President Kennedy's Speeches

Recently I was invited to speak at a dinner hosted by a Christian group at the Kennedy Museum in Dallas. They asked if I might speak about President John F. Kennedy and relate it to some of the issues we are dealing with today.

I began by asking them to imagine what might happen if we could bring President Kennedy in a time machine to our time and place. What would he think of what has happened in America?

Of course, we cannot accurately predict what he might think, but we do have his speeches that give us some insight into his perspective on the major issues in the 1960s. And as I re-read his great speeches, I think the audience concluded that they said more about the change in America than anything else.

I think it would be fair to say that President Kennedy's speeches illustrate what was mainstream (perhaps even a bit progressive) back in the 1960s. Today (with perhaps the exception of his speech on church/state issues) most of his ideas would be considered right wing. And if I might be so bold, I think it is reasonable to say that many of the leaders of his party today would reject many of the ideas he put forward more than forty years ago.

Foreign Policy

Let's first look at President Kennedy's perspective on foreign policy. One of his best known speeches is his inaugural address on January 20, 1961:

> *Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage—and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing*

> *of those human rights to which this Nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.*
>
> *Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.*

In his day, the great foreign policy challenge was communism. The threat from the Soviet Union, as well as Red China, was his primary focus. And he made it clear that he would bring an aggressive foreign policy to the world in order to assure the survival and success of liberty.

Today the great foreign policy challenge is international terrorism (which is a topic that President Kennedy addressed in his day). And there are still threats to America and the need to address the issue of human rights that he talked about more than forty years ago. America still needs a foreign policy that aggressively deals with terrorists who would threaten our freedom and dictators who keep whole nations in bondage.

It may surprise many to realize that more than forty years ago President Kennedy understood the threat of terrorism. Here is what he said to the General Assembly of the United Nations on September 25, 1961:

> *Terror is not a new weapon. Throughout history it has been used by those who could not prevail, either by persuasion or example. But inevitably they fail, either because men are not afraid to die for a life worth living, or because the terrorists themselves came to realize that free men cannot be frightened by threats, and that aggression would meet its own response. And it is in the light of that history that every nation today should know, be he friend or foe, that the*

> *United States has both the will and the weapons to join free men in standing up to their responsibilities.*

Terrorism is with us in the twenty-first century, though the terrorists today are primarily radical Muslims. And President Kennedy rightly understood the threat terrorism posed to freedom. As we just saw, he proposed an aggressive foreign policy to deal with these threats. He knew that "free men cannot be frightened by threats."

President Kennedy also spoke to the issue of human rights. In his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, he quoted from the book of Isaiah to illustrate his point:

> *Let both sides unite to heed in all corners of the earth the command of Isaiah—to "undo the heavy burdens . . . and to let the oppressed go free."*
>
> *And if a beachhead of cooperation may push back the jungle of suspicion, let both sides join in creating a new endeavor, not a new balance of power, but a new world of law, where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved.*

He envisioned a future world where people were not enslaved by communism and held behind an Iron Curtain or Bamboo Curtain. When he spoke in West Berlin on June 26, 1963, he addressed the importance of freedom:

> *Freedom is indivisible, and when one man is enslaved, all are not free. When all are free, then we can look forward to that day when this city will be joined as one and this country and this great Continent of Europe in a peaceful and hopeful globe. When that day finally comes, as it will, the people of West Berlin can take sober satisfaction in the fact that they were in the front lines for almost two decades.*
>
> *All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and, therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words "Ich*

> *bin ein Berliner.”*

President Kennedy saw the day when men and women on both sides of the Berlin Wall would be free.

Economic Policy

President Kennedy proposed a significant cut in taxes. Here is what he said to the Economic Club of New York on December 14, 1962:

> *The final and best means of strengthening demand among consumers and business is to reduce the burden on private income and the deterrents to private initiative which are imposed by our present tax system—and this administration pledged itself last summer to an across-the-board, top-to-bottom cut in personal and corporate income taxes to be enacted and become effective in 1963.*
>
> *I’m not talking about a ‘quickie’ or a temporary tax cut, which would be more appropriate if a recession were imminent. Nor am I talking about giving the economy a mere shot in the arm, to ease some temporary complaint. I am talking about the accumulated evidence of the last five years that our present tax system, developed as it was, in good part, during World War II to restrain growth, exerts too heavy a drag on growth in peace time; that it siphons out of the private economy too large a share of personal and business purchasing power; that it reduces the financial incentives for personal effort, investment, and risk-taking. In short, to increase demand and lift the economy, the federal government’s most useful role is not to rush into a program of excessive increases in public expenditures, but to expand the incentives and opportunities for private expenditures.*

