

## Chapter 4

### President Kennedy: Profile of Power

Richard Reeves

With an Introduction by Robert Boyd

**Introduction,** Robert Boyd, University of North Dakota, Vice President Student & Outreach Services:

I am Bob Boyd and it is my privilege to be able to introduce our speaker this evening. I have also been asked to read one letter that we have received. We had our national delegation from Washington on our invitation list, but there are some things happening in Washington right now that kept them from coming. We did receive a letter from one of our senators and I have been asked to read it. "Thank you very much for inviting me to be part of the John F. Kennedy Interdisciplinary Conference and community celebration. Unfortunately, the Senate is in session and I am unable to be with you. I do want to tell you what a wonderful idea it is to host a celebration to commemorate the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of President John F. Kennedy's visit to Grand Forks. I also want to extend my warm welcome to Richard Reeves who will provide a wealth of knowledge about legacy of John F. Kennedy's presidency for our great country. President Kennedy's life was cut short just two months after his 1963 visit to the University of North Dakota and in nearly three short years of his presidency he inspired the American people to great accomplishments. When he told the American people that our country was going to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade he didn't say I think we are going to do that, or we hope to do that. He said that America is going to accomplish that feat. He inspired so many Americans to be part of something bigger than themselves and that is the lasting legacy of President John F. Kennedy. I hope you have a wonderful conference in celebration. Sincerely, Byron Dorgan.

We sincerely appreciate that comment from him.

It is a pleasure this evening to first of all welcome all of you here to this wonderful facility and to another great event in this series of events in the John F. Kennedy: History, Memory, Legacy Conference. It has been a great conference and tonight we are going to add to its outstanding success. I hope many of you have had the chance to participate in some of the other activities.

Tonight we have the pleasure of hearing from Richard Reeves. Undoubtedly, Mr. Reeves is one of America's preeminent political authors. Although he is the author

of what most people agree is the authoritative work on our 35<sup>th</sup> president, a book entitled *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*, he demonstrated his ability to cross political lines by writing books on both Nixon and Reagan. I have read them too and all three are terrific. It should be noted that all three of these Presidents visited UND. Mr. Reeves is indeed a person of many accomplishments. He has won national awards for non-fiction; he became national editor and columnist for *Esquire* and *New York Magazine*, a chief political correspondent for *The New York Times*. And if that were not enough he has worked extensively on television and in film. He even appeared in the movie 'Sea Biscuit.' I am a horseman and that was a great movie, as far as I am concerned. Mr. Reeves has served as chief political correspondent on 'Front Line' and for contributions to ABC and CBS. Mr. Reeves, it is a pleasure to have you in our city and to have you at UND and to have the opportunity this evening to hear from you.

### **Richard Reeves:**

Thank you. The pleasure is all mine. It has been a pleasure to part of this program. It was also a privilege to share part of this with Theodore Sorensen. I am not sure that he is always so happy being referred to as the last living member of the Kennedy circle, the inner circle. Actually, there were only three people in the inner circle - the President, Ted Sorensen and Bob Kennedy. It was also nice because Ted's wife and my wife worked together at the United Nations. His wife Gillian was the deputy to the Secretary, Kofi Annan, and my wife was the American director to the UN under Kofi Annan. Every moment here has been pleasurable. I was actually surprised - I didn't know the weather was always like this. But in good weather and bad I am glad to be here.

First, how I began writing this book. I was the chief political correspondent for *The New York Times* and then began to write books, to work for magazines. But like many people I know I wanted to write fiction - you never have to leave the house. So, there came a time when we had our fifth child, who is now the Wisconsin director for Barack Obama. In 1984, we had decided that if the Mommy and the baby were both healthy we were going to move to Paris and Daddy was going to write a novel.

Well, Daddy started a novel called *The President's Diary* and it didn't work. I did not have the skills it took - because diaries are never true. Back then, if you write something as pure diary how do you signal to the audience or the reader what's true in this and what's not? But in doing it I read all the diaries of all of our presidents.

