



TELESCOPING THE TIMES

The New Frontier and the Great Society

Summary

CHAPTER OVERVIEW *President Kennedy survives major confrontations with the Soviet Union but cannot get his domestic policies past Congress. President Johnson succeeds him and launches an era of liberal activity with a wide-ranging program of new laws.*

1 Kennedy and the Cold War

MAIN IDEA *The Kennedy administration faced some of the most dangerous Soviet confrontations in American society.*

As Eisenhower's second term drew to a close, Americans were restless. Soviet advances seemed to show that the United States was losing the Cold War. Democratic candidate John F. Kennedy defeated Republican Richard Nixon, the Vice President, in an extremely close election.

Kennedy won in 1960 because he had a well-organized campaign. He also benefited from the first televised presidential election debates in the nation's history, in which he appeared forceful and Nixon ill at ease. Finally, Kennedy was helped to victory by thousands of African Americans, who voted for him because he had taken steps to support Martin Luther King, Jr.

President Kennedy and his wife brought charm and an interest in the arts to the White House. Critics said that his administration was all style and no substance. Kennedy appointed many intellectuals and business people to high administration offices. His chief adviser was his brother Robert, named attorney general.

Kennedy emphasized foreign affairs. He urged a tough stand against the Soviet Union and adopted a new military strategy called flexible response, meant to give the president many options other than nuclear weapons. He increased defense spending and created the army's Special Forces.

Kennedy's policies were challenged in 1961 by Cuba, where Fidel Castro had seized power in 1959 and declared himself a Communist. A plan had been devised under Eisenhower to have Cuban exiles land in Cuba and overthrow Castro. Kennedy gave approval, but the surprise "Bay of Pigs" attack failed and the U.S. was embarrassed.

A year later, spy planes flying over Cuba took photographs showing that the Soviets were building

bases to house nuclear missiles that could be aimed at the United States. In a tense confrontation, Kennedy insisted that the missiles be removed. He sent U.S. Navy ships to surround the island and force Soviet vessels to turn away. Finally Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles, ending the threat of war.

Another crisis arose in Berlin. The city was still divided, half in Communist hands and half under the control of Great Britain, France, and the United States. Khrushchev threatened to block travel to the western-controlled portions of the city, but Kennedy refused to yield. Khrushchev responded by building a concrete and barbed wire wall dividing the city—and preventing East Berliners from fleeing to West Berlin.

After these crises, Kennedy and Khrushchev reached some agreements. They installed a telephone "hot line" connecting president and premier so they could talk directly when a crisis arose. They also began discussing an end to the testing of nuclear weapons.

2 The New Frontier

MAIN IDEA *While Kennedy had trouble getting his ideas for a New Frontier passed several were achieved.*

Kennedy called his domestic program the New Frontier, but his proposals lacked Congressional support. Conservative Republicans and southern Democrats blocked bills providing medical care for the aged, rebuilding cities, and aiding education.

He did succeed with some proposals. With increased spending on defense, he hoped to boost the economy out of a recession. He also persuaded Congress to raise the minimum wage. To decrease poverty abroad and increase goodwill toward the United States, Kennedy instituted the Peace Corps. In the program, volunteers worked in undeveloped foreign countries. Another program, the Alliance

for Progress, gave aid to Latin American nations to prevent the spread of Communist revolution from Cuba.

When the Soviets launched a person into orbit around the earth, Kennedy pledged to commit the nation to putting a man on the moon and bringing him back to earth within the decade. The goal was reached on July 21, 1969, when Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon. The race for the moon had lasting effects on society. Schools expanded their teaching in science. Research spending resulted in improved technologies such as computers and helped promote economic growth.

In 1963, Kennedy called for a national effort to combat poverty. Before he could fully develop this program, however, he was assassinated on November 22. Millions were glued to their televisions over the next few days, watching live, in horror, as the president's accused killer, Lee Harvey Oswald, was himself killed. A Warren Commission investigation determined that Oswald acted alone. However, many people continue to believe that Oswald acted as part of a conspiracy.

3 The Great Society

MAIN IDEA *The demand for reform helped create a new awareness of social problems, especially on matters of civil rights and the effects of poverty.*

The new president, Lyndon Johnson, was a committed New Deal Democrat and skillful legislator. He got Congress to pass two bills submitted by Kennedy—a tax cut meant to stimulate the economy and a sweeping measure aimed at securing equal rights for African Americans. Johnson then launched his own campaign—a “war on poverty” that began with the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964.

Johnson won election in 1964, defeating Republican Barry Goldwater. Johnson's liberal policies were in favor, and Goldwater's comments that he might use nuclear weapons on Cuba and North Vietnam frightened many people.

Johnson then pushed for a broad range of new laws aimed at creating what he called the “Great Society.” Among other things, these laws

- created Medicare and Medicaid, to ensure health care for the aged and poor,
- funded the building of public housing units,
- lifted quotas on immigration,
- required efforts to ensure clean water,
- offered increased protection to consumers.

At the same time, the Supreme Court under Chief Justice Earl Warren took an active role in promoting more liberal policies. The Court ruled that states had to make congressional districts roughly equal in population served, following the principle of “one person, one vote.” The new district lines resulted in a shift of power from rural to urban areas. The Court also required that criminal courts provide an attorney to accused people who cannot afford one. It also ruled that police had to read people accused of a crime their rights—“Miranda rights”—before asking them any questions. Conservatives felt these policies benefited criminals too much.

The Great Society and the Warren Court changed American society. People disagree on whether those changes were beneficial. They greatly expanded the reach and power of the federal government. The tax cut of 1964 spurred economic growth. But, Great Society programs contributed to a rising deficit in the federal budget because the government spent more than it took in in revenues. That problem continues today.

Review

1. How did the United States and Soviet Union confront each other during Kennedy's term and how did the situations end?
2. What policies did Kennedy push, and how well did he succeed in having them passed?
3. Describe Johnson's Great Society.
4. What decisions were made by the Supreme Court under Earl Warren?