camelot,” the term often used to describe the Kennedy years.

GOVERNMENT BECOMES A SCAPEGOAT

KENNEDY'S DEATH DEPRIVED THE NATION of this nurturing. Our presidents no longer speak about making America one of the great schools of civilization, nor do they seek to make us better citizens. A president who spoke in such terms today would draw blank stares from the people and ridicule from his opponents.

In the years after Dallas, the nation was led by presidents who had little comprehension of the principles that Kennedy brought to the White House. Both Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon lied to the people. Johnson lied to escalate the war in Vietnam. Nixon, among other things, lied about the Watergate burglary in a desperate attempt to hang on to his presidency.

They embedded in the nation's consciousness the demoralizing notion that presidents will do anything to get what they want or to protect themselves. And they trampled upon Kennedy's dictum that for this nation to flourish, our leaders must tell the truth.

Damaged and disillusioned, America suffered through years of bitterness, a needless war, and the social conflict it caused. The people became cynical and uncertain about the honesty and objectives of their leaders. Without Kennedy to inspire them, they eventually succumbed to the complacency, "the inertia of human thought," that he had tried to prevent.

Into this vacuum in 1981 stepped a man who tragically reversed Kennedy's view of government. In the mind of Ronald Reagan, government was not a noble, time-tested system in which men like Jefferson and John Adams addressed the needs of the people with reason and intellect.

Instead, he told the nation that government, because it collects taxes, spends money on the poor, regulates business, and is too large, is the enemy of the people and should be feared and distrusted. "The best minds are not in government," he declared. "If any were, business would hire them away."

The United States, Reagan believed, should be guided by special interests and the wealthy, because they possess the capacity to generate massive amounts of wealth. Brimming with contempt, Reagan said, "Government is not the solution to the problem; government *is* the problem." This, as historian Thom Hartman has pointed out, is like saying that

“America is not the solution to the problem; America *is* the problem.”

Reagan’s bizarre, self-destructive philosophy would have enraged Kennedy, who felt that presidents should strengthen, not destroy or mock, the principles that tie the people and government together.

Kennedy acknowledged the wastefulness of big government, but rather than making it the enemy, he urged the people to work with him to make it more effective and responsive to their needs.

As we will see, Reagan’s willingness to make government a scapegoat in order to promote a flawed ideology has been disastrous for the United States. The growth of special interests, entities greatly feared by the Founding Fathers, has become the driving force in America, while John Kennedy’s idealistic view of government has been shoved to the side.

Here is just one example of the damage caused by government-by-ideology. Just hours after Obama took the oath of office in 2009, a group of 15 House Republicans met for a secret dinner in a restaurant in Washington, D.C.

Their purpose was not to explore ways to to work with Obama. Most political scientists believe that, for the good of the nation, competing political parties must compromise on the issues that divide them. Liberals and conservatives can resolve their differences and move forward only if each side is willing to make concessions in the name of progress.

But over the next four hours, the 15 men instead devised ways to obstruct every move Obama made. No matter what he proposed, no matter how important the issue he raised, they agreed to oppose everything he said or did. If he said black, they would say white.

The objective of the Republicans was to defeat Obama in the next election by creating a firestorm of controversy in the media over every issue he addressed. A Democrat, Obama was a threat to conservative ideology, particularly that part of its belief system that says the private sector, not government, should be the dominant force in America. Above all else, their philosophy had to be preserved; they would not give an inch to a president who likely would favor liberal attitudes and policies.

When news of the meeting became public, three years after it occurred, there was mock outrage in the media, but little effort was made to condemn the Republicans for purposely creating political gridlock

in a country of 315 million people. Something that under Kennedy would have been called treason is today an accepted part of the political process.

This is not the type of government Kennedy wanted for this country. In 1962, he warned the nation about the danger of allowing ideologues like Reagan to take control of government. He particularly feared the damage their rigid policies would inflict upon the economy. He said the nation's economic policy should never be determined by

some grand warfare of rival ideologies which will sweep the country with passion... but with the practical management of a modern economy. What we need are not labels and clichés but more basic discussion of the sophisticated and technical questions involved in keeping a great economic machinery moving ahead.

We have yet to confront the long-term consequences of losing John Kennedy. The harm inflicted on the nation by some of the men who came after him has gone largely unaddressed. Without much opposition, his successors have transformed the United States into a nation controlled by the wealthy, a plutocracy in which corporations are considered the equal of human beings. In the process, the political system bequeathed to us by the Founding Fathers has become secondary and dysfunctional.

The purpose of this book is to discover how John Kennedy gained the wisdom to make America an enlightened nation. This knowledge, perhaps, will help give the people the courage to demand that we return to the type of responsible government the Founders established and Kennedy brought to life.

We begin with the events and experiences that made John Kennedy the man, and the president, that he was.