In the middle of all that process I happened to read a book which I would recommend to all of you. It is called *The Emperor* and is by a Polish journalist named Ryszard Kapuscinski. It is a biography of Haile Selassie. It is extraordinary. It opens with Kapuscinski wandering the back streets of Addis Abba talking with people who were in the Emperor's court. And these are amazing stories. Haile Selassie would walk

lions - he had two lions - through his gardens every morning while a man called the Minister of the Pen would run along behind him hiding behind trees. If the Emperor had an idea he called for the Minister of the Pen who would write it down. As I read the book I wondered what did all this seem like to Haile Selassie.

Now, I didn't know anything about Ethiopia or emperors, but I did know a good deal about presidents. I had been a White House correspondent. I was in school when John Kennedy was president. I have spoken with, sometimes at great length, and have worked with all of the presidents who succeeded him. I knew that you could reconstruct a president's life or a president's day. The records, recordings, memories, interviews - interviews are particularly important - and often the meeting with the President is the highest point of someone's life. I rarely found anybody who met with the presidents I have written about who did not keep a record of what happened during that meeting. Often, a researcher's dream came true when they said, well, I always meant to give my papers to a library but they are in the garage if you want to look at them. Do I want to look at them?! I thought I could write what it was like to be President of the United States. As for Kennedy, Ted Sorensen wrote a great book called *Kennedy* and Arthur Schlesinger wrote a great book called *A Thousand Days* about the Kennedy presidency.

There were flaws, I thought, in those books and in most conventional history. And that is that classic history cleans up the mess. When people write a book it's divided into sections like the economy, civil rights, the war. That makes it all seem very logical and as if everyone knew what they were doing. Of course, history knows how it all ends. The president didn't know how it all would end. What I wanted to do was write history forward, to write it as it looked to the man at the center. What did the President know and when did he know it? What did he know when he made a decision to have the United States overthrow the government of South Vietnam? I thought that could be done because there was that much material and because I was a journalist and I knew one thing which I was pleased to hear Ted Sorensen talk about as well. What we forget if you read conventional history is that all of these things happened at the same time. I was astounded when Barack Obama said - I hope he got it from one of my books - that a president has to be able to do more than one thing at a time in the dispute with John McCain in the debate tonight in Oxford.

That is the reality: all of these things were happening at the same time. I'll give you one example, but I am going to talk more about this. October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1963. One of the great days in John Kennedy's life. He signed the nuclear test ban treaty, the first nuclear treaty between the nuclear powers. That was also the day that at a National Security Council meeting he signed off on the overthrow of the Diem government in South Vietnam which happened less than a month later. Most people have forgotten this because after President Diem of South Vietnam was overthrown and assassinated, John Kennedy lived only three weeks and died on November 22<sup>nd</sup> of the same year.

That, to a certain extent, is what being president is like - not just one thing a day.

In conventional history books, the overthrow, the disastrous overthrow, of the Diem government--as Collin Powell would later say of Iraq, you break it you own it. We broke Vietnam and we owned it for a long time. The nuclear test ban treaty and the overthrow of President Diem in most history books are 500 pages apart. In John Kennedy's life they were 20 minutes apart.

I was also protected by the Sorensen and Schlesinger books because they were so good that even though hundreds of books have been written about Kennedy in the 25 years after them, no serious, or very few serious books have been written in that period about the 35<sup>th</sup> president and many of them were very specialized, such as Kennedy and Africa, Kennedy and the Ukraine. Because of these two great towers of political writing by eye-witnesses as opposed to outsiders Kennedy seemed to me to be really a fertile field. That's why I picked him. It gives me great pleasure that the preeminent histories have been written by journalists and have tended to be chronological, whether it be Robert Caro, David McCullough, David Halberstam, Tony Lukas, Taylor Branch, Stanley Karnow, all journalists who have written probably the most influential histories in our time.