He so believed in the need to cut taxes that he focused whole

paragraphs of his 1963 State of the Union speech on the same topic. Here is one of those paragraphs:

> *For it is increasingly clear—to those in government, business, and labor who are responsible for our economy's success—that our obsolete tax system exerts too heavy a drag on private purchasing power, profits, and employment. Designed to check inflation in earlier years, it now checks growth instead. It discourages extra effort and risk. It distorts the use of resources. It invites recurrent recessions, depresses our Federal revenues, and causes chronic budget deficits.*

In the last few decades, many Democrat leaders have criticized President Reagan and President Bush for comparing their tax cut proposals to those of President Kennedy. But there are significant similarities. President Kennedy was not just proposing a quick fix or an economic "shot in the arm." He saw that taxes exert "a drag on growth" in the economy. If that was true in the 1960s when the taxes on the average American were lower than today, then it is even more true today.

Church and State

Church and state was a major issue in his campaign since he was Catholic. So he chose to speak to the issue in front of the Greater Houston Ministerial Alliance on September 12, 1960:

> *I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute; where no Catholic prelate would tell the President—should he be Catholic—how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote; where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference, and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the President who might appoint him, or the people who might elect him.*

> *I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish; where no public official either requests or accept instructions on public policy from the Pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source; where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials, and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all.*
>
> *For while this year it may be a Catholic against whom the finger of suspicion is pointed, in other years it has been—and may someday be again—a Jew, or a Quaker, or a Unitarian, or a Baptist. It was Virginia's harassment of Baptist preachers, for example, that led to Jefferson's statute of religious freedom. Today, I may be the victim, but tomorrow it may be you—until the whole fabric of our harmonious society is ripped apart at a time of great national peril.*

We can agree with President Kennedy that religious leaders should not demand that a politician vote a certain way. But we live in the free society, so pastors should be free to express their biblical perspective on social and political issues.

That is one of the reasons Representative Walter Jones has sponsored legislation known as the "Houses of Worship Freedom of Speech Restoration Act" to make this possible. Back in 1954, then-Senator Lyndon Johnson introduced an amendment to a tax code revision that was being considered on the Senate floor. The amendment prohibited all non-profit groups—including churches—from engaging in political activity without losing their tax-exempt status. The bill by Representative Jones would return that right to churches and allow pastors and churches greater freedom to speak to these issues.

Social Issues

One issue that surfaced during Kennedy's presidency was the subject of school prayer. In 1962, the Supreme Court issued its decision in *Engel v. Vitale*. This was President Kennedy's response:

> *We have in this case a very easy remedy, and that is to pray ourselves. And I would think it would be a welcome reminder to every American family that we can pray a good deal more at home, we can attend our churches with a good deal more fidelity, and we can make the true meaning of prayer much more important in the lives of our children.*

At the time, this may have seemed like an isolated and even necessary action by the Supreme Court. Few could have anticipated that this would be the beginning of the removal of prayer, Bible reading, and even the Ten Commandments from the classrooms of America.

So how would John F. Kennedy stand on the issue of abortion? Well, we simply don't know, since abortion was not a major policy issue in 1963.

We do know that as a Catholic, he and the other Kennedys valued life. In the 1968 election, Robert F. Kennedy was asked about the subject of contraception. The Supreme Court handed down its decision on contraception in the case *Griswold v. Connecticut* in 1965, and so Bobby Kennedy was asked about his views on the subject. Kennedy at that time had ten children. He used the Kennedy wit and turned the question into a funny line. He replied, "You mean personally or as governmental policy?"

We do know that President Kennedy did nominate Byron White to the Supreme Court. It's worth noting that he and Justice Rehnquist were the only two dissenting votes in the case of *Roe v. Wade*.

By the way, when Justice White left the court and President Clinton nominated Ruth Bader Ginsberg, you didn't hear anyone in the media talk about the court shifting to the left. Byron York, writing for *National Review*, did a Lexis-Nexis search and did not find one major media outlet that talked about this shift. By contrast, he found sixty-three times in which the media lamented the potential shift of the court to the right with the nomination of Judge Samuel Alito.

As we have looked at some of President Kennedy's speeches, it is amazing how much of the political dialogue has moved. But to be more precise, it is America that has moved.

It reminds you of the story of a middle-aged man and wife. One day as her husband was driving the car, she began talking about how it used to be when they first dated. They always held hands, they had long talks, and they used to sit next to each other as they drove along the countryside. Finally, she asked her husband, "Why don't we ever sit together anymore when we drive?" He glanced over and said to her, "I'm not the one who moved."

