

17 Passing the Torch

Why was Kennedy, not Theodore Roosevelt, the youngest man ever elected to the presidency?



President Kennedy and his wife, Jackie, on their way to the inaugural ball. Her glamour nearly stole the show.

The United States is today the country that assumes the destiny of man....For the first time, a country has become the world's leader without achieving this through conquest, and it is strange to think that for thousands of years one single country has found power while seeking only justice.

—ANDRÉ MALRAUX,
FRENCH POLITICIAN AND
MAN OF LETTERS, ON A VISIT TO
PRESIDENT KENNEDY, 1962

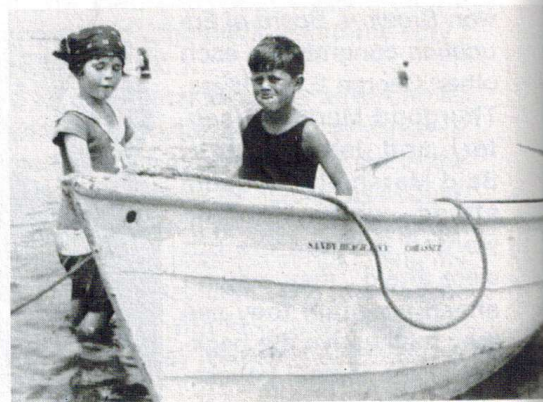
It had been cold all week in Washington, D.C., and Thursday night—January 19, 1961—snow fell thick and heavy. Washington, southern in its graciousness and geography, handles snow poorly. Everywhere cars stalled and people shivered.

That evening the army and navy were called. Three thousand servicemen, using 700 snowplows and trucks, worked through the night. The next day the wind was mean and the temperature stayed below freezing, but the streets were clear. Wooden bleachers were set up outdoors in front of the Capi-

itol. At noon, when some 20,000 invited guests filled those bleachers, the winter sun reflecting off the banks of new snow seemed unusually bright. It was Inauguration Day.

Most of the presidential party wore scarves and mittens with their top hats and formal clothes. But the president-elect seemed to generate his own warmth—a quality he had in abundance. He took off his overcoat before he spoke. Then John Fitzgerald Kennedy put his hand on his grandfather's Bible and swore to uphold his mighty responsibilities. At 43, he was the youngest president since Theodore Roosevelt and the youngest man ever

John F. Kennedy aged seven (right), with his sister Rosemary



ected president. Next to him stood 70-year-old Dwight D. Eisenhower, at the time the oldest man ever to be president.

The contrast between the two was as strong as the winter sun. Genial, likable Ike was the son of a poor midwestern creamery worker. But his easy manner was an outside face; inside was a core of steel. Eisenhower had worked his way through an army career to the nation's top job.

Harvard-educated JFK, the patrician son of a wealthy businessman, had been given every advantage our society has to give. But the silver spoons that fed him had not made him lazy. Quite the opposite. He, and the other members of the large Kennedy family, were trained to serve their country, to achieve, and to do their best.

The wind blew as Robert Frost, America's favorite poet, read part of a poem he had written for this occasion:

*Summoning artists to participate
In the august occasions of the state
Seems something for us all to celebrate.*

And then came lines about a *Golden Age of poetry and power, of which this noonday's the beginning hour.*

A "Golden Age of poetry and power." Would this handsome young president bring it about? There were many who believed he could. Not since the first days of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal had so many eager people clamored to join the political process. The new cabinet (the president's top advisers) was going to be *bipartisan*. That meant it would include people from both political parties. Some of Kennedy's college professors were leaving their classrooms to become government officials. Thousands of Americans wanted to be part of the excitement that seemed to be building. It was amazing, the number of people who hoped to work to help their nation. John Kennedy had already suggested a "peace corps," a volunteer

A Chip Off

John F. Fitzgerald and Patrick J. Kennedy (both sons of 19th-century Irish immigrants) became politicians. Fitzgerald, known as "Honey Fitz," was Boston's mayor. Kennedy, a saloon keeper (that means he owned a bar), was a senator in the Massachusetts legislature. But when he ran for the U.S. Senate, Henry Cabot Lodge, Sr. (an old-guard Bostonian) defeated him. (Lodge had also defeated Woodrow Wilson's dream of an American-supported League of Nations.) Years



P. J. Kennedy

Old Blocks

later, a grandson of Honey Fitz and P. J. Kennedy ran for the Senate against Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr.—and beat him. The new senator

was John Fitzgerald Kennedy.



Honey Fitz

To **clamor** means to agitate noisily for something.

President Kennedy with all the children of the Kennedy clan at the family's summer house in Hyannisport, on Cape Cod. John F. Kennedy, Jr., heads off on his own in the foreground.





A Peace Corps worker teaches English to a group of children in Katmandu, the capital city of Nepal. By 1963, about 5,000 volunteers were doing two-year stints in more than 40 Third World countries.

In 1961 the nuclear submarine *Triton* surfaced after making the first underwater around-the-world trip. *Triton* was named for a god of the sea in ancient Greek mythology. It had taken the sub 83½ days to complete its trip. (That was three days longer than Jules Verne's fictional hero Phileas Fogg took in what adventure book?)

agency that would let Americans unselfishly share their experience and knowledge with less fortunate nations.

