

Civil Rights

Although Kennedy did not have a strong civil rights record while in the Senate, he did portray himself as a crusader for African American rights during his campaign. Toward the end of his presidency, he abandoned his cautious approach. In a special report to the American people on civil rights, he talked about the racial inequality that had long endured in the nation:

“It ought to be possible for American students of any color to attend any public institution. . . . It ought to be possible for American consumers of any color to receive equal service in places of public accommodation . . . and it ought to be possible for American citizens of any color to register and to vote in a free election. . . . We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it, and we cherish it here at home, but are we to say to the world and, much more importantly, to each other that this is the land of the free except for the Negroes . . . ?”

—John F. Kennedy, June 11, 1963

▲ President Kennedy with prominent civil rights and labor leaders in 1963. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is at the far left.

Kennedy's New Frontier

Objectives

- Evaluate Kennedy's domestic policies.
- Assess the impact of the Kennedy assassination.

Terms and People

New Frontier

Equal Pay Act

deficit spending

space race

Warren Commission

NoteTaking

Reading Skill: Identify Main Ideas List the characteristics of John F. Kennedy's style that appealed to the American people.

The Kennedy Image

- Youthful
-
-

Why It Matters Kennedy's determination to change life at home resulted in his domestic agenda called the New Frontier. Faced with a conservative Congress, Kennedy met with opposition as he fought to turn his vision into a reality. Still, he had some success in making changes in Social Security benefits, dealing with poverty and racial discrimination, and spurring new interest and expectations for the space program. **Section Focus Question:** What were the goals of Kennedy's New Frontier?

The Kennedy Style

As John Kennedy showed in his 1960 campaign and in his Inaugural Address, he had a special quality—or charisma—that separated him from other politicians. With his exquisitely tailored clothes, quick smile, and sense of humor, he seemed closer to a movie star than to a run-of-the-mill politician. Although he suffered many health problems, he projected youthful health and energy.

He surrounded himself with other distinguished men. Reporters dubbed them “the best and the brightest.” They came from some of the country's most prestigious businesses and universities. Robert McNamara, president of Ford Motor Company, agreed to serve as Secretary of Defense. Dean Rusk, president of the Rockefeller

The Kennedy Family

The new First Family charmed Americans with their youth and energy. Often, the President's children, Caroline and John, Jr., visited their father in the Oval Office.



Foundation, signed on as Secretary of State. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, worked at the White House as a spokesperson for liberal causes and was a source of ideas for the President.

President Kennedy promised Americans that his administration would blaze a **"New Frontier."** The term described Kennedy's proposals to improve the economy, education, healthcare, and civil rights. He also hoped to jump-start the space program. In his presidential acceptance speech on July 15, 1960, in Los Angeles, California, Kennedy said,

Primary Source

"I stand tonight facing west on what was once the last frontier. . . . From the lands that stretch three thousand miles behind me, the pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comforts and sometimes their lives to build a new world here in the West. . . . But the problems are not all solved and the battles are not all won, and we stand today on the edge of a new frontier—the frontier of the 1960s—the frontier of unknown opportunities and perils—a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats."

—John F. Kennedy, July 15, 1960



Checkpoint Why did people feel that Kennedy was a different kind of politician?

Kennedy's Domestic Program

Early in his presidency, occupied by events in Cuba and Berlin, Kennedy devoted most of his attention to foreign affairs. But by 1963 he had become more concerned about pressing problems at home.

Kennedy—like millions of other Americans—was troubled by the high levels of poverty in the United States. *The Other America*, Michael Harrington's best-selling and influential 1962 exposé of poverty in America, shocked Kennedy and many other Americans.

While Kennedy failed to get Congress to accept his more ambitious social programs, he did push through an increase in the minimum wage, an extension in Social Security benefits, and improvements in the welfare system.

In addition, in 1962 Kennedy established the President's Commission on the Status of Women, a blue-ribbon panel that studied how poverty and

NoteTaking

Reading Skill: Identify Main Ideas

As you read, identify details of Kennedy's domestic program.

Domestic Program

Space Program

discrimination affected women. The differences in wages received by men and women for the same work was an especially glaring problem. The **Equal Pay Act** (1963) required equal wages for “equal work” in industries engaged in commerce or producing goods for commerce. Although it contained various loopholes, the law was a crucial step on the road to fair and equal employment practices. The next year Congress would prohibit discrimination by employers on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, or sex.

Stimulating a Sluggish Economy Kennedy believed that increased prosperity would help to eliminate some of the nation’s social problems. When he became President, the country was suffering from a high unemployment rate and a sluggish economy. To help the sagging economy, Kennedy proposed tax credits to encourage business investment in new factory equipment. At the same time, increased military spending created new jobs and boosted the economy. Finally, Kennedy accepted the “new economics” of theorist John Maynard Keynes that advocated **deficit spending** to stimulate the economy. Deficit spending is the government practice of borrowing money in order to spend more than is received from taxes. In 1963, Kennedy called for dramatic tax cuts for middle-class Americans as a way to put more money in the pockets of more people. At the same time, he increased the tax burden on wealthier citizens. Kennedy’s economic initiatives jump-started the tremendous economic growth of the late 1960s.

