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# **From Shannon to Dallas: The Final Twenty-one Weeks of JFK's Presidency**

*narrative and reflection*

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## **Abstract**

This article traces the final weeks and days of John F. Kennedy's presidency from his departure from Shannon Airport on 29 June 1963 to his assassination in Dallas, Texas on 22 November. It argues that this period was among the most action-packed and significant of Kennedy's presidency as he doggedly pursued a peace strategy. Kennedy had entered office as a convinced Cold Warrior, but the Cuban Missile Crisis had altered his views and persuaded him of the need for peaceful co-existence with the Communist world. In this short twenty-one week period, Kennedy concluded a significant nuclear test ban treaty and extended peace overtures to America's Cold War opponents. On the domestic front, civil rights and his re-election campaign were central to the President's busy agenda.

**Keywords:** Kennedy, Peace, Cuba, Test Ban Treaty, Cuba, Soviet Union, Vietnam, Dallas.

## **Introduction**

The distance from Shannon Airport to Dallas, Texas, is 7,045 kilometres. It took the 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States 146 days to make this journey, although he took a rather circuitous route. On 29<sup>th</sup> June 1963, John Kennedy spent his last ever day on Irish soil. Prior to departing Shannon Airport, Kennedy famously said "this is not the land of my birth but it is the land for which I hold the greatest affection and I certainly will come back in the Springtime" (Carroll, 2003, p.172). That pledge was not honoured because of an assassin's bullet in Dealey Plaza, Dallas, on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1963. Kennedy's time in Ireland has been described as the happiest of his presidency, but from the moment he departed on Air Force One he rode a political and emotional roller-coaster. Between

leaving Shannon and arriving in Texas, Kennedy experienced some of the most tumultuous and defining days of his presidency.

In this short twenty-one week period, Kennedy triumphantly concluded an important test ban treaty. He significantly advanced détente with the Soviet Union. He put out peace-feelers towards Cuba and China. His administration was complicit in a coup in Vietnam while, at the same time, Kennedy was, paradoxically, planning to downscale American involvement in South East Asia. He endured the huge personal bereavement of losing a child. He made incremental progress on the burning issue of civil rights legislation. He also began, to all intents and purposes, campaigning for his re-election in 1964.

### **Kennedy's visit to England**

Kennedy got the biggest laugh of his Irish visit when he started to say that Limerick was his final stop before going on to England and then Italy. Instead, he caught himself, and said, "From here I go to – another country – and then Italy" (O'Donnell & Powers, 1970, p.370). Kennedy had told his close advisor, Kenny O'Donnell, that his visit to Ireland was "a pleasure trip" (O'Donnell & Powers, 1970, p.358). In contrast, Kennedy's visit to England involved significant political business, but before this could be conducted, the President availed of the opportunity to discharge a family debt of honour.

Air Force One made an unpublicised stop at Waddington RAF Base where the President transferred by helicopter to the Chatsworth Estate in Derbyshire's Peak District (O'Donnell & Powers, 1970, p.370). There Kennedy paid his first and only visit to his younger sister Kathleen's grave. She had died in a plane crash in France in 1948 and had been buried on the estate of her late husband, an English aristocrat and heir apparent of the 10<sup>th</sup> Duke of Devonshire (Molumby, 2010). From Chatsworth, Kennedy travelled to Birch Grove, the country residence of the British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, for talks with his closest European ally on forthcoming negotiations on a nuclear atmospheric test ban treaty.

### **In Italy to talk test-ban treaty**

Kennedy's next stop was Italy. The President's visit coincided with the coronation of Pope Paul VI, but after consulting with Cardinal Cushing from Boston, Kennedy did not attend the ceremonies. "Stay away from Rome until after the coronation," the Cardinal advised. "It's the biggest day of the

man's life and you don't want to take the play away from him" (O'Donnell & Powers, 1970, p.370). President Kennedy waited until two days after the coronation before he went to the Vatican to meet with the new Pope. This meeting was, in fact, a renewing of acquaintanceships because Paul VI had first met the President and other members of the Kennedy family at the coronation of Pope Pius XII in 1939. On that occasion, Ted Kennedy had received his First Communion from Pius XII (McGinnis, 1993, p.146).

President Kennedy's main political set piece in Italy took place in Naples. At a speech at NATO Headquarters, Kennedy assured his Western Allies that "our negotiations for an end to nuclear tests and our opposition to nuclear dispersal are fully consistent with our attention to defence - these are all complementary parts of a single strategy for peace" (John F. Kennedy Library & Museum, 1963).

