

President Kennedy- As the World Knew Him



Whatever the late President did became the mirror which reflected the world's opinion of America

by Professor James Tracy Crown

THE IMAGE that the head of a government projects abroad, whether he be President, Premier or Prime Minister, reflects more than just his own personality; it becomes a yardstick by which the rest of the world judges his country. His actions and attitudes on domestic and foreign affairs, even his physical appearance, have a profound effect on world opinion. He is a symbol of his country.

More than any other President in our history, John F. Kennedy was the public image of the United States of America. Unlike the initial acclaim accorded the stately Roosevelt or the revered Eisenhower, many nations viewed the election of Kennedy in 1961 with alarm. It was not difficult to understand; he was born to great wealth, he was very young and he was inexperienced. Could any country that elected such a man be respected?

What these detractors did not realize was Kennedy's great energy, his personal magnetism, his ability, and his decisiveness.

Thrown into the role of leader of the free world, Kennedy's actions were to change the whole world's views of America. During his three years in office, he lived under a microscope; everything he said or did was

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magnified. World public opinion changed from day to day.

The leadership-image game is a treacherous one in which the stakes are high. A favorable image can be of great help in building friendly cooperation abroad, while any tarnish on that image can create the reverse reaction. Such a vulnerable instrument of foreign policy causes many veteran diplomats to shudder, yet we have no choice but to play the game, because the people of the world have chosen to think of this country very much in terms of its President.

Typical examples of the pitfalls inherent in the image game are these two instances that occurred during the Eisenhower regime. In December, 1959, the President made a triumphal 11-nation tour of Europe and Asia. When he stopped at New Delhi, an estimated 1,000,000 Indians greeted him as the "Prince of Peace," and American prestige, through the image of its leader, soared. Yet, six months later, on the eve of a Big Four summit conference in Paris, the Presidential image suffered a severe set-back. An American U-2 reconnaissance plane had come down in Russia, and Eisenhower, and the United States, were now depicted as war-mongers by the Soviet Union and by many neutralist nations, *including India*. Quick to seize on an opportunity to embarrass Eisenhower and damage his image, particularly with the uncommitted nations, Premier Khrushchev blamed the United States and its President for wrecking the summit peace conference, and he walked out. Khrushchev also withdrew an invitation for Eisenhower to visit Russia. This double rejection not only humiliated our President publicly, but dropped American prestige around the world.

At that time, John F. Kennedy, then a senator, underscored the im-

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portance that we should attach to the treatment our President receives overseas by saying, "No President of the United States must ever again be put in the position of traveling across the sea, armed only with vague, speculative hopes, in order to provide occasion for public humiliation."

Despite the dangerous aspects of the image game, no administration ever staked more on the reputation of its President abroad than President Kennedy. And no recent administration, with the possible exception of Harry S. Truman's, began as so much of an unknown quantity internationally.

Conversing with politicians in Europe and Asia during the 1960 American presidential campaign, the author discovered that a few Europeans knew of Senator John Kennedy because he had championed Algerian independence before it was in vogue to do so. Some others thought he was vaguely "British" in political outlook. A few Asians knew that Chester Bowles, who had always been friendly toward India, was then an important political adviser to Kennedy. This impressed the Indians but left the Pakistanis, with whom they were having a border dispute, unhappy. The Japanese were reading exciting stories about their former naval hero whose destroyer had smashed Lieutenant John F. Kennedy's P.T. boat, but beyond that the Kennedy name meant nothing to them.

No one actively disliked Kennedy—although some leftist Indians remarked that with all his wealth he couldn't be very "progressive," and some conservative Frenchmen thought him a meddler for his "interfering statements" about Algerian independence. But while Kennedy escaped the intense dislike a few foreign politicians felt for his Re-

publican opponent, former Vice President Richard M. Nixon, he did not generate the same feeling of confidence that other foreign statesmen had in Nixon, whom they thought of as a seasoned disciple of Eisenhower's basic policies.

The Making of an Image: Immediately upon taking office, President Kennedy set about dispelling the anonymity that cloaked him abroad. He laid the foundation for his international image in a startling and significant fashion when instead of following custom and talking only to the American people, he addressed his inaugural message to "my fellow citizens of the world."

Of course Kennedy was concerned about domestic problems, too, and he dealt with them eloquently during his first address to Congress, but in his maiden speech as President of the United States he had a golden opportunity to catch the eyes and ears of the world—and he took it.

