

## Osher Lifelong Learning Program

Week One *The Kennedy Dynasty* Course Outline: Winter Term 2022

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America has had a number of prominent family political dynasties over its 250 year history. The Adamses, the Harrisons, the Roosevelts, and the Bushes, immediately come to mind. But no family was more influential—or glamorous—over a prolonged stretch of time than Joseph Kennedy and his progeny. For over seven decades, a Kennedy served on government commissions, in the diplomatic corps, in the halls of Congress and the Senate, and for a brief one thousand days, in the White House. In addition to their political impact, the Kennedys became cultural icons for millions, spawning fashion trends, making physical fitness chic, and epitomizing a certain brand of American “cool.” Whether one admired the Kennedys or hated them—and there were plenty Americans in both camps—no one can deny their lasting significance in our history. In this course, we will examine the personal lives and political careers of these remarkable men and women.

### Week One: Joseph P. Kennedy—“The Patriarch”

Depending on one’s perspective, Joe Sr. embodies much that is good—and deplorable—about American society. A shrewd and brilliant businessman, Joe made a fortune in banking, real estate, on Wall Street, and in Hollywood. By the mid-1950s, *Forbes* magazine ranked him among the sixteen wealthiest men in the country. Although nothing Joe did in amassing this fortune was, strictly speaking, *illegal*, he certainly was willing to cut ethical corners and use his inside connections to wring the most out of his every business dealing. With such wealth at his disposal, Joe and the Kennedy clan lived the high life: yachts, endless trips to Europe, expensive cars and clothes. But, to Joe’s credit, the real point of all this money was to provide security for his children, and to smooth the path for their future careers. For all his faults—and they were legion—Joe was adamant that a Kennedy’s purpose in life was to *serve* society. This maxim held for both the girls and the boys in his family. All were to contribute in some way. A good Kennedy didn’t just lie around and enjoy the good life carved out by pere Joe’s lifetime’s work.

There is something Shakespearean about Joe’s life. For all his wealth, he couldn’t prevent seeing four of his beloved offspring (and he did love his nine children) die violent deaths, and a fifth succumb to mental issues. Joe lived too long. It would have been better had he died on the evening of January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1961, after watching his second son say to America, “Ask not....” It was going to be all downhill after that.

### Week Two: John F. Kennedy—the Formative Years

We have never had a president that was quite as charismatic, charming, and good

looking as J.F.K. But a close examination of his childhood and youth leaves one with the feeling that this presidency might never have come to pass. Young Jack was a sickly lad—in stark contrast to the Kennedy myth of glowing health—and almost died on several occasions. He came within a hair's breadth of dying in World War II when his P.T. boat was sunk by a Japanese destroyer. In 1954 he came close to death once again when surgery on his back resulted in a near fatal infection. A priest was called to administer Last Rites to the young Senator. With such a medical history, it appeared unlikely that Jack was going to live a long life, much less go to the White House.

Add to these health woes young Jack's propensity for getting into trouble with women, (a Kennedy family trait) and it would have seemed that he was a long shot at best for a presidential bid. But J.F.K. proved to be a brilliant campaigner, and with the help of his father's money and influence he quickly rose through the ranks in Congress and in the Senate, setting the stage for his 1960 Presidential campaign.

### **Week Three: J.F.K. In the White House**

#### **Part One: Domestic Affairs**

John F. Kennedy became president at the very moment when America's centuries-old racial problems boiled over. Seemingly unprepared for the Civil Rights upheavals which were to dog his steps during his brief stay in the White House, Kennedy's first response to the turmoil was to wish the troubles away. He had to deal with Freedom Riders, racist Southern Governors, Ku Klux Klan terrorism, and segregationist universities which refused to admit African American students in defiance of federal law. To complicate matters further, he had to placate racially biased Congressmen and Senators from the South whose support was vital to maintaining the fragile Democratic Party coalition which had put him in office. Kennedy finally found his feet on Civil Rights, and made impressive strides toward some measure of justice during the second half of his thousand day reign. In this talk we will examine the Kennedys' response to the James Meredith confrontation at the University of Mississippi, the showdown with George Wallace at the University of Alabama, and the struggle over desegregation of the nation's transportation system.