Reading President Kennedy's speeches remind us that America has moved. Maybe it's time to get back to where we belong.

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JFK and Groupthink: Lessons in Decision Making

JFK’s Legacy and Groupthink

Have you ever been part of a group that was making an important decision and you felt uncomfortable with the direction things were headed? Maybe it was a business or academic committee, a social group, a church board, a government agency. Did you speak up? Or did you keep your concerns to yourself? And what was the outcome of the group’s decision? Do you ever wish you had voiced your reservations more strongly?

Perhaps you can identify with John F. Kennedy.

Forty years after his tragic death, President Kennedy continues to fascinate the public. A new JFK biography{1} hit the bestseller lists. Analysts dissect his political and oratorical skills, his character and legacy. His relatives – America’s royalty in some eyes – are frequent newsmakers.

The youthful president has engendered both inspiration and disappointment. Major initiatives that he sponsored or influenced touch society today: the space program, the Peace Corp, and economic sanctions against Cuba, to name a few.

A fascinating facet of Kennedy’s legacy involves the decision-making procedures he used among his closest advisors. Some brought great successes. Others were serious failures. This article looks at two specific examples: the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, an attempt to invade Cuba and overthrow Fidel Castro that became a fiasco, and the 1962 Cuban missile crisis that saw the world come perilously close to nuclear war.

Yale social psychologist Irving Janis studied these episodes carefully and concluded that too often decision makers are blinded by their own needs for self-esteem they get from being an accepted member of a socially important insiders group. Fears of shattering the warm feelings of perceived unanimity – of rocking the boat – kept some of Kennedy’s advisors from

objecting to the Bay of Pigs plan before it was too late. After that huge blunder, JFK revamped his decision-making process to encourage dissent and critical evaluation among his team. In the Cuban missile crisis, virtually the same policymakers produced superior results.{2}

"Groupthink" was the term Janis used for the phenomenon of flawed group dynamics that can let bad ideas go unchallenged and can sometimes yield disastrous outcomes. This article will consider how groupthink might have affected JFK and a major television enterprise, and how it can affect you.

The Bay of Pigs Invasion

"How could I have been so stupid?"{3} President John F. Kennedy asked that after the Bay of Pigs fiasco. He called it a "colossal mistake."{4} It left him feeling depressed, guilty, bitter, and in tears.{5} One historian later called the Bay of Pigs, "one of those rare events in history – a perfect failure."{6}

What happened? In 1961, CIA and military leaders wanted to use Cuban exiles to overthrow Fidel Castro. After lengthy consideration among his top advisors, Kennedy approved a covert invasion. Advance press reports alerted Castro to the threat. Over 1,400 invaders at the *Bahía de Cochinos* (Bay of Pigs) were vastly outnumbered. Lacking air support, necessary ammunition and an escape route, nearly 1,200 surrendered. Others died.

Declassified CIA documents help illuminate the invasion's flaws. Top CIA leaders blamed Kennedy for not authorizing vital air strikes. Other CIA analysts fault the wishful thinking that the invasion would stimulate an uprising among Cuba's populace and military. Planners assumed the invaders could simply fade into the mountains for guerilla operations. Trouble was, eighty miles of swampland separated the bay from the mountains. The list goes on.{7}

Irving Janis felt that Kennedy's top advisors were unwilling to challenge bad ideas because it might disturb perceived or desired group concurrence. Presidential advisor Arthur Schlesinger, for instance, presented serious objections to the invasion in a memorandum to the president, but suppressed his doubts at the team meetings. Attorney General Robert Kennedy privately admonished Schlesinger to support the president's decision to invade. At one crucial meeting, JFK called on each member for his vote for or against the invasion. Each member, that is, except Schlesinger – whom he knew to have serious concerns. Many members assumed other members agreed with the invasion plan.{8}

Schlesinger later lamented, "In the months after the Bay of Pigs I bitterly reproached myself for having kept so silent during those crucial discussions in the cabinet room." He continued, "I can only explain my failure to do more than raise a few timid questions by reporting that one's impulse to blow the whistle on this nonsense was simply undone by the circumstances of the discussion."{9}

Have you ever kept silent when you felt you should speak up? President Kennedy later revised his group decision-making process to encourage dissent and debate. The change helped avert a nuclear catastrophe, as we will see.

The Cuban Missile Crisis

Ever face tough decisions? How would you feel if your wrong decision might mean nuclear war? Consider a time when the world teetered on the brink of disaster.{10}

Stung by the Bay of Pigs debacle, President Kennedy determined to ask hard questions during future crises.{11} A good opportunity came eighteen months later.