To Europeans, he promised "the loyalty of faithful friends." To "those peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of misery," he promised America's "best efforts to help them help themselves." To his nation's adversaries, he pledged to meet strength with raw strength when that was required, but he also invited an "exploration of what problems unite instead of belaboring those problems which divide us."

Thus, from the very outset, the Kennedy image was projected as a composite of all the virtues a friendly giant should have—dignity, humanity and strength. And when American observers noticed soon afterward that his phrase: "Let us never negotiate out of fear, but never let us fear to negotiate," began to be repeated abroad, they knew the image had started gaining accept-

ance. The first hurdle had been cleared.

Khrushchev and the Kennedy Image: The acid test for Kennedy's image came not in connection with our European allies or with peoples in underdeveloped countries but with his "adversaries" as he preferred to call the Iron Curtain nations. More specifically, it involved one man—the Soviet Premier, Nikita Khrushchev. And when it came, it threatened to destroy both the capitalist and communist systems.

Kennedy's election had left the Soviet political high command perplexed. Many years ago, a Soviet leader named Zinoviev had remarked that "British politics are puzzling enough, but American politics are incomprehensible." The Soviet viewpoint has not changed much with the passing of time.

To the Soviets, and many Europeans as well, Richard Nixon seemed the logical choice as President. Not only did Nixon represent a continuation of the policies and attitudes of the previous administration, but he also had been indoctrinated in the intricacies of running a large country.

During two visits to the Soviet Union and in conversations with Soviet diplomats elsewhere, the author has repeatedly been impressed by the enormous stress the Russians place on administrative experience. They feel it is essential to the man who is to be taken seriously. From the lowest party levels up to, apparently, Khrushchev himself, the Russians found it inconceivable that anyone with only legislative experience could run a great country responsibly.

The Soviet Premier, attending a United Nations session in New York in 1960, told Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt that if Kennedy were elected he probably would be dominated by the



Kennedy in Puerto Rico. Security measures that protected him away from home failed to stop assassin's bullet in Texas where he was making his speaking tour.

big financial and industrial interests. Other Communists expressed the fear that Kennedy, as a liberal, might lean over backward to be more anti-Communist than a conservative would. But the predominant attitude toward Kennedy was uncertainty.

Knowing this, the President determined to meet the Red chieftain face-to-face at the earliest possible moment and set the record straight. The meeting between these two titular heads took place in Vienna in 1961, with the President at a distinct disadvantage.

Kennedy was still subject to criticism, both at home and abroad, for the way he and his administration had handled the abortive Bay of Pigs landing in Cuba. The Kennedy image at that time was hardly a picture of determination and strength, and Khrushchev was quick to exploit this weakness by demanding immediate changes in Berlin favorable to the East. Although Kennedy stood firm on the Berlin issues, observers came away with the feeling that Khrushchev had merely been toying with the younger man and that a real showdown would occur elsewhere sooner or later.

The opportunity for Kennedy to establish a strong image in Soviet eyes finally came in the early fall of 1962, when U.S. reconnaissance

planes brought back aerial photos showing Red missiles with nuclear capabilities in Cuba. We still do not know all the reasons that impelled Khrushchev to run the risk of war by installing missiles in Cuba. There can be no doubt, however, that in weighing the pros and cons of such a risk, he woefully underestimated Kennedy's strong reaction.

Explaining to America and the world via television and the press that Russia had caused a "change in the status quo which cannot be accepted by this country if our courage and our commitments are ever to be trusted again by either friend or foe," Kennedy sent U.S. warships to blockade Cuba, with orders to stop and search every Communist ship and turn back those carrying missiles. While the world waited and wondered whether it was on the brink of World War III, a Soviet flotilla loaded with nuclear missiles steamed toward the blockade.

Just as the U.S. ships prepared to intercept them, the Soviet vessels swung around and headed back to their home ports. With that point won, Kennedy took the second step. He told the Soviets that the blockade would remain in force until all the missiles in Cuba were evacuated. Once again Khrushchev complied.

Some Kennedy detractors pointed out that it was by no means a clear-cut victory, because not too long afterward the United States dismantled its own nuclear rockets in Turkey and Italy, replacing them with Polaris submarines. Also, Khrushchev extracted a promise that the United States would not invade Cuba, which gave Castro's status a boost. Regardless of these side issues, however, the hard fact remains that Khrushchev was publicly forced to withdraw his missiles. It was evident he had misread the Kennedy image and he never made that mistake again.