#### **Part Two: Foreign Policy**

If Jack had his hands full dealing with the likes of Ross Barnett at Ol' Miss, things were even more hair-raising in the realm of foreign affairs. Kennedy assumed office at the height of the Cold War, and he would be repeatedly tested by a seemingly endless string of crises in that arena. Just three months into his administration, Jack launched the star-crossed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, an ill-advised venture that could have ruined his presidency just as it was getting started. Later in the summer of 1961, America came perilously close to war with Russia during the Berlin Crisis. And a year later, the Cuban Missile Crisis brought us to the very brink of nuclear destruction. As if all this was not enough, Jack faced the

**thorny question of what to do about our deteriorating position in Southeast Asia. Fortunately, Jack had been well-schooled in international relations during his formative years, and thus managed to keep his wits about him during this terribly dangerous period. At a time when many of his advisors were recklessly advocating a pre-emptive strike against the Soviets and/or their allies, Jack steered us safely through the darkest days of the Cold War. It will be our thesis in this lecture that Jack grew enormously as a result of these close brushes with catastrophe. By the end of 1963, it appeared that Kennedy was actively seeking a path toward a peaceful settlement of our grievances with the Soviet Union.**

#### **Week Four: Robert F. Kennedy—“Good Bobby, Bad Bobby”**

**The all-too-brief life of Robert Kennedy presents us with one of the great “what ifs” of history. What if he had not been assassinated just minutes after winning the June 1968 California Democratic Primary election? What if he had received the Democratic nomination for the presidency at the Chicago Convention that August? What if he had beaten his Republican opponent Richard Nixon in the November election? What if he had gone on to negotiate a settlement of the Vietnam War? Would we have been spared four more years of senseless bloodshed in Vietnam? Would the country have been able to get through the turbulent Sixties and early Seventies with less chaos and violence? Tantalizing questions, if impossible to answer with any certainty. But we will always wonder—hence our ongoing fascination with Robert, or “Bobby,” as he was affectionately known later in his life.**

**There seem to be two Robert Kennedys: the angry and volatile younger Bobby, and the older, more mature “Good Bobby” he gradually became after Nov. 22, 1963. The early version—“Bad Bobby”—was an ardent Cold Warrior, staunch defender of the Red-baiting Senator Joe McCarthy, and a would-be pugilist who threatened to fight anyone who besmirched his father’s reputation. Young R.F.K. engaged in epic feuds with his powerful enemies, most notably J. Edgar Hoover and Lyndon Johnson. This youthful, fiery and martial spirit will be our opening topic this week.**

**Robert was shaken to the core by his older brother’s assassination. The horror of that dreadful day in Dallas stayed with him the remaining five years of his life. Bobby had idolized Jack, and had been willing to do anything for his adored brother. The shock of having two older brothers die violent deaths seemed to blow away much of Bobby’s arrogance, and much noted “ruthlessness.” Jack’s death was a terrible initiation into the random cruelties of life, but it had a sobering and salubrious effect on Bobby’s psyche. “Good Bobby” emerged as he began to read Greek history and philosophy, and reflect on the tragic dimension of life. Perhaps these ruminations caused him to begin to question the justice of America’s seemingly endless war of attrition in Vietnam. Perhaps he felt that Jack would never have let the war spiral out of control as it had, and that it was his**

responsibility to settle the conflict before it tore the country apart. In any case, he made a belated run for the White House beginning in March of 1968. He would have approximately one hundred days to live.

**Week Five: Ted Kennedy—from frivolous youth to wise elder statesman**  
Few political figures in American history had greater expectations placed upon such palpably frail shoulders. As the last surviving brother of the clan, Ted was expected to become the champion of peace and defender of traditional liberalism, which was rapidly falling into disrepute in the late '60s. But clearly, such hopes were misplaced: Ted botched the role miserably, first at Chappaquiddick, and then in a spectacularly inept presidential run in 1980. But then Ted's life took an unexpected turn: with the presidency now out of reach, he was finally free to stake out *his own* path. He would become the "last lion" of the Senate, and become the most powerful figure in that body for several decades. He also served as a mentor of sorts to a young Barack Obama, and helped to anoint him as the heir apparent to his fallen brother Jack. In the end, Ted arguably accomplished more than any of his three slain brothers.

#### **Week Six: The Kennedy Women**

In our final gathering we will examine the lives and accomplishments of three generations of Kennedy women. These women were important and culturally influential figures in their own right—intelligent, determined, and powerful, if often in somewhat subtle ways. Bridget, grandmother of Joseph P. Kennedy, may be considered the Founding Matriarch of the clan. She came to America as a single woman in 1849, met her future husband on board the ship, and managed to carve out a successful life in Boston where she and her progeny would work their way up the social ladder and make history. Her life is an astonishing tale of success for a poor semiliterate Irish immigrant who crossed the ocean in steerage. Rose, daughter of Boston Mayor and Congressman John "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald, had a much more pampered life. She grew up in luxury, received a good (if a traditionally cramped Catholic) education, and married well. Rose would never want for anything, nor would her nine children. Over her long life of one hundred and four years, Rose would travel extensively, hobnob with the most important historical figures of her day, and watch with pride as her sons rose to prominence. But this fairy tale existence came at a heavy price. At a very young age, Rose learned to look away from anything jarring or unpleasant, and simply deny the tissue of lies that supported her family's mythology.

We will also examine the lives of the Kennedy wives—Jackie, "Queen of Camelot," Ethel, and Joan. To complete our story, and to avoid that pitfall of romantic denial which was so characteristic of the Kennedy family, we will also look at the many mistresses that Father Joseph and his boys collected along the way.