There were a few other things that I knew that I learned in the White House. One is the presidency is a reactive job. The president is there to react to events that no one has predicted. To a certain extent, I will dwell on that fact.

The second thing that I knew from watching and reading is that we judge our presidents by one, two, three big things. No one remembers whether Lincoln balanced the budget. Presidents are there to respond to events unpredicted and often unpredictable. We don't pay our presidents by the hour. Ronald Reagan was considered to be lazy because he worked a 9 to 5 day. Yet he was an extraordinarily effective president--between naps.

I also learned that being smart, having a high IQ, is not a qualification for the presidency and maybe quite the opposite. Sometimes when you look at Barack Obama you wonder if he's not too thoughtful to be president. If it was just raw intelligence, which Obama clearly has, there would be statues out there of Herbert Hoover, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton. They were the smartest presidents we have had in modern times. And, in general, they were presidents who failed. The job is not about intelligence. It is about judgment. It's about what you do if the locals start to shell Fort Sumter, or if you discover that there are missiles in Cuba, or if the Iranians grab our diplomats, or if a plane flies into the World Trade Center, or big banks begin to fail.

You can hire intelligence - you can find an awful lot of smart people in this country. The judgment of how to deal with those things is quite a different thing. I would argue that the current presidential race is a dramatic and great race - I teach at the University of Southern California and it is a pleasure to find that young people are interested one more time, as they have not been since 1960, 1968, and 1980, in the

process of how our country runs.

If we ignore the other obvious questions of race, age and party ideology, John McCain is an extraordinarily impulsive man. Some are using the term erratic as a euphemism for that, but we have had impulsive presidents before, Harry Truman among them, who succeeded. What happens if you have an impulsive president and a Cuban missile crisis at the same time? Would you move immediately? Obviously, Kennedy succeeded in that adventure because of patience and a willingness to let things work themselves out without trying to destroy the island of Cuba. John McCain strikes me, and I have had a lot experience with him, as that kind of man. He picked a vice-president he didn't know. That was an impulsive decision by someone who did not think it out.

On the other hand, I am writing a book now on the Berlin airlift. Although the National Security Council, the Joints Chief of Staff headed by General Omar Bradley, and the cabinet voted unanimously against trying to stay in Berlin, Harry Truman decided immediately that we would and that was what led to the Berlin airlift.

Would a president who was thoughtful and patient have done that? Would Barack Obama have done that? I don't know the answer to that question but I do know that that is one of the great issues between these two men. It is impulsiveness versus a kind of thoughtfulness. John Kennedy was about as pure a politician as you could find. However he came to it - the death of his brother, the ambition of his family, the rise of Catholics in this society - I for one have always believed that the confrontation between the preachers in Houston and candidate Kennedy, Senator Kennedy, has been overrated. My feeling is that it was World War II that created the rise of Catholics in America and of Catholicism. A third of the country in the 1940s was Catholic. They were discriminated against in large parts of the country and had been for a hundred years. Suddenly we are thrown into a situation that requires total commitment and everybody with a pulse. What I read out of that is that the acceptance of a Catholic president is in the scripts of World War II movies.

If you look at all those movies with Bill Bendix playing the Irish guy and Richard Conte playing the Italian where they list off the names of Johnson, Langilla, McCarthy, and what-not, we are all in this together. The message was, I suspect, that that was what made it possible for a Catholic to become president of the United States.

The divisions in the country over Catholicism, which were very great at the time, were resolved during the war. We are going to find out in this election, I suspect, whether the divisions of race in this country have been resolved or how resolved they have become. As I said, Kennedy was a pure politician. If I had to define that in one sentence I would say that he couldn't stand to be alone. Politicians are people who need action all the time, who need people around them all the time, who need to be at the center of things.

Kennedy himself always thought he would die young. He had every disease known to man. As Bob would say, if the mosquito bites my brother the mosquito dies. One of the things that helped my book get to where it was, it was one of the first examinations of the truth about John Kennedy's health, the diseases he had, the fact that he had had the last rites of his church three times before his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. The fact that he had a terminal disease. The fact that he used amphetamines among other drugs because he was in pain all of the time.

