

WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #11

For those who considered the social and political climate of the 1950s dull, the following decade provided a striking contrast. The 1960s were years of extraordinary turbulence and innovation in public affairs – as well as sudden tragedy and trauma. Many social ills that had been festering for decades suddenly forced their way onto the national agenda. At the same time, the deeply entrenched assumptions of Cold War ideology led the country into the longest, most controversial, and least successful war in the nation’s history.

In 1960, however, few sensed such dramatic change on the horizon. The presidential election of that year pitted two candidates – John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon – who seemed to symbolize the unadventurous politics of the 1950s. For many Americans, however, that charisma, style, and personality – more than platforms and issues – became the hallmarks of a new brand of politics in the early 1960s. This was the natural environment of John F. Kennedy. A Harvard alumnus, a World War II hero, and a U.S. senator from Massachusetts, he had inherited his love of politics from his grandfathers – colorful, and often ruthless, Irish Catholic politicians in Boston. His father, Joseph Kennedy, a self-made tycoon and a ferocious opportunist, gained control of much of the Hollywood film industry in the 1930s and had finessed from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt an appointment as ambassador to Great Britain. He soon developed a consuming ambition to see one of his sons elected president. When his eldest boy, Joseph Jr., was killed in World War II, the mantle of paternal expectation fell on John’s shoulders. Ambitious and deeply aware of style, the forty-three year old Kennedy made use of his many advantages to become the “leading man” in American politics. His one disadvantage – that he was Catholic in a country that had never elected a Catholic president – he masterfully neutralized. Thanks to media advisors and his youthful attractiveness, Kennedy projected a superb television image.

Kennedy suffered from criticism that there was more image to him than substance. There was some truth to that charge. Although he had won in 1956 a Pulitzer Prize for *Profiles in Courage*, a book (ghostwritten by an aide) about past political leaders who had “made the tough decisions,” Kennedy, claimed Washington critics, had shown more profile than courage during the McCarthy era of the early 1950s. He had a weak record on civil rights. Eleanor Roosevelt, FDR’s widow, declined to endorse Kennedy in 1960, noting that presidential authority should not be vested in “someone who understands what courage is and admires it, but has not quite the independence to have it.”

During his campaign for the nomination of the Democrats, Kennedy had show that he had the energy to match his grace and ambition, even though he actually lived with intense pain all his adult life. He suffered from serious spinal problems, Addison’s disease (a debilitating disorder of the adrenal glands), recurrent blood disorders, venereal disease, and fierce fevers. He took medicine daily, sometimes hourly. But like FDR, he and his advisors and his family members successfully masked such physical ailments from the public.

As the first Catholic to run for the presidency since Al Smith in 1928, Kennedy sought to dispel the impression that his religion was a major political liability. Religious bigotry was one of Kennedy's greatest adversaries in the 1960 presidential primary campaign. By the time of the convention in 1960 he had traveled over 65,000 miles, visited 25 states, and made over 350 speeches. Early in April JFK arrived in West Virginia, a rural state with a struggling economy. He discovered that a strong lead in a state poll tracked four months earlier had evaporated. He now trailed his opponent, Hubert Humphrey, the buoyant liberal senator from Minnesota, by 20 points. The explanation came from Kennedy's advisors: "No one in West Virginia knew you were a Catholic in December. Now they know." Yet, just four weeks later, on May 10, the people of West Virginia handed him a stunning victory, which knocked Humphrey out of the race. Sweeping an economically distressed, hardscrabble state in Appalachia in which Catholics comprised barely 5 percent of the population, Kennedy proved that a Catholic candidate could win votes. Speaking in a Boston accent about a brighter future, he won their votes, and they won his heart. The people of West Virginia – their kindness and fairness, their grit and determination and patriotism – made their mark on this young candidate and helped shape the President he would become.

He later credited his win in West Virginia as the turning point in securing the Democratic nomination for President. In his victory speech Kennedy found the stirring, muscular rhetoric that would stamp the rest of his campaign and his presidency: "We stand today on the edge of a New Frontier – the frontier of unknown opportunities and perils – a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats." Kennedy and his staff consciously fastened upon the frontier metaphor as the label for their domestic program. An avid student of American history, JFK knew that the frontier image possessed a special resonance for the American people. Americans had always been adventurers, eager to conquer and exploit new frontiers. Kennedy promised to use his administration to continue the process.

In foreign policy Kennedy was, at heart, a Cold Warrior, who had come of age in the shadow of Munich, Yalta, and the McCarthy hearings. He projected an air of idealism, but his years in the U.S. Senate from 1953 to 1960 had proved him to be a conventional Cold War politician. Once elected president, JFK would shape the nation's foreign policy by drawing both on his ingenuity and on old-style Cold War power politics.

Three events shaped the campaign in the autumn of 1960. First, in a speech before the Houston Ministerial Association, Kennedy directly confronted the political implications of his Catholicism. In the United States he told the Protestant clergy, "the separation of church and state is absolute," and "no Catholic prelate would tell the President – should he be a Catholic – how to act and no Protestant minister should tell his parishioners for whom to vote." The religious question thereafter drew little public attention. Kennedy's candor had neutralized it.