DeGaulle Challenged the Image: A more recent challenge to the Kennedy image came not from an avowed "adversary," but from an ally, France's President DeGaulle.

The safety of Western Europe currently rests on the faith that the United States, and more specifically its Commander-in-Chief, will risk retaliatory attack against its own cities by employing its nuclear weapons to defend NATO nations against a Communist aggressor. When DeGaulle questioned whether Europe could really depend on the United States using its weapons if needed, a deep, unsettling tremor ran through the NATO alliance. To replace NATO, DeGaulle proposed an independent nuclear force and a closed French and German alliance.

To quell any doubts that our allies had, Kennedy flew to Europe and personally spoke to the heads of governments and the people, reaffirming his pledges about risking American cities to save those in Europe. His enthusiastic reception in Germany confirmed the German people's faith in him and shattered any hope that DeGaulle had of weaning that country away from its close economic and political ties with the United States.

Instead of causing a rift between the United States and Europe, DeGaulle found himself under attack in his own and neighboring countries for his isolationist attitude. The Kennedy image won that round in Europe, but his rivalry with DeGaulle was far from over.

Britain Liked the Image: From the very beginning, the Kennedy image had favorably impressed both the leaders of the parties in England and the people. When the late Labor leader Hugh Gaitskill learned of Kennedy's election, he remarked exuberantly, "This is the best thing that has happened to labor since 1945."

The old Conservatives also had great faith in the son of the man who once was American ambassador to Great Britain.

An indication of Kennedy's popularity with the people was the fact that the mass-circulation press, which is notorious for its critical lampooning of "those on top" in Britain and America, had treated the President with considerable respect. Of course, Kennedy got his share of verbal blasting from irreverent orators in London's famed open forum, Hyde Park, but so does every British official regardless of his party affiliation. One wag roamed the area with a huge sign inscribed on one side, "America can do no wrong," and on the other, "Make Kennedy King."

On the whole, however, Kennedy did create a good rapport with both the masses and the Establishment, and Britian seemed to think *In Latin America: Kennedy, Si; America, No:* This is the one area in the world where Kennedy, the man, was considered in a different light from Kennedy, the President of the United States. After the fiasco at the Bay of Pigs early in 1961, the Kennedy administration came in for severe criticism in Latin America. Many of the political leaders, who live in fear of a Castro-like revolution in their own country, were shocked that tiny Cuba successfully repulsed a U.S.-backed invasion. They were also angry that the United States had started the Cuban affair without making certain that it accomplished its purpose—that of overthrowing Castro. Now Castro loomed as a bigger menace than before the ill-fated expedition, and such a flagrant undertaking without more justification. Nowhere was there support for the Soviets' making war over America's blockade and threatened ship inspections. *In Conclusion:* Summing up briefly,

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President Kennedy had done an amazing job of building up his image abroad from virtual anonymity to a veritable high status. He and his advisers had always been extremely public-relations conscious and ready to exploit every plus-factor in the President's personal as well as political life. So successful was this approach that one angry opposition party member was overheard commenting: "An administration that can turn a rocking chair into a vitality symbol can do anything with images."

The one thing that should not be overlooked is that in order for the image to endure it must be backed by substance. That substance consists of policies, actions and decisions that affect not only this country but the entire world. And it should be remembered that no President, including Kennedy, is immune to the "slings and arrows" of world opinion, regardless of whether he is young or old, friendly or aloof, dynamic or placid.

When the administration sanctioned the poorly-planned Bay of Pigs invasion, Kennedy was castigated around the world. Later, when the President forced Khrushchev to withdraw his missiles from Cuba and followed this not with aggressive bluster but with a negotiated test ban treaty, he revived his image as a man of firmness but reasonableness. Kennedy's actions have gone a long way toward convincing Europeans of our reliability as protector of their security. His fight for foreign aid helped convince less fortunate lands that he was concerned with more than military security. His long sought image of a man standing for peace with honor seemed close to attainment.

It can be expected that the opinions of various countries will fluctuate according to the times. For

example, India denounced Kennedy for the Bay of Pigs, was only slightly critical during the missile showdown, and hailed him as a hero for airlifting supplies to her beleaguered forces being attacked by the Red Chinese. But through it all, the figure of the late President emerged as a man of decision and determination. And that's the way the rest of the world saw it.

The folksy, less elegant President Lyndon B. Johnson now has the perilous task of gaining the world's respect and admiration. He must fashion his own image—which in effect is America's image—throughout the world. As Kennedy's provocative story indicates, it is an awesome task.



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