

# John F Kennedy: 'We all breathe the same air'

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President Obama's [address to young people in Jerusalem](#) in March was meant to be an uplifting call for peace. Yet there was one remarkably dispiriting line. "Speaking as a politician," said Obama, "I can promise you this: political leaders will not take risks if the people do not demand that they do. You must create the change that you want to see."

Obama was appealing to Israel's young people to rally for peace. That's fine. But he was also expressing the sad truth of our time – political leaders are followers. Politicians are governed by focus groups and opinion surveys. They will "lead" only when the outcry becomes loud enough, and sometimes not even then. And when the public is confused and divided, the politicians cower in their platitudes.

It is fitting, therefore, to remember other times in history, when democratic politicians led, by cajoling, inspiring, and enlightening the public to follow a necessary yet courageous course. At those moments of history, grand rhetoric spurred action, even dazzling and inspiring action. We are at an anniversary of one such moment of democratic leadership, an act of leadership and statesmanship so large that it helped to save humanity.

Fifty years ago, on 10 June 1963, President [John F Kennedy](#) changed the course of the cold war. Like Obama, he spoke of peace. Yet, unlike Obama, JFK took risks in the cause of peace. His British counterpart of the day, Harold Macmillan, and the UK ambassador to Washington, David Ormsby-Gore, deserve significant credit for bolstering his resolve at critical moments.

But JFK had a towering role model for his political bravery. No 20th-century democratic politician did more to harness words to courageous action than Winston Churchill. His determination, soaring rhetoric, and decisive action in 1939 and 1940 saved Britain in the war with Nazi Germany.

As a young college student, JFK watched Churchill's rise to wartime leader while visiting his father Joseph Kennedy, America's ambassador to the Court of St. James. Churchill's courage no doubt made a powerful impression on JFK in contrast with his own father's notorious pessimism about Britain's wartime prospects.

From this time onward, JFK's yardstick of leadership was political courage, the readiness to lead public opinion rather than to follow it. As a US senator, he and Ted Sorensen, his trusted adviser and speechwriter, crafted *Profiles in Courage*, a selection of historical examples from the Senate where a politician risked career and reputation to stand for higher principles. Soon enough, Kennedy would face the test of political courage at another hinge of history.

He arrived at the presidency with little experience – the youngest elected president in US history. His first two years were bumpy, far from the ideals of leadership to which he aspired and held himself accountable. Yet it was in his third year, a true *annus mirabilis* of presidential leadership, that JFK joined the pantheon of greatness.

Kennedy became president after 15 years of cold war, and at a moment when the prospects of a US-Soviet thaw were rapidly fading. Stalin's death in 1953 had raised widespread hopes that solutions to the cold war could be found. Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin's successor, championed the cause of "peaceful coexistence" of the superpowers. Yet years of US-Soviet negotiations on arms control had failed to make headway: the distrust on both sides was too great.

Worse still, tensions intensified in the months between JFK's election victory in November 1960 and his assumption of office on 20 January 1961. A long-awaited Khrushchev-Eisenhower summit failed when a CIA spy-plane was shot down in Soviet airspace just weeks before the scheduled meeting. This was par for the course: no agency did more damage more consistently to the cause of peace than the malign and bungling CIA. But Eisenhower compounded the CIA's damage by brazenly denying the spy mission, only to have the Soviets produce both the plane's wreckage and the captured US pilot for a global audience.

Kennedy came into office in 1961 hoping to reach a series of arms-control treaties with the Soviet Union, specifically a ban on nuclear arms testing to be followed by a nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Yet as an initially inexperienced leader, JFK drifted with events instead of leading them. The CIA reprised its spy plane bungling in a far larger and more dangerous debacle, by staging an invasion of Cuba by Cuban exiles. When the attempt immediately collapsed on the beach of the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy repeated Eisenhower's blunder by brazenly (and ridiculously) lying to Khrushchev about the US role in the attempted invasion.

To say that matters quickly spiralled out of control is an understatement. Kennedy increased defence spending; completed the placement of intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Turkey, practically on Russia's doorstep; and generally stepped up the cold war rhetoric. Khrushchev, too, dramatically raised the stakes, declaring that the Soviet Union would soon take unilateral action in divided Berlin to deny western access to the western portion of the city. And then came the coup de grace, Khrushchev's impetuous decision in early 1962 to place intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Cuba to give the US a taste of its own medicine, a tit-for-tat response to the Bay of Pigs and the missiles in Turkey.