Formal negotiations on a nuclear test ban treaty got underway in Moscow on 15<sup>th</sup> July, 1963. Kennedy appointed Averell Harriman, an elder statesman of the Democratic Party, a former Governor of New York and a former American Ambassador to the Soviet Union, as his lead negotiator (Oser, 1986). However, a core team, based in the White House, including the President himself, the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk and Bob McNamara, the Secretary for Defence, were in daily and often intense communication with Harriman.

On 25<sup>th</sup> July, a Treaty was agreed between the United States, the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom which was designed to work towards "the speediest possible achievement" of disarmament and to guard against nuclear fall-out (The American Presidency Project Website, n.d.). Specifically, the Treaty outlawed nuclear testing in the atmosphere, outer space and underwater. John Kennedy considered this agreement his administration's greatest achievement (Sachs, 2013, p.111), but he knew he faced another battle to convince the US Senate of its merits.

Constitutionally Kennedy needed a two-thirds majority of the Senate, 67 votes, to ensure the Treaty's ratification. The President however was gravely concerned that the Treaty could be scuttled by Republican senators, many of whom were sceptical of any rapprochement with the Soviet Union and who also did not believe that Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev could be trusted. Privately Kennedy mused that this outcome would be a catastrophe equivalent to America's failure to ratify the League of Nations following World War One (Sachs, 2013, p.111; Clarke, 2013, p.22; Dallek, 2003, p.628).

### **Kennedy's forceful side**

The President was not averse to using strong-arm tactics to deliver his favoured outcome. Back in 1961, Sherman Adams, who had been the White House Chief of Staff during the presidency of Kennedy's predecessor, Dwight Eisenhower, was facing an impending indictment of serious tax fraud. Eisenhower was concerned that if Adams was convicted he might commit suicide and he indirectly intervened on his old political retainer's behalf with President Kennedy (Clarke, 2013, p.25). Eisenhower asked Everett Dirksen, the Republican Senate Minority Leader, to approach Kennedy with a view to the President quietly getting the Justice Department to drop Adams's indictment. Dirksen promised Kennedy that if he did so he would have a political "blank check" in his account from both himself and Eisenhower (Clarke, 2013, p.25).

On August 12<sup>th</sup> 1963, Kennedy chose to call in these political favours in order to assist the ratification of the Limited Test Ban Treaty. At a meeting in the White House, after reminding Dirksen that both he and Eisenhower owed him one, Kennedy said: "Ev, I want you to reverse yourself and come out for the Treaty. I also want Ike's public endorsement of the Treaty before the Senate votes. We'll call it square on the other matter" (Clarke, 2013, p.31). In reply, Dirksen said "Mr President, you're a hell of a horse trader. But I'll honour my commitment, and I'm sure that General Eisenhower will" (Clarke, 2013, p.31). Three days later, on 16<sup>th</sup> August, the *New York Times* reported that former President Eisenhower was now in favour of the Test Ban Treaty (Bracker, 1963). Dirksen subsequently followed suit. Following a further meeting with Kennedy, he publicly endorsed the Treaty on 9<sup>th</sup> September 1963 (Anonymous, 1963).

The endorsements of two of the most popular and influential figures in the Republican Party, undoubtedly impacted positively on the safe passage of the Limited Test Ban Treaty. On 24<sup>th</sup> September, the Senate comprehensively ratified the Treaty by 80 votes to 19 (Talbot, 2007, p.213). The Treaty was subsequently signed by 102 nations (O'Donnell & Powers, 1970, p.380-1). On 7<sup>th</sup> October, the historically-minded Kennedy formally signed the Limited Test Ban Treaty on behalf of the United States in a specially staged ceremony in the White House's Treaty Room on the same table in which President William McKinley had signed the peace protocols that concluded the Spanish-American War in 1898 (O'Donnell & Powers, 1970, p.380-1).

### **A Race for Peace**

The Test Ban Treaty was just one of a series of measures that Kennedy pursued in the Autumn of 1963 as part of a wider peace strategy. Kennedy had entered into office as a dedicated Cold War

Warrior, but the Cuban Missile crisis in October 1962, in which the world had come to the brink of nuclear annihilation, had deeply affected him. He had come to the stark realisation that both the United States and the Soviet Union had, in his own words, a “mutual interest in avoiding mutual destruction” (The US State Department Website, n.d.).

