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CLASSROOM



Bio4Kids:John F. Kennedy (1917-1963)

Brief Outline

Sometimes simply called “JFK,” John Fitzgerald Kennedy became one of the country's youngest and most popular presidents. He guided the nation through the early 1960s, handling conflicts with other nations and working to improve the lives of all Americans.

The second of nine children, Kennedy was born on May 29, 1917 in Brookline, Massachusetts. He grew up in a wealthy, Catholic, Irish American family with a strong political background. His grandfather, John Fitzgerald, was the mayor of Boston. His father, Joseph Kennedy, was a successful businessman who later served on several government commissions and as an ambassador.

Although he was often sick as a child, Kennedy loved sports such as swimming, sailing and tennis. He often competed against his brothers in touch football games. As a teenager, he went to a boarding school in Connecticut where he played football and basketball. Kennedy was also a bright student, excelling at English and history. In 1936, he finished boarding school and went to college at Harvard University.

While at Harvard, Kennedy hurt his back playing football. He had trouble with his back for the rest of his life. This did not prevent him, however, from joining the U.S. Navy in 1940. Kennedy sailed in the South Pacific during World War II. He was in charge of a patrol boat called the PT-109. In 1943, Kennedy's boat was attacked by a Japanese ship. He was hurt in the attack, but was able to rescue some of his crew. For this heroic act, Kennedy received several medals.

After the war, Kennedy decided to become a politician. He was successful in his first attempt, becoming elected to a seat in the House of Representatives in 1946. After serving three terms, Kennedy was elected to the Senate in 1952. He married Jacqueline Lee Bouvier the following year.

In 1954, Kennedy had back surgery. During his recovery, he wrote a book about famous Senators called Profiles in Courage. The book later received the Pulitzer Prize for biography in 1957. He had other good news that year-his wife gave birth to their first child, Caroline, in November.

Kennedy decided to run for president. He became the Democratic candidate for the 1960 presidential election and ran against Republican Richard Nixon, the country's Vice President. Kennedy narrowly beat Nixon in the election, becoming the first Catholic president of the United States. A few weeks after the election, his son John F. Kennedy Jr. was born.

During his presidency, Kennedy worked hard to end racial segregation-the practice of keeping white people and black people separated. Kennedy also proposed new ways to improve civil rights. Wanting to help others in the world, he created the Peace Corps. The corps sends American volunteers to different countries to provide assistance to those in need. Kennedy also sought to learn more about the universe through his support of space exploration.

Some of the greatest challenges Kennedy faced as a president involved the fight against communism. Communism is a form of government that believes that the whole nation should own all of its land and businesses. Kennedy oversaw the failed invasion of communist Cuba (called the "Bay of Pigs Invasion") in 1961. The next year, he found himself in a standoff with the leader of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev. The Soviet Union, which was the world's largest communist nation, had set up missile bases in Cuba. Kennedy discovered their plan and took action to stop them. In October 1962, it looked like the United States and the Soviet Union might go to war over these bases. Kennedy, however, was able to resolve what is now called the Cuban Missile Crisis peacefully.

Sadly, Kennedy's time as president was short. On November 22, 1963, he was shot during a trip to Dallas Texas while riding in a parade with his wife. Kennedy was taken to a nearby hospital, but the doctors were unable to save him. The entire nation mourned the loss of their much loved president. Thousands of people traveled to Washington, D.C., for his funeral and for a chance to say good-bye to a heroic leader.

Honors

- Awarded the Purple Heart, the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal and the World War II Victory Medal for duty and heroism during World War II.

- Awarded with a Pulitzer Prize in 1957 for his book *Profiles in Courage* (1956)
- NASA's Launch Operations Center in Florida was renamed the John F. Kennedy Space Center in November 1963.
- New York's international airport, Idlewild, was renamed John F. Kennedy International Airport in 1963.
- Posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1963.
- U.S. Mint issues the Kennedy half-dollar coin in 1964.