Moving Cautiously on Civil Rights Kennedy pursued a timid approach toward civil rights. He had narrowly won the 1960 election, and he had little real influence in Congress or even complete partisan support. He did not want to anger conservative, white southern members of Congress in his own party. They stood ready to block any civil rights legislation.

While Kennedy remained largely passive on civil rights issues, African Americans and their white allies challenged segregation in the South. In 1961, they took “freedom rides” to desegregate interstate bus travel. In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., took the civil rights struggle to Birmingham, Alabama. Such actions took courage and were met by angry, oftentimes violent, responses by white southerners.

In early 1963, Kennedy introduced a civil rights bill that demanded prosecution for voting-rights violations and federal money to aid school desegregation. Further violence in the South prompted Kennedy to introduce stronger civil rights legislation.

Racing Into Space The launching of the satellite *Sputnik 1* by the Soviet Union in 1957 called into question American technological superiority. Although Congress created the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in 1958, the Soviets’ space program remained several steps ahead of the American program. In April 1961, for example, the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first human to orbit Earth.

Kennedy recognized that the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in a “**space race**.” *Space race* was the term used to describe the competition between the Soviet Union and the United States to develop technology to successfully land on the moon. In May 1961, NASA put astronaut Alan Shepard into a sub-orbital space flight aboard the Project Mercury space capsule *Freedom 7*. Encouraged by the success of Project Mercury, Kennedy committed the United States to landing a man on the moon by 1970.

Vocabulary Builder

crucial—(CROO shuhl) *adj.* of vital importance

Vocabulary Builder

advocate—(AD vuh kayt) *v.* to speak or write in support of; be in favor of



Analyzing Political Cartoons

Civil Rights This cartoon, titled “Eclipse,” appeared in 1963, at a time when the civil rights struggle reached national prominence.

1. Define *eclipse*. Why do you think the cartoonist chose this title?
2. Do you think all Americans responded the same way to this cartoon? Explain.

America's quest to reach the moon was punctuated by enormous successes and heartbreaking failures. Astronaut John Glenn became the first American to orbit Earth in February 1962. But astronauts Virgil Grissom, Edward White, and Roger Chaffee burned to death when their docked capsule exploded in fire during a routine test. Finally, in July of 1969, astronaut Neil Armstrong left his spacecraft *Columbia's* landing vehicle and became the first man to step on the moon. The mission was a successful completion of Kennedy's bold dream.

✓ **Checkpoint** Why did Kennedy change the way in which he addressed civil rights issues?

The President Is Assassinated

During his first two and a half years in office, Kennedy made the transition from politician to national leader. In foreign affairs he confronted Soviet challenges, made hard decisions, and won the respect of Soviet leaders and American citizens. He also spoke eloquently about the need to move toward a peaceful future. In domestic affairs he finally came to the conclusion that the federal government had to lead the struggle for civil rights. Added to his new maturity was his ability to inspire Americans to dream noble dreams and work toward lofty ends.

In November 1963, Kennedy traveled to Dallas, Texas, to mend political fences for his 1964 reelection bid. He never lived to see 1964. While his motorcade moved through the city, assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, perched by a window on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository, fired three shots at the President. The third shot hit Kennedy in the back of his head. A half hour later, doctors at Parkland Memorial Hospital pronounced him dead. Texan Lyndon B. Johnson, Kennedy's Vice President, was sworn in as the new President. Although many people would later question whether Oswald acted alone, the **Warren Commission**, which conducted the official investigation of the assassination, described Oswald as the "lone killer."

The senseless murder deeply saddened Americans across the nation. Millions of people watched Kennedy's funeral procession on television, and many reacted as if they had lost a family member. It seemed as if part of America's innocence had died with him.

✓ **Checkpoint** What was the purpose of the Warren Commission?



A Son's Farewell

John F. Kennedy, Jr., salutes his father's casket as it passes by in the funeral procession.

SECTION

2 Assessment

Progress Monitoring Online

For: Self-test with vocabulary practice
Web Code: nea-1504

Comprehension

- 1. Terms and People** Discuss how each of the following terms met a goal of Kennedy's domestic program.
 - New Frontier
 - Equal Pay Act
 - deficit spending
- 2. NoteTaking Reading Skill: Identify Main Ideas** Use your concept web to answer the Section Focus Question: What were the goals of Kennedy's domestic program?

Writing About History

- 3. Quick Write: Identify Counterarguments** Identify one point of view regarding President Kennedy's decision to move cautiously on civil rights. Then, identify one argument that someone might use *against* this point of view. Remember, an effective counterargument does not simply state that the original argument was wrong but gives specific reasons for the opposing point of view.

Critical Thinking

- 4. Analyze Information** Why did Kennedy consider foreign policy to be the most important issue of his administration?
- 5. Draw Inferences** Why do you think Kennedy called his domestic program the New Frontier?
- 6. Draw Conclusions** Was Kennedy's commitment to the space program an extension of the Cold War? Explain.