Knowing or thinking that he would not live to an old age, he lived life as a race against boredom. He had to be stimulated every moment by one thing or another. He had said to friends that he wanted to be president because it was the best job in the world because it had more action than any other job.

A third thing that was unique to him and important to us was that John Kennedy refused to wait his turn, and now, I would argue, no one does. I'll talk about Kennedy as a cultural figure, as we live and see the world and not just its politics. He could never have become the nominee of the Democratic Party by depending on the party as it existed in the 1950s as a series of fiefdoms with bosses who controlled large areas of the country.

Kennedy was the first self-selected president. He went out for two years, more than two years, before the 1960 Democratic convention and campaigned in every state where there were primary elections, which were nothing; primary elections had no influence in 1956 when compared to 1960 when Kennedy decided that he could woo the press - his only job, other than the military, had been to be a newspaper reporter. Many of his friends were journalists and he was extraordinarily popular among journalists. They were the same generation, the same age. They were all the enlisted men and junior officers of World War II. They bonded that way. Journalism was the same as politics and many other parts of American life in that way. By the time the democratic convention came, much to the surprise of the favorites, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Russell of Georgia, John Kennedy had that nomination won.

As Ted Sorensen said in his appearance, they had it won but barely. If they didn't win on the first ballot and, as you recall, the ballot was alphabetical and John Kennedy was nominated with the votes from Wyoming. If he had not won that roll call vote he thought that that would be his last shot at the presidency, that the forces that opposed him and they composed most of the party, would unite against him. As it turned out, it was his strategy that worked.

In terms of wanting to be at the center of the action you can learn a great deal about any president, and probably about any man or woman who run an operation, about how they organize that operation. A Dwight Eisenhower becomes president and creates a replica of military structure. Very few people get to talk to the commanding general- in the pyramid where ideas were exchanged and synthesized, and decisions only come to the president, if it is impossible to make a decision at a lower level. That is the way

Eisenhower saw the world. It worked effectively for him.

Other presidents used other systems. Richard Nixon designed a system that was specifically designed to keep all but the tiniest inner circle away from him. Richard Nixon tried to take over the country with a kind of coup against his own administration. After he was reelected in a landslide in 1972, he decided that he wanted to change many people in his government, including the cabinet. The ones he picked to stay had to sign a 15 point contract that was done at Camp David. One of the provisions of that contract was they would not try to talk to him. Richard Nixon was uncomfortable talking to people including his own people.

John Kennedy, on the other hand, organized his White House and his administration which was much smaller - there were only about 20 people in the Kennedy White House. Ted Sorensen and I, years ago when I was working on this book, sat down and took his job description in the White House - counsel to the President - and compared it with the structure of George H.W. Bush's White House, the first President Bush. His old job had been divided by then among 221 people. That is one of the reasons we have some of the problems that we have today.

Kennedy's structure was a wheel and spokes with himself as the hub, at the center. None of the people along the spokes of that wheel communicated with each other without first going through the hub, without first going through the President. Kennedy let them know, in general, only what he wanted them to know and they were all nervous most of the time. This was a very tough guy who stripped away old friends who were no longer useful in his drive for the ultimate power.

Because you only knew what your relationship was with the President you could only talk to the President. You knew other people were doing the same thing on different spokes of that wheel. Kennedy wanted total control over those people and he wanted to be the center of all action. He was a young man. He wanted to know everything that was going on; quite different from, say, a Reagan or an Eisenhower.

He wins the Presidency, the first Catholic, a Democrat from Massachusetts. It was, in some ways, a relatively dull campaign. Two lieutenants in the Navy, Kennedy and Nixon, who agreed on almost all of the fundamentals of foreign policy. There was very little argument in America about what our foreign policy should be. As we look back today, it was a pretty tepid campaign compared with what we see all around us right now.