JFK's greatness began in the famous 13 days of the Cuban missile crisis. While demanding the removal of the Soviet missiles, he bought time through a naval quarantine of Soviet ships to Cuba, and kept open communication channels with Khrushchev. He repeatedly imagined himself in Khrushchev's position, in order to assess his motivations and to induce him to withdraw the missiles without humiliating the Soviet Union. One crucial part of that strategy was Kennedy's secret commitment to Khrushchev, that the US would remove its Jupiter missiles from Turkey.

As Kennedy would say eight months later in the "Peace" speech: "And above all, while defending our own vital interests, nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either a humiliating retreat or a nuclear war. To adopt that kind of course in the nuclear age would be evidence only of the bankruptcy of our

policy – or of a collective death-wish for the world.”

Many historians have misjudged the importance of Kennedy’s secret quid pro quo on the missiles in Turkey. When it was revealed, 25 years after the event, it was first assumed that this trade must have played a decisive role in Khrushchev’s own decision to withdraw the Cuban missiles. But once the timing of JFK’s commitment was re-examined, in light of new evidence from Soviet archives, it was clear that Khrushchev had decided to remove the Soviet missiles from Cuba even before learning of Kennedy’s pledge on the Jupiter missiles. Some historians then swung the other way, deciding that Kennedy’s pledge had played no role in the ultimate outcome of the crisis.

Yet Kennedy’s decision, an act of statesmanship and wisdom, played a powerful role. Khrushchev appreciated Kennedy’s gesture. It established a bond of mutual trust and common understanding that would serve them well in the test ban negotiations.

The Cuban missile crisis changed Kennedy and Khrushchev, and thereby changed the world. Despite JFK’s long-standing fear that nuclear war could occur through miscalculation or accident, he himself had almost presided over the ultimate Armageddon. Had he listened to his generals, advocating a surprise military strike, this surely would have been the outcome. Khrushchev was no less shocked. His ill-considered plan for a quick political advantage had brought the world to the brink of annihilation. As he recounted later: “Any man who could stare at the reality of nuclear war without sober thoughts was an irresponsible fool ... Of course I was scared. It would have been insane not to have been scared. I was frightened about what could happen to my country – or your country and all the other countries that would be devastated by a nuclear war.”

The crisis was therefore a catharsis for the leaders of the two superpowers, a break of the fever of the self-feeding escalation of arms and conflict of the preceding two years. Most importantly, for JFK it was a wake-up call. If the world was to be saved, if nuclear war was to be avoided, the president would have to lead. War and peace could not be left to the generals, the CIA, or a confused and fearful public. Obama told the Israeli young

people to “create the change you want to see”. JFK instead decided that as president he must lead that change.

What followed, between October 1962 and September 1963, was one of the greatest sustained acts of leadership and statesmanship in modern times. Kennedy’s eloquence was key; but it was just one weapon in his political arsenal. JFK built his campaign for peace on a combination of vision and pragmatic actions, focusing first on a treaty to end nuclear tests.

The notion of a test-ban treaty might seem rather obvious today, yet at the time it was as likely as a substantive US-Iran or Israel-Palestine treaty would be today. Making peace with the Soviet Union was hardly high on the political to-do list in the spring of 1963, and very few were even arguing it should be tried. Soviet perfidy, or so it seemed to many Americans, had brought the world to the brink of destruction. The US public was deeply sceptical that any peace could be possible. Hardliners on both sides firmly believed that any treaty would be tantamount to unilateral surrender, as it would be followed by secret aggression – even a nuclear first strike – by the other side. But after staring into the nuclear abyss in the missile crisis, Kennedy was determined to pull back from the brink. There could be no better start for his peace campaign than the American University on commencement day.

Any speech, of course, has many listeners and audiences, but this one was more complicated than most. It had to satisfy three tough audiences: the American public, who would in turn influence the Senate debate over treaty ratification; Soviet leaders; and key European allies. Strong and vocal opposition by West Germany, for example, could undermine the negotiations. And such vocal opposition was quite possible. West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer repeatedly ridiculed the possibility of a cold war thaw, arguing instead for a US-backed German nuclear arsenal as the key to the west’s defense.

Kennedy’s rhetorical strategy was brilliant. Instead of using the speech to list a set of demands on the Soviet Union, as earlier presidents had done, JFK called on Americans

to “re-examine our own attitudes, for ours are as important as theirs”. Kennedy’s basic point was simple, powerful, direct, and shocking: both sides of the cold war are human, and both sides want peace.

Kennedy did not speak of Russian perfidy. Instead he spoke of Russian valour. “No government or social system is so evil that its people must be considered as lacking in virtue. 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, in acts of courage.” He noted that America and the Soviet Union shared a mutual abhorrence of war, and that “[a]lmost unique among the major world powers, we have never been at war with each other”.