Rather than an arms race, by 1963 Kennedy was engaged in a race for peace. Though he personally abhorred Communism, Kennedy confronted hawkish attitudes and argued that peaceful co-existence between East and West was not just possible, but essential to the survival of mankind. In an extraordinary speech to the United Nations General Assembly on 20<sup>th</sup> September, Kennedy made a direct appeal to the USSR to work with the United States in pursuit of a sustainable peace. The President said:

*I would say to the leaders of the Soviet Union, and to their people, that if either of our countries is to be fully secure, we need a much better weapon than the H-Bomb – a weapon better than ballistic missiles or nuclear submarines – and that better weapon is peaceful co-operation* (The US State Department Website, n.d.).

Kennedy's actions in this period show that this was not mere rhetoric. On 26<sup>th</sup> August, he had told the Soviet Ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, that he hoped the Test Ban Treaty could be followed by US-Soviet agreements on civil aviation and the prohibition of weapons being introduced into outer space (Clarke, 2013, p.101-2).

### **Grain for the Soviet Union**

A more tangible expression of unprecedented goodwill occurred in early October when President Kennedy agreed to sell surplus US wheat to the Soviet Union. Russia was undergoing severe grain shortages as a result of a combination of drought and inefficient agricultural programmes. Though Kennedy knew that the wheat sale would help America's balance of payments and would bring considerable income to US farmers and shippers, it also exposed him to strong domestic criticism. Lending Khrushchev a helping hand was especially unpopular with Polish-Americans, a key electoral demographic group. Richard Nixon, who had stood against Kennedy in 1960, called the deal “a major foreign policy mistake” (Clarke, 2013, p.221). Within his own administration, Vice President Lyndon Johnson was privately deeply critical of Kennedy's decision (O'Donnell & Powers, 1970, p.381). The President, however, was undeterred. He believed that this gesture to Khrushchev put in place solid foundations for a lasting peace.

## Co-Existing with Castro's Cuba

In September, Kennedy authorised a back-channel of communications with Castro's Cuba, via William Attwood, a key official of Adlai Stevenson, the US Ambassador to the United Nations (Clarke, 2013, p.183-4). On 24<sup>th</sup> October, Kennedy met with Jean Daniel, a socialist and noted French journalist, who that November was travelling to Havana. Kennedy told Daniel, who he knew would report the conversation back to Castro, that the United States could peacefully co-exist with Cuba and would end the economic blockade if Castro's regime stopped attempting to export Communism to other countries in the region (Clarke, 2013, p.250-2).

In his memoir, published in 2006, Castro wistfully recalled Kennedy's assassination as a lost opportunity for US-Cuban relations. Castro noted:

*He made mistakes, I repeat, but he was an intelligent man, sometimes brilliant, brave and it's my opinion – I've said this before – that if Kennedy had survived, it's possible that relations between Cuba and the United States would have improved.... The day he was killed I was talking to a French journalist, Jean Daniel, whom Kennedy had sent to me with a message, to talk to me. So communications were being established, and that might have favoured an improvement in our relations.... when [Kennedy] was taken from the stage he had enough authority in his country to impose an improvement in relations with Cuba. And that was palpably demonstrated in the conversations I had with that French journalist, Jean Daniel, who was with me – bringing me very important words from Kennedy (Castro, 2006, p.591).*

## Second Term Plans for Peace

Kennedy had to walk a fine-line between securing re-election and deepening his peace strategy. He knew that he would have greater room for manoeuvre in his second term and he confided in his friend, David Ormsby-Gore, the British Ambassador to Washington, that if he was re-elected he intended to visit Moscow as a step towards further improving US-Soviet relations (Clarke, 2013, p.285).

Kennedy also intended to explore détente with China in his second term. In November 1963, he was directly involved in the preparation of a speech that Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, Roger Hilsman, would be delivering on US-Sino relations. It was Kennedy's intention that this speech would, in his own words, "open the door a little bit" (Clarke, 2013, p.319). Kennedy's press secretary, Pierre Salinger, later claimed that Kennedy "had China marked as a part of policy for the

second four years of his administration” and that Kennedy intended to use his second term “to bridge the gap” between Washington and Beijing (Anonymous, 1971).

### **Tito, Lemass, Hollywood and Bereavement**

Kennedy had already begun the process of preparing the US public for this unprecedented engagement with the Communist World. On 17<sup>th</sup> October, Josip Tito, the President of Yugoslavia, became the first Communist Head of Government to be received at the White House (The American Presidency Project Website, n.d.). President Eisenhower had previously invited Tito, but he then rescinded the invitation following protests from Congress (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2009, p.235).

