POLITICAL EXPERIENCE IN THE 1960s
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(1) John F. Kennedy's 1960 campaign and election into the Office of the Presidency clearly marked the beginning of a new era. A feeling of newness and hope existed throughout the nation: Americans believed and trusted Kennedy when he said, "The torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans." But as the decade continued, the nation experienced drastic events and changes. With Kennedy's assassination, the enchantment and hope of his term began to die, leaving President Johnson with the task of continuing Kennedy's policies as smoothly as possible. Toward the end of the decade, America's involvement in the Viet Nam War overshadowed Johnson's term and sparked violent unrest among the American people. The 1960s is often considered the most turbulent era in modern American history, and the political events which took place helped America to mold itself and grow by gaining experience.

(2) John F. Kennedy announced his candidacy early in 1960 and began a campaign which promised to "get the nation moving again." If each new decade is characterized with a fresh, innocent start, the 1960s is a clear example. Kennedy's youth and charisma contributed greatly to his campaign; in fact, the four nationally televised debates against Richard Nixon were probably the factors contributing most to his election. This new political device enabled Kennedy to display his speaking ability and youthfulness. His campaign package contained a set of goals which he called "the New Frontier," reminding many people of Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal." Kennedy epitomized the hopeful ideas which he was trying to sell to his country.

(3) Once in office, Kennedy continued his plan of hope and optimism. He filled his administrative positions with brilliant young men, hoping to create and continue a vitality which would spark new ideas and methods. Many of his advisors were also teachers and scholars. In the White House itself, President Kennedy and his wife sought to make their home the cultural center of the nation. They invited artists, scientists, and musicians to dinner to represent their support for new creativity and thinking. Once, at a reception held for the American winners of the Nobel Prize, Kennedy remarked that "more talent and genius was at the White House" that night than there had been "since Thomas Jefferson had last dined there alone." The mood of his beginnings in office was a hopeful one. Kennedy was quite successful in passing his New Frontier legislation, and he introduced the idea of the Peace Corps, which was begun to help poor people in less developed countries.
(4) However, as Kennedy's term continued, he found it increasingly difficult to pass his legislation. Now he would take his nation through many trying events. Some would scar the nation and others would inspire it, but all of them would cause the nation to develop and mature.

(5) Kennedy's inexperience and youth was painfully evident first in his handling of the Bay of Pigs incident. In 1959, Fidel Castro had overthrown the Cuban dictator, Fulgencio Batista. In the two years which followed, Castro's hostility toward the United States increased, and Cubans fled to the United States from the Communist atmosphere in their homeland. The United States military began secretly to train these exiles for an invasion of Cuba. In April of 1961, Kennedy allowed the poorly planned and administered invasion to take place. Castro's forces, informed of the attack, were prepared to outnumber the United States heavily. The invasion was a disaster and caused Kennedy to lose credibility with other nations, including the U.S.S.R.'s Premier Khrushchev. Later that year, Kennedy and Krushchev met in Austria to discuss foreign relations, and it was clear that Krushchev felt Kennedy was weak and powerless in his decision-making and national control. Only later, during the Cuban missile crisis, would the President and the nation regain political respect.

(6) In October of 1962, Kennedy and a select number of his administration received word that Russia was placing offensive weapons at a Cuban base. On October 14, these observations were confirmed by the C.I.A. For the next two weeks, the President and his staff had to take decisive action cleverly and carefully in order to avoid a possible nuclear war. Russia did dismantle the missiles, after a blockade had been set up, and the national tension finally ended. The entire country had undergone a trying experience, and as a result of the political experience Kennedy and his administration had gained through the earlier mistakes at the Bay of Pigs, the United States had learned how to act wisely and maturely in a foreign crisis.

(7) Other events which took place in the early sixties also reflected the hope and optimism of a new era. Alan Shepherd's spaceflight in 1961 and John Glenn's orbit in 1962, both firsts for the American space program, created a feeling of togetherness and national pride. Martin Luther King began his crusade to further civil rights. In 1963, during a Washington demonstration, he expressed his hope in these words, "I have a dream that this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.'" In 1964 a civil rights bill was passed forbidding discrimination in voting, hiring, and other aspects of American life. Another important landmark in the
Political history of the early sixties was the development of the Test Ban Treaty. On August 5, 1963, the United States, along with Russia and Great Britain, agreed to outlaw the atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons. Kennedy considered this treaty to be the greatest achievement of his term in office. All of these events gave spirit to the American people. They believed that this generation would be different from others before them. America was hopeful and expectant, unprepared for Kennedy's assassination and the turbulent events which would follow.

(8) On November 22, 1963, John F. Kennedy’s assassination stopped the nation and shattered the enchantment of his presidency. National grief and mourning was apparent throughout America. Lyndon Johnson, quickly sworn into office, was faced with the task of putting America back on its feet. His main concern was to continue Kennedy’s policies smoothly, so he kept the majority of Kennedy’s staff in office to help create political continuity and stability. Although Johnson was placed in a tough position by following such a popular, well-loved leader, he was very successful in continuing Kennedy’s legislation and getting it passed. In fact, Johnson seems to have had the best rapport with Congress in modern times. He devoted much of his effort to creating a “war on poverty,” striving to aid the poor, and during his term he succeeded in passing major civil rights legislation.

(9) Lyndon Johnson won the 1964 election by the largest popular vote in U.S. history. He had been able to finish Kennedy’s term successfully, and he temporarily restored America’s faith in leadership. However, Johnson’s second term was overshadowed by the increasing military activity in Viet Nam, and the country found itself torn apart at home by the conflicting opinions arising from these events.

(10) If one event stands out as making the greatest impact on the American people during the sixties, it would be America’s involvement in Viet Nam. During Kennedy’s presidency, more advisors had been ordered to Southeast Asia and military combat had been started. For the next twelve years, America increased its financial and military aid there so much that American people bitterly questioned their country’s involvement. Johnson’s image worsened in the public eye, and after 1965, his term was tainted by Viet Nam involvement. His administrative actions were marked by fluctuating opinion and indecision as he tried to maintain a compromise between pulling out altogether and increasing efforts to end the war immediately. Unfortunately, this led only to a prolonged, futile attempt to stay in Viet Nam for a “worthwhile” cause. Unrest and violence, especially among young people, was apparent as they began questioning the establishment and figures of authority.
Although the era closed with bitterness and disillusionment, people looked forward to the beginning of a new cycle.

(11) As Walt Whitman noted almost one hundred years ago, "(S)ociety remains unformed, it sits still between things just ended and things just begun." Just as the generation of the sixties had to develop and grow, so will the generations after them. Although Americans went through many tumultuous events, they were able to learn from their mistakes and grow with their strong points. As Kennedy had said in his Inaugural address, "(T)he same beliefs for which our forbears fought are still at issue around the globe." Each generation must form its own society, make its own mistakes, and leave behind marks of growth for future generations.