He becomes President - I love the fact that one of the speakers used a phrase that I used in this book: that his presidency had an extraordinary "density of events." Things had been repressed during the war. People, colonies, were exploding all over the world, all over at home. After all, we had a colony here, too, and we used the word "Negro" to describe it.

Kennedy becomes President and all hell breaks loose. If you judge Presidents by the big ones there are four things that are essential to think about John Kennedy. One, he was the first President to come into office since 1812 who had to face the fact that the United States was vulnerable to direct attack. Soviet strategic missiles could reach the United States by 1960. The last time anybody had been able to wage war on us, on our own territory, was the War of 1812.

I would argue that in the new nuclear world it was a safer world when Kennedy left office, when he was killed, than when he took office. Among other things, the nuclear test ban treaty had been signed. The Soviet Union and the United States were able to come to agreement on the disarmament—that was a totally new thing.

He had to handle, and handle well, crises that no one could have predicted - the building of the Berlin Wall, the installation of Soviet missiles in Cuba - and I think there was less chance of confrontation when he left office than when he began.

John Kennedy didn't give a damn about civil rights. I don't think there was any prejudice in the man but he was running a Democratic Party which depended upon the votes of black people in the places where they were allowed to vote and a Congress controlled by Southern whites. The last thing he needed or wanted was a racial confrontation in the country. He got it and as I will talk about here he did an extraordinary thing that a democratic, small 'd', politician can do. That is he sided with the minority against the majority, a tiny minority, a hated minority in many parts of the country. John Kennedy put the weight of the federal government behind them and I'll talk about how he did that.

Finally, he's the President who got us into Vietnam. The Kennedy people, Ted Sorensen among them, have done a hell of a job of saying that it was Lyndon Johnson who got us into Vietnam. In fact, it was John Kennedy and the decision to overthrow the government of South Vietnam, which was overthrown on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1963. President Diem and his brother were assassinated. That surprised Kennedy and it shouldn't have. If you run a revolution or a civil war you kill the leaders of the other side before they come back to get you. It was his decision to let that go ahead that made Vietnam an American colony. We then let it be run by our ambassadors, by the CIA and by a string of hapless generals who had been corporals in the French army when it was still French Indo-China.

We broke it and we owned it. We paid a high price for all of that. I want to mention before I go into that in detail the talk and character of politicians. I am a great believer that there is such a thing as private character and there were such things in John Kennedy's private character which you wouldn't wish for your children or your family.

There is also such a thing as public character and it is as President that Kennedy should be judged by whether he brings out the best in the American character or the

worse in the American character. I would argue that in general John Kennedy brought out the best in the American character whereas a President such as Richard Nixon, bright as he was, as accomplished as he was, managed to bring out the worst in the American character.

As to his own character, John Kennedy obviously was a philanderer - I guess that was his wife's business - but he lived as a rich boy who did anything he wanted to during his life. Daddy and the lawyers were always there to take care of it. In those days rich people could live that way. Maybe they can today. I don't know. He lied consistently and necessarily about his health. He never took a medical exam when he became a lieutenant in the Navy. His reasoning was no one of his generation would have influence in the United States if they did not serve in that war. Yet, he could never pass the physical examination for the Navy or any other service. His father arranged for him to get an appointment as a lieutenant junior grade in the United States Navy without taking a physical test which he would have surely failed.

Moving on to the civil rights question and his views on that. I think this is essential in looking into any president - what they think privately and what they do publicly is part of the way to judge them. Dwight Eisenhower was a racist and in private it was very obvious to his friends. When *Brown v Board of Education* was passed by a unanimous vote to desegregate public schools with all due speed Eisenhower was angry as hell that Earl Warren, the man he had appointed, the former governor of California, had kind of rigged this decision. But Ike never said a word in public. Had Dwight Eisenhower, with his enormous popularity in the country, said that he was strongly against this decision, which was his job to enforce, that's what the executive branch does, if he had admitted what he thought, actually thought, the country would have been torn apart. We would have been in much worse shape in terms of race than we were. Eisenhower kept his own counsel on that.