Second, Richard Nixon, the current Vice-President of the U.S. and a seasoned politician, violated one of the cardinal rules of politics when he agreed to debate his less prominent opponent on television. During the first of four debates, few significant policy differences

surfaced, allowing viewers to shape their opinions more on matters of style. Nearly 70 million people watched this first-ever television debate. They saw an obviously uncomfortable Nixon, still weak from a recent illness, perspiring heavily and sporting his perpetual five-o'clock shadow – altogether less photogenic than Kennedy. Nixon looked haggard, uneasy, and even sinister before the camera. Kennedy, on the other hand, projected a cool poise and offered crisp, precise answers that made him seem equal, if not superior, in his fitness for office. Polls showed that television swayed political perceptions. Voters who heard the first debate on the radio concluded that Nixon had won., but those who viewed it on television favored Kennedy. Kennedy's popularity immediately shot up in the polls. Reporters discovered that he had "charisma" and noted the giddy young people, who now greeted his arrival at campaign stops. In the words of a bemused Southern senator, Kennedy combined "the best qualities of Elvis Presley and Franklin D. Roosevelt."

Still, the momentum created by the first debate was not enough to ensure a Kennedy victory. The third key event in the campaign involved the civil rights issue. Democrat strategists knew that, in order to offset the loss of Southern Democrats suspicious of Kennedy's Catholicism and increasingly stronger civil rights positions, they must attract black voters. To do so, they set up a special committee to increase minority voters. Nixon's running mate, the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., of Massachusetts, pledged that the Republicans, if elected, would appoint a black cabinet member. Shortly thereafter, however, Nixon rejected such a commitment. A crucial incident in the campaign occurred when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and about 50 demonstrators were arrested in Atlanta, Georgia, for "trespassing" in an all-white restaurant. Although the other demonstrators were soon released, King was sentenced to four months in prison, ostensibly because of an earlier traffic violation. Robert Kennedy, the candidate's younger brother and campaign manager, called the judge handling King's case, who also happened to be a close friend of the Georgia governor, alerting him "that if he was a decent American, he would let King out of jail by sundown." The call had its intended effect. King was soon released on bail, and the Kennedy campaign seized full advantage of the outcome, distributing 2 million pamphlets in black neighborhoods extolling the efforts of Kennedy on behalf of King.

When the votes were counted, Kennedy and his running mate, Senator Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas, had won the narrowest of victories – the closest presidential election since 1888. Despite the edge JFK enjoyed in the debates, the winning margin was only 118,574 votes out of 68 million cast. Kennedy had received 49.7% of the popular vote to Nixon's 49.5%. Kennedy attracted Catholics, blacks, and the labor vote. Johnson, his running mate, helped bring in Southern Democrats. Kennedy's wide lead in the electoral vote, 303 to 219, belied the paper thin margin in several key states. A shift of a few thousand votes in key states would have reversed the outcome – especially in Illinois. Mayor Richard Daley in Chicago controlled that city's Democrat machine, which lived up to its legendary campaign motto: "In Chicago we tell our people to vote early and to vote often." Nixon had, in fact, carried more states than Kennedy, sweeping most of the West and holding four of the six Southern states President Dwight Eisenhower had carried in 1956. Kennedy's majority

was built out of victories in southern New England, the populous Middle Atlantic states, and key states in the South where black voters provided the critical margin of victory. Yet, ominous rumblings of discontent appeared in the once solid Democratic South, as all eight of Mississippi's electors and six of Alabama's eleven electors defied the national ticket and voter for Virginia senator Harry Byrd, an arch-segregationist.

Kennedy was the youngest man ever elected President of the U.S. His cabinet appointments put an accent on youth and "Eastern Establishment" figures. He brought to Washington, D.C., a cadre of young, ambitious newcomers. A self-described "idealist without illusions," Kennedy was determined to attract the "best and the brightest" minds available – individuals who would inject a tough, pragmatic, and vigorous outlook into governmental affairs. Kennedy's team included, among others, the following men: Dean Rusk, a career diplomat who then headed the Rockefeller Foundation, was appointed secretary of state; Robert McNamara, a renowned systems analyst and former head of Ford Motor Company, became secretary of defense; C. Douglas Dillon, a banker and a Republican, was made secretary of the treasury in an effort to reassure conservative business owners; Kennedy's younger brother, Robert, who had made a name as a hard-hitting investigator of organized crime, was appointed attorney general; and McGeorge Bundy, whom Kennedy called "the second smartest man I know," was made special assistant for national security affairs, lending additional credence to the impression that foreign policy would remain under tight White House control.

But not everyone was enchanted. House Speaker Sam Rayburn, a Democrat from Texas, told his old friend, Lyndon Johnson, that Kennedy's people "may be every bit as intelligent as you say, but I'd feel a whole lot better about them if just one of them had run for sheriff once."

The inaugural ceremonies set the tone of elegance and youthful vigor that would come to be called the "Kennedy style." The glittering atmosphere of snow-clad Washington, D.C., on Friday, January 20, 1961, seemed to symbolize the fresh promise. After Robert Frost paid tribute to the administration in poetic verse, Kennedy dazzled listeners with his uplifting rhetoric. He proclaimed: "Let the word go forth from this time and place. 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 success of liberty. And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country." Spines tingled at the time. One journalist wrote that Kennedy was the first president to be a Prince Charming. The Kennedy White House became a glamorous world of high fashion and celebrity. No other presidency has ever matched the Kennedy aura, but every president after him embraced the idea that image mattered as much as reality in conducting a politically effective presidency.