The humanisation of the foe, the emphasis that both sides are rational and desirous of peace, not only formed the bulwark of JFK’s core vision, but also greatest lyricism of the speech, in soaring phrases with the capacity to inspire across generations:

“So let us not be blind to our differences, but let us also direct attention to our common interests and the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For in 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 futures. And we are all mortal.” Towards the end of the speech, Kennedy made the important announcement that he, Prime Minister Macmillan, and Chairman Khrushchev would resume talks on a test ban treaty.

We may read the speech for inspiration, but should judge it in history as a political act. Kennedy above all warned against fantasies and fanatics. He was a politician, and had his eye firmly on the outcome. Could a treaty be signed and ratified? And would the treaty help to create the conditions for peace?

The answers are of course now clear. Khrushchev regarded Kennedy’s speech as the

greatest by an American president since Franklin D Roosevelt. It spurred him to clear away many long-standing obstacles to the test ban treaty, which was signed in Moscow just seven weeks after the Peace speech. Only one major compromise was made – to limit the test ban to air, space, and underwater, excluding tests underground – so as to sidestep the vexing scientific and political question of how to differentiate between secret underground nuclear tests and earthquakes. Kennedy also reassured Khrushchev that the US would not arm West Germany with nuclear weapons, a policy that Eisenhower had begun to explore, to the great alarm of the Soviet Union.

The American public rallied as well. They did reconsider their own attitudes, and agreed with Kennedy that peace was possible. Yet Kennedy also made a series of shrewd agreements with the military top brass and with key Senators, to ensure that no sticking points would hinder ratification. Kennedy had all the reason to keep his feet on the ground, even as he let his rhetoric soar. Any agreement with the Soviet Union would have to pass the Senate by a two-thirds majority. There was no use signing an agreement that the Senate would not ratify. Through arduous and detailed work over many weeks, Kennedy produced a landslide victory in the Senate, with ratification won by a margin of 81 to 17.

The test ban treaty certainly did not end the cold war, but it did end atmospheric nuclear testing. Just as important, it provided the proof that negotiation and agreement was possible, and thus laid the groundwork for future treaties, most importantly the nuclear non-proliferation treaty of 1968. The myth of implacable hostility between the superpowers was disproved, decisively and irreversibly. It is also notable that the most recent careful epidemiological research has also found that nuclear fallout from the atmospheric testing until 1963 was even more dangerous than supposed at the time.

Yet the impact of JFK's courageous leadership in the final year of his life extends even beyond his role in putting the cold war on to a safer path, for his lessons in leadership extend beyond nuclear diplomacy and great power [politics](#). I would draw several lessons for our own time, indeed for any time.

First, our foes are human, and our common human bonds can overcome seemingly unbridgeable divides. One of Kennedy's most important messages that summer was that "history teaches us that enmities between nations, as between individuals, do not last forever. However fixed our likes and dislikes may seem, the tide of time and events will often bring surprising changes in the relations between nations and neighbours." This lesson remains largely unlearned by many in the US and Europe today.

Second, empathetic steps can beget empathetic steps in return. Kennedy removed the missiles from Turkey, and respected legitimate Soviet concerns over potential West German nuclear arms. He and the US were repaid with the trust to clear away a decade's worth of hurdles to a durable test ban treaty.

Third, Kennedy was guided by a soaring vision of peace, but kept both feet on the ground. "World peace," he declared, "like community peace, does not require that each man love his neighbour, it requires only that they live together in mutual tolerance, submitting their disputes to a just and peaceful settlement." The test ban treaty, he said, was but the first step on a journey of a thousand miles. He did not oversell the treaty, and won the public's trust in his honest appraisal of what it could and could not do.

Fourth, while a great speech is a powerful tool of leadership, it must be combined with pragmatic follow-through, something evidently lacking in Obama's diplomacy. The essence of leadership, said JFK, is to make the vision seem achievable by laying out the pragmatic steps to implement it. "By defining our goal more clearly, by making it seem more manageable and less remote, we can help all people to see it, to draw hope from it, and to move irresistibly towards it."

Finally, leadership counts. Courage does not arise by committee. And vision is not the common denominator of a focus group. Kennedy made peace not because he was advised to do so. He made peace because he chose his own counsel, tuning down – if not out – the cacophony of advice from the generals, politicians and pundits.

These are lessons for our time, whether to end the roiling wars in the Middle East or



finally to face the challenges of human-induced environmental destruction. We live in an age where the media rules and the politicians follow. That age is becoming dangerous indeed, an echo-chamber of sound bites and politics as the art of the trivial. We need better politics than that, and can draw hope from a moment of history 50 years ago, when courage, leadership and vision moved the world.

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