In October 1962, aerial photographs showed Soviet missile sites in Cuba.{12} The missile program, if allowed to

continue, could reach most of the United States with nuclear warheads.{13} Kennedy's first inclination was an air strike to take out the missiles.{14} His top advisors debated alternatives from bombing and invasion to blockade and negotiation.{15}

On October 22, Kennedy set forth an ultimatum in a televised address: A U.S. naval "quarantine" would block further offensive weapons from reaching Cuba. Russia must promptly dismantle and withdraw all offensive weapons. Use of the missiles would bring attacks against the Soviet Union.{16}

The U.S. Navy blockaded Cuba. Soviets readied their forces. The Pentagon directed the Strategic Air Command to begin a nuclear alert. On October 24, the world held its breath as six Soviet ships approached the blockade. Then, all six ships either stopped or reversed course.{17} Secretary of State Dean Rusk told a colleague, "We're eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked."{18}

A maze of negotiations ensued. At the United Nations, U.S. ambassador Adlai Stevenson publicly pressed his Soviet counterpart to confirm or deny Soviet missiles' existence in Cuba. Saying he was prepared to wait for an answer "until hell freezes over," Stevenson then displayed reconnaissance photos to the Security Council.{19} Eventually, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev removed the missiles.{20}

Kennedy's decision-making process – though imperfect – had evolved significantly. He challenged military leaders who pressured him to bomb and invade. He heard the CIA's case for air strikes and Stevenson's counsel for negotiation. Advocates for different views developed their arguments in committees then met back together.{21} Robert Kennedy later wrote, "The fact that we were able to talk, debate, argue, disagree, and then debate some more was essential in choosing our ultimate course."{22} Many groupthink mistakes of the Bay of Pigs, in which bad ideas went unchallenged, had been avoided.{23}

Groupthink has serious ramifications for government, business, academia, neighborhood, family, and the ministry. One area it has affected is Christian television.

Groupthink and the Seductive Televangelist

Once upon a time, a prominent Christian televangelist, despondent about his rocky marriage, had sexual intercourse with a church secretary.

This televangelist and his wife regularly appeared on international TV, providing physical and spiritual care to hurting people. Television brought in millions of dollars. Their headquarters and conference center displayed a wholesome, positive atmosphere. Yet the operation was quite lavish and included an opulent five-star hotel, white limousine, corporate jet, and bloated salaries.

The distraught secretary contacted ministry headquarters, wanting justice. The ministry paid her hush money, laundered through their builder. Several insiders were aware of the sex scandal and cover up, but turned a blind eye. Many of these top leaders also enjoyed privilege, esteem, comfort, and wealth from the successful ministry.

Eventually, fearing media exposure, the televangelist confessed his sexual episode to the local newspaper and stepped down. The ensuing turmoil became an international soap opera complete with sexual intrigue, power struggles, and legal morass. The televangelist and his VP served prison terms. The builder's wife divorced him because of his involvement with the televangelist's wife, who divorced the televangelist, married the builder and tried to start another TV ministry.

After prison, the televangelist wrote a book admitting wrong{24}, joined an inner city ministry, and remarried. The

church secretary had plastic surgery and posed nude for *Playboy*. The local newspaper won a Pulitzer Prize.

You may recognize this as the story of PTL and Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker.{25} Reporter Charles Shepard's book about PTL, *Forgiven*{26}, stands as a timely warning to ministry leaders and boards of the temptations of fame and power.

The PTL scandal exhibited several possible symptoms of groupthink{27}, such as belief in the group's inherent morality, rationalizations, stereotyping adversaries, and pressures to conform. Desires for approval, pride, greed, and a false sense of well-being stemming from being an accepted member of a wealthy, influential inner circle apparently stifled dissent. Leaders seemed to overlook problems for "the good of the ministry." Richard Dortch, Bakker's second in command, later admitted, "We were wrong. I should have refused the kind of salary I took. . . . We were so caught up in God's work that we forgot about God. It took the tragedy, the kick in the teeth, to bring us to our senses."{28}

Groupthink can affect leaders of all stripes. What lessons might JFK and PTL have for you?