Incidentally, Tito’s visit almost immediately followed a less-contentious and more light-hearted state visit. Two days previously, the Irish Taoiseach, Seán Lemass, had been the guest of honour at a state dinner which concluded with a private late night party in the President’s White House quarters. Gene Kelly, the celebrated Hollywood star, performed for the guests and Dorothy Tubridy, an Irish friend of the Kennedy family, sang the “Boys of Wexford” (Maier, 2003, p.443). After noticing how much this song had moved the President, his sister, Eunice Kennedy-Shriver, with Lemass’s help, sourced a recording of it to give to him at Christmas (John F. Kennedy Library & Museum, 1966). It was a present that John Kennedy would never receive.

In the final Autumn of his life, as Kennedy publicly strove to underpin world peace, he was privately mourning the death of his new born son. Patrick Kennedy was born on 7<sup>th</sup> August 1963. He died two days later of respiratory distress syndrome (Altman, 2013).

### **Vietnam**

Vietnam also loomed large in Kennedy’s consciousness in this period. From mid-August, Kennedy had prevaricated on whether his administration should support a coup against the South Vietnamese President, Ngo Dinh Diem (Dallek, 2003, p.673-84; Reeves, 1991, p.403-412). Diem had increasingly fallen under the sinister influence of Madame Nhu, the wife of his younger brother. Diem’s Government were engaged in a campaign of persecution against South Vietnamese Buddhists.



In protest at this repression, in June 1963, a Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, had burnt himself to death in Saigon. Photographs of Quang Duc's death received huge coverage in newspapers and Kennedy remarked that "no news picture in history has generated so much emotion around the world as that one" (Jacobs, 2006, p.149). Further immolations followed and continued media coverage of these incidents horrified millions across the globe, including Kennedy (Reeves, 1991, p.403-412). Madame Nhu made matters worse by referring to the immolations as "barbeques" and offering matches and fuel for further immolations (Reeves, 1991, p.40). On 1<sup>st</sup> November, having received assurances from the US Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge that the United States would not intervene, the South Vietnamese Generals ousted Diem in a coup d'état.

Whatever about effecting regime change in Vietnam, Kennedy was determined to ensure that the United States did not become enmeshed in South East Asia. On 2<sup>nd</sup> October, Kennedy asked the Defense Secretary, Bob McNamara, to announce the immediate withdrawal of one thousand US soldiers and to pledge that all American forces would leave Vietnam by the end of 1965 (US Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, 1967, p.115). This commitment was reversed in the immediate aftermath of John Kennedy's death.

## Civil Rights

On 28<sup>th</sup> August, Kennedy stood at the third-floor window of the White House solarium with Preston Bruce, the White House doorman, and watched a crowd of over a quarter of million people march to the Lincoln Memorial (Clarke, 2013, p.108). The rally organised by the Civil Rights Movement was the largest ever mass protest in American history. After Martin Luther King had delivered his iconic "I have a dream" speech, Kennedy had a robust encounter with leaders of the civil rights movement in the Oval Office. The civil rights leaders wanted Kennedy to expand the scope of his civil rights bill to include a Fair Employment Practices Commission, which would prevent racial discrimination in hiring. The President however doubted that an expanded bill, including this fair employment measure, would attract significant support to pass through Congress (Clarke, 2013, p.114-116).

Kennedy was fully committed to the civil rights agenda, but he took a piece-meal, pragmatic approach. A Gallup Poll on 12<sup>th</sup> October 1963 showed that Kennedy's approval rating had dropped from 50 to 35 percent after he had submitted his civil rights bill (Clarke, 2013, p.233-234). A Harris Poll in the *Washington Post* on 14<sup>th</sup> October suggested that Kennedy would lose up to half of the Southern States he had won in 1960 (Clarke, 2013, p.233-234). The President's visit to Texas was

about shoring up Southern support. With an eye on the 1964 election, Kennedy was already in campaign mode.

### Safety concerns and final days

He had visited Tampa, Florida, on 18<sup>th</sup> November. On this trip, Floyd Boring, a secret service agent who had previously foiled an attempt on President Harry Truman's life, expressed concerns to Kennedy that by travelling by open-top motorcade the President was endangering his own safety (Goldstein, 2008). Kennedy replied "Floyd, this is a political trip. If I don't mingle with the people, I couldn't get elected as a dog catcher" (Clarke, 2013, p.312). Kenny O'Donnell later told the Warren Commission, Kennedy's journey through Dallas was planned to give the President maximum public exposure (President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy, 1964, p.440).

At 12.30 p.m. on 22<sup>nd</sup> November, John F. Kennedy's open-top motorcade turned left onto Elm Street in Dallas. Seconds later shots rang out which would change the course of history. It was just 146 days since John Kennedy had said goodbye at Shannon.

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