The young president, with his intense blue eyes, his thick head of hair, and his engaging smile, stepped up to the lectern and began to speak. "We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom," he said in strong, self-confident New England tones.

Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans, born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage, and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed....Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty....Let us begin anew...remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness.

Then he challenged his listeners:

If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.... And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.

A Solitary Child

Ecology—which comes from the Greek word meaning habitation—is the scientific study of our home: the earth. Here are some words about a famous ecologist named Rachel Carson.

Rachel Carson was, in her own words, "a solitary child." Brought up in Springdale, Pennsylvania, she spent "a great deal of time in woods and beside streams, learning the birds and the insects and flowers." When she was young, Rachel loved to read and thought she would become a writer. Then she decided to be a scientist, and at first believed that meant giving up writing. But of course it didn't have to mean that at all. She wrote of science and the natural world, and she did it so well that all who read her books gained a new awareness of their environment. Although, at first, no one paid much attention to what she wrote.

Then, in July of 1951, Oxford University Press (see the name on the spine of this book) published Rachel Carson's book *The Sea Around Us*. Oxford didn't expect much in the way of sales. What would you think if you were publishing a book about the ocean? There were hardly any humans in the book; it was all about reefs and islands and sea creatures and coral and sea plants. Would you think many people would read it? Oxford printed a modest number of copies.

The publisher was quickly astonished (and out of books). *The Sea Around Us* became a

best-seller—a huge best-seller. *The New York Times* called it “the outstanding book of the year.” Eventually it was translated into 32 languages. It introduced the ideas of ecology and conservation to large numbers of people. It was enormously influential.



By the end of the '60s, at least five state legislatures, alarmed by Rachel Carson's picture of a poisoned world, had banned or limited the use of DDT.

“We live in a scientific age; yet we assume that knowledge of science is the prerogative of only a small number of human beings, isolated and priestlike in their laboratories. This is not true. The materials of science are the materials of life itself. Science is part of the reality of living; it is the what, the how, and the why of everything in our experience,” said Rachel Carson.

“It is impossible to under-

stand man without understanding his environment and the forces that have molded him physically and mentally,” she wrote. Then she attempted to explain that environment. Here is an excerpt from *The Sea Around Us*:

The Hawaiian islands, which have lost their native plants and animals faster than almost any other area in the world, are a classic example of the results of interfering with natural balances. Certain relations of animal to plant, and of plant to soil, had grown up through the centuries. When man came in and rudely disturbed this balance, he set off a whole series of chain reactions.

Vancouver brought cattle and goats to the Hawaiian Islands, and the resulting damage to forests and other vegetation was enormous. Many plant introductions were as bad. A plant known as the pamakani was brought in many years ago, according to report, by a Captain Makee for his beautiful gardens on the island of Maui. The pamakani, which has light, wind-borne seeds, quickly escaped from the captain's gardens, ruined the pasture lands on Maui, and proceeded to hop from island to island....

There was once a society in Hawaii for the special purpose of introducing exotic birds. Today when you go to the islands, you see, instead of the exquisite native birds that greeted Captain Cook, mynas from India, cardinals from the U.S. or Brazil, doves from Asia,

weavers from Australia, skylarks from Europe, and titmice from Japan. Most of the original bird life has been wiped out.

The Sea Around Us made Rachel Carson famous; the last book she wrote, *Silent Spring*, brought her enemies (among some powerful interest groups). It took courage to write that book. It was a look at a grim subject—pesticides—and how they were poisoning the earth and its inhabitants. In *Silent Spring*, Carson attacked the chemical and food-processing industries, and the Department of Agriculture.

They lost no time in fighting back. Rachel Carson was mocked and ridiculed as a “hysterical woman.” Her editor wrote, “Her opponents must have realized... that she was questioning not only the indiscriminate use of poisons but the basic irresponsibility of an industrialized, technological society toward the natural world.”

But the fury and fervor of the attacks only brought her more readers. President Kennedy asked for a special report on pesticides from his Science Advisory Committee. The report confirmed what Carson had written, and it made important recommendations for curtailing and controlling the use of pesticides.

The public, which had been generally unaware of the danger of the poisons sprayed on plants, was now aware. Modestly, Rachel Carson said that one book couldn't change things, but on that she may have been wrong.



Above: John F. Kennedy, Sr., and Jr., in the Oval Office. Below: The new president delivers his inaugural speech, hatless and coatless. His dislike of hats did serious damage to the hat industry.

After the applause, which was long and strong, the new president joined his wife, Jacqueline. "Oh, Jack, what a day," she whispered. And it was. On that bright January afternoon, hope vibrated in the air. Our president was intelligent and graceful and knew how to laugh, especially at himself. He had big dreams that everyone could share. He intended that the nation reach for greatness within itself. He was surrounding himself with men and women who would be called "the best and the brightest." He expected to get things done.

And so, when he noticed in the inaugural parade that there were no black cadets among the Coast Guard marchers, his first act as president was to call an aide and ask him to do something about that. The next September there was a black professor and several black cadets at the Coast Guard Academy.

This man, John F. Kennedy, was determined to be an active president, a good president, a president who would inspire the nation. That wouldn't be difficult for him. Everyone talked of his *charisma* (kuh-RIZ-muh), which the dictionary says is *a rare power given to those persons with an exceptional ability for leadership and for securing the devotion of large numbers of people.*