John Kennedy was from a different generation and his first slogan in politics, when he ran for Congress in 1946, was "The New Generation offers a Leader." He was a very generational figure. He represented those young men who went overseas in World War II, and their wives and their families.

John Kennedy learned about the Freedom Riders when he saw a picture of their bus burning on the front page of *The New York Times*, the burning of the bus in Anniston, Alabama. He called in his civil rights advisor, Harris Wofford, who was a white man, who later became a Senator from Pennsylvania, and he said "what the hell is going on? Who are these people? Get your friends off those god-damned busses." Wofford said "How am I going to do that?" And Kennedy said, "Tell them to fly." Planes as opposed to buses were not segregated at that time in American history. This was driven by college students, by young, black college students in places like North Carolina. The impact of sit-ins and then the Freedom Riders and then the demonstrations in the streets of southern cities became national issues because of a new technology, television.

One thing to remember about John Kennedy is that when he became President we were using mimeograph machines. By the time he finished the presidency Xerox machines and transistors had been invented. That changed totally the way government operated, changed totally the amount of secrecy possible-- the democratization of information. And this affected the presidency greatly. There would have been no 'Pentagon Papers' if there hadn't been Xerox machines. Kennedy said "where are these people getting these ideas?" And Wofford said "They're getting them from you, Mr. President." Kennedy was giving speeches about individual freedom, about the rights of man, as the French would call it. He was giving those speeches and they were aimed at Eastern Europe, at the communist empire. They were being heard, however, by young black students, by young black veterans back from the war who took it as an accurate description of their place in the America of their time. Then, along came television in that period and all of us saw how blacks were living in this country.

Martin Luther King was a great leader because he understood that the way to deal with injustice in America was to use American rhetoric and ask people if they were the people they said they were. That in large measure is why that revolution succeeded. It is also why John Kennedy had to deal with it. He would have been glad never to have had to deal with that. He hoped to pass it on to his successor.

We also remember Kennedy as a man for all generations, young forever, dying young. Youth translates into hope and new generations translate into hope. Before the memorial ceremony on campus they played excerpts from tapes of Kennedy speaking. What I thought of when I heard that was that Kennedy, like Reagan, like Lincoln, understood that in the presidency words are more important than deeds. Again, we don't know if Lincoln balanced the budget.

The presidency is not about running the country. It's about leading the nation. Words are what we remember. It is the words of Kennedy that we remember, not the specifics of the Civil Rights Bill of 1963.

At the same time he was a towering cultural figure. John Kennedy was a genius in the sense that, as all geniuses such as Picasso, Freud, Einstein, are people who change the way we see the world. John Kennedy changed the way we saw the world and the way we saw ourselves.

We were wearing those three button tubular suits, thin ties with button down shirts. John Kennedy had long hair. He didn't wear hats. He wore two button, rolled lapel, European clothes. He literally changed the way we dress, certainly if you were a man. Then there was his wife's influence. They taught us how to be rich. America was not rich before World War II.

Part of the enduring legacy of Kennedy is as a cultural figure. He invented 'cool.'

And we all bought into it. He was a role model for the people we wanted to be. That doesn't mean he was a nice man. He was a rich man who used people and abused some. But I would argue that he passed the great test of the presidency which is to bring out the best and not the worst in the country.

It's ironic that in Ted Sorensen's presentation he focused on the same period of 48 hours that I focus on at great length in this book. I am going to describe those 48 hours - Ted is protecting the president a little more than I might. This is what happened beginning on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 1963.

On that morning President Kennedy landed in San Francisco - he had been in Hawaii for a conference, the US Conference of Mayors, trying to persuade the mayors to use political influence, particularly on House members, to pass what became the Civil Rights Bill. He landed in San Francisco and met Ted Sorensen, who was, as he said, his intellectual blood-bank, his speech writer, and book writer.