Groupthink and You

As we have seen, Kennedy's presidency provides some potent examples of this psychological theory about flawed group decision-making. When the group culture overvalues internal agreement, members can become unrealistic.{29}

Symptoms of groupthink include:

- *Illusions of invulnerability: "No one can defeat us."*
- *Belief in the group's inherent morality: "We can do no wrong."*
- *Rationalizing away serious problems: "Danger signs? What danger signs?"*

- *Stereotyping the opposition: "Those guys are too dumb or too weak to worry about."*
- *Illusions of unanimity: "Members who keep silent probably agree with the ones who speak out."*
- *Pressuring dissenters: "Look, are you a team player or not?"*

JFK's Bay of Pigs advisors accepted the CIA's flawed plan almost without criticism. Leaders underestimated Castro's military and political capability and overestimated their own. Jim Bakker and his PTL Christian ministry leaders rationalized away sexual and financial impropriety, to their peril.

Of course, not every group succumbs to groupthink. Nor does groupthink explain every bad group decision (decision makers could be inept, greedy or just plain evil, for example).

What about you? What can you do to avoid the groupthink trap? May I offer some suggestions, from a biblical perspective?

First: *Determine to stand for what is right, regardless of the cost.* Jesus of Nazareth, one who stood by his convictions of right, admonished followers to "let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father."{30}

Second: *Determine to speak up when the situation warrants it.* One of Jesus' close friends said of certain people too fearful to speak up amidst opposition that "they loved the approval of…[humans] rather than the approval of God."{31} How sad.

Third: *Seek to structure groups to avoid blind conformity and encourage healthy debate.* JFK once said, "When at some future date the high court of history sits in judgment on each of us, it will ask: Were we truly men of courage – with the courage to stand up to one's enemies – and the courage to stand up, when necessary, to one's associates?"{32} Paul, a first-century follower of Jesus, encouraged group members to

“admonish one another.”{33}

We all have a chance to leave a legacy. John Kennedy left his, which was mixed. PTL left a legacy, also mixed. What legacy will you leave?

Notes

1. Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2003).

2. Irving L. Janis, “Groupthink,” *Psychology Today* 5:6, November 1971, 43-44, 46, 74-76. See also Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972).

3. Dallek, op. cit., p. 367.

4. Ibid., 375.

5. Ibid., 366.

6. Ibid., 363.

7. For a summary of the invasion and various assessments of its many flaws, see Ibid., 356-372; and Michael Warner, “Lessons Unlearned: The CIA’s Internal Probe of the Bay of Pigs Affair,” Studies in Intelligence: A collection of articles on the theoretical, doctrinal, operational and historical aspects of intelligence, 42:2, Winter 1998-1999, www.cia.gov/csi/studies/winter98-99/art08.html.

8. Janis 1971, op. cit., especially 46, 74.

9. Ibid., 74.

10. Most of the historical material for this section is taken from Dallek, op. cit., 535-574. Another useful summary of the Cuban missile crisis by a former *New York Times* reporter who covered it from Washington, D.C. – and became a participant,

of sorts – is Max Frankel, "Learning from the Missile Crisis," *Smithsonian Magazine,* October 2002, www.smithsonianmag.si.edu/smithsonian/issues02/oct02/missile_crisis_full_1.html. For a collection of declassified documents from the crisis, see Laurence Chang and Peter Kornbluh, eds., *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader,* 2nd edition (New York: The New Press, 1998); the Introduction is reproduced at www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba_mis_cri/declass.htm.

11. Dallek, op. cit., 368, 372.

12. Ibid., 544.

13. Ibid., 559.

14. Ibid., 547.

15. Ibid., 547-58.

16. Ibid., 558-59.

17. Ibid., 561-562.

18. Ibid., 562.

19. Ibid., 564-565.

20. Ibid., 562-572.

21. Ibid., 550-56.

22. Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 111; in Chang and Kornbluh, op. cit., Introduction, www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba_mis_cri/declass.htm.

23. Janis 1971, op. cit., 76.

24. Jim Bakker, *I Was Wrong: The Untold Story of the Shocking Journey from PTL Power to Prison and Beyond (Nashville: Thomas*

Nelson, 1996).

*25. See, for instance, Keith A. Roberts, Religion in Sociological Perspective, 3rd ed. (Belmont, Californ*ia: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1995), 376-78. The PTL saga has reached textbook-case status.

26. Charles E. Shepard, *Forgiven: The Rise and Fall of Jim Bakker and the PTL Ministry* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1991).

27. Janis 1971, op. cit., 44, 46, 74-75.

28. "Interview: 'I Made Mistakes'," *Christianity Today*, March 18, 1988, 46-47.

29. Janis 1971, op. cit.

30. Matthew 5:16 NLT.

31. John 12:43 NASB.

32. Dallek, op. cit., 535.

33. Colossians 3:16 NIV.

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