Kennedy talked to Sorensen about his ideas on things like speeches or books. Then, Sorensen would go off on his own and write a draft based on those ideas. These would go back to Kennedy and he would rewrite it quite extensively. He was a good writer, though not as good as Sorensen, and eventually they would come up with an end product. The end product this time, which had been in the works for three months, was the 'peace speech.'

Norman Cousins, the editor of *The Saturday Review*, a popular magazine of the day, essentially left-wing, had spent time with Nikita Khrushchev and talked about nuclear disarmament with Khrushchev. Khrushchev went through what he saw as the America betrayals--we were building a picket fence of missiles around the Soviet Union. He somehow saw that differently than we saw it. He said "I'm willing to talk about these things, disarmament, peace but Kennedy has to make the first move. I can't stand up to my own generals and my own Politburo and say that I am going to soften my attitude towards the Americans. Not while you are building missiles in Turkey." Cousins came back and told Kennedy that. Kennedy called in Sorensen and they began work that spring on "the peace speech."

That Sunday, June 9<sup>th</sup>, Sorensen got on the plane and on the flight back to Washington they edited that speech which the President was scheduled to give at 10 AM on the morning of June 10<sup>th</sup>, the next day, at the commencement of American University in northwest Washington.

It happened that that same day a Chinese delegation in Moscow wanted to meet with Khrushchev. They felt the Russians were going soft on the Americans because of Khrushchev's grudging admiration of Kennedy. The Chinese wanted to present a letter to Khrushchev but they were not allowed to. The delegation was headed by a man named Deng Xiaoping. They were essentially thrown out of Moscow, first real proof we had

that monolithic communism was certainly communism but it was not monolithic. There was a great split between the Chinese and the Soviets which had essentially been discounted by our intelligence agencies.

Air Force One landed at 9:15 in the morning on June 10<sup>th</sup>. Kennedy got into a steaming bath which he had to do to relax his back muscles. He stayed in there for a half an hour, got into a limousine and drove up Wisconsin Avenue to American University. He gave the speech. Ted Sorensen said that he thought it was the best speech that Kennedy had ever given. I think it was one of the greatest speeches ever given by an American president. And I am going to read a bit of it because every word that I am going to say had not been heard by Americans up to then. This was when Kennedy had to make the first move for Khrushchev and he said that day at American University: "Some say that it is useless to speak of world peace or world law or world disarmament - and that it will be useless until the leaders of the Soviet Union adopt a more enlightened attitude. I hope they do. I believe we can help them do it. But I also believe that we must reexamine our own attitude - as individuals and as a Nation - for our attitude is as essential as theirs....Let us examine our attitude toward the Soviet Union....As Americans, we find communism profoundly repugnant as a negation of personal freedom and dignity. But we can still hail the Russian people for their many achievements - in science and space, in economic and industrial growth, in culture and in acts of courage....[N]o nation in the history of battle ever suffered more than the Soviet Union suffered in the course of the Second World War. As least 20 million [Russians] lost their lives... [I]n the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."<sup>1</sup>

Words like that had not been spoken to the Soviets, particularly our admission of their sacrifice in World War II - 20 million people killed, mostly by the Germans. That was the signal that Khrushchev seized on, although we didn't know that at the time.

Kennedy went back to the White House after the speech, talking to people, in this case Ted Sorensen, saying that that speech might cost him the presidency. How would the Soviets react to it? How would the Americans react to it? As he walked in the White House door and back toward the Oval Office his brother Robert came running out and said "You have to see this." It was Governor George Wallace on television at the University of Alabama and what Wallace was saying was a repeat of his inaugural address: "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow and segregation forever."

Tomorrow had come. The federal courts had ordered the university to admit the two Negroes, Vivian Malone and James Hood the next day, June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1963.

There has been a good deal of discussion and wonderful scholarship on that

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<sup>1</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States John F. Kennedy 1963* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1964), "Commencement Address at American University in Washington." June 10, 1963, 460-462.

subject;-- the desegregation of the southern universities-- at this conference. It came the next day and George Wallace was standing, as they say, in the school-house door of the University of Alabama. As the officers of the National Guard said yesterday at the dedication ceremony for the flame on campus, the way the National Guard works is that they are commanded by the governor as the commander-in-chief. In Alabama the commander was George Wallace. However, they are still elements of the United States Army, Air Corps or Navy, and the president can federalize them.

George Wallace was standing at the school-house door to prevent this two young Negroes from registering at the school. They were surrounded by soldiers wearing the uniform of the United States Army, the National Guard. At 11:34 on the morning of June 11<sup>th</sup> Kennedy federalized the National Guard and the same people who had been taking orders from George Wallace turned and marched him off the campus on the orders of the President of the United States.

Vivian Malone and James Hood entered the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa with escorts from the Justice Department. The window in the third floor above that door opened and one white student leaned out and waved the American flag back and forth as Hood and Malone went in.

Kennedy watched that scene on television and felt that he had to go on television and speak about it. This time there was no text. There was no speech worked over for weeks. He felt that it had to be done, that he had to choose sides. One of the things he learned and this he had learned from George Reedy, who was Lyndon Johnson's press secretary, who in a memo to Johnson that he transmitted to Sorensen and Sorensen gave to Kennedy, said that the racial violence in the country was going to continue and was going to get worse until the President took sides. The blacks thought he was their guy. The Negroes thought this was a new time, a new generation, the torch had been passed to a new generation which had different attitudes about race, about justice, about equality and about democracy.

The Southern Democrats in Congress thought, and most Southern officials thought, that Kennedy was just doing this for political reasons. He was, after all, a Senator from the North and he was just talking. What Reedy said in that memo was that the violence will continue until you choose sides. That is when John Kennedy put the government of the United States on the side of the minorities.

Speaking only from notes, there was no text. He and Sorensen were dictating to two different secretaries before Kennedy went on the air at 8 o'clock that night and spoke for 18 minutes, much of it ad-libbed. "This afternoon, following a series of threats and defiant statements, two clearly qualified young Alabama residents who happened to have been born Negro, were admitted. I hope that every American, regardless of where he lives, will stop and examine his conscience about this and other related incidents. When Americans are sent to Vietnam or to West Berlin we do not ask for whites only." Then,

ad-libbing, "This is not a sectional issue, not a partisan issue. This is not even a legal, legislative issue alone. We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and it is clear as the American Constitution. If an American, because his skin is dark cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public. If he cannot send his children to the best public schools available. If he cannot vote for the public officials who represent him. Then who among us would be content to have the color of their skin changed. Who among us would then be content with counsels of patience and delay. We face, therefore, a moral crisis as a country and as a people."

The President put the government on the side of the minority. The President defined it as a moral issue, not a legal issue, not a regional political issue. That was one of the great speeches in American history and that was largely ad-libbed. If he did nothing else in his life we would honor him.

The field agent of the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in Jackson, Mississippi, was driving along and heard that speech on the radio. He was driving along, heard the speech and thought it was so extraordinary, that he stopped his car at a gas station, called his wife on the telephone and said "Keep the children up. I want to come home and talk to them tonight about what has happened in our country."

He did that. He drove into his driveway. His name was Medgar Evers, and when he got out of the car, holding tee-shirts, a pile of tee-shirts he had been delivering marked "No More Jim Crow." He stopped in the driveway. His children ran out the door toward him. He was shot and bled to death in front of his children.

At the same time, John Kennedy who was depressed because the Soviets had not answered or responded at all to the "peace speech" was called by his brother at midnight, as Medgar Evers was bleeding to death-- and as in Saigon Thich Quang Duc, a South Vietnamese monk was burning himself to death. Bobby, though, was not calling about that. He had news from Russia. Robert Kennedy called to tell his brother that *Izvestia* had reprinted the entire text of the American University speech in Russian, the first time that that has ever happened.

That's 48 hours in the life of an American President. That is what it is like to be President.