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Robert F. Kennedy

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"RFK" and "Robert Kennedy" redirect here. For other uses, see [RFK \(disambiguation\)](#) and [Robert Kennedy \(disambiguation\)](#).

Robert Francis Kennedy (November 20, 1925 – June 6, 1968) was an American politician and lawyer who served as a [United States Senator](#) for [New York](#) from January 1965 until his [assassination](#) in June 1968. He was previously the 64th [U.S. Attorney General](#) from January 1961 to September 1964, serving under his older brother President [John F. Kennedy](#) and his successor, [Lyndon B. Johnson](#). Kennedy was a member of the [Democratic Party](#) and is seen as an icon of [modern American liberalism](#).

Kennedy was born in [Brookline, Massachusetts](#), the seventh child of [Joseph P. Kennedy Sr.](#) and [Rose Kennedy](#). After serving in the [U.S. Naval Reserve](#) as a [seaman apprentice](#) from 1944 to 1946, Kennedy returned to [Harvard University](#) and graduated in 1948. He received his law degree from the [University of Virginia](#) and was admitted to the [Massachusetts](#) bar in 1951. He began his political career the following year as the [manager](#) for his brother John's successful campaign for the [U.S. Senate](#).^[1] Prior to entering public office himself, he worked as a correspondent for *The Boston Post* and as an assistant counsel to the Senate committee chaired by Senator [Joseph McCarthy](#). He gained national attention as the chief counsel of the [Senate Labor Rackets Committee](#) from 1957 to 1959, where he publicly challenged [Teamsters](#) President [Jimmy Hoffa](#) over the corrupt practices of its union and authored *The Enemy Within*, a book about corruption in organized labor.

Kennedy resigned from the committee to conduct his brother's campaign in the [1960 presidential election](#).^[1] He was appointed [United States Attorney General](#) after the successful election and served as the closest advisor to the President from 1961 to 1963. His tenure is best known for its advocacy for the [civil rights movement](#), the fight against [organized crime](#) and the [Mafia](#), and involvement in U.S. foreign policy related to Cuba. After his [brother's assassination](#), he remained in office in the [Johnson Administration](#) for several months. He left to run for the United States Senate from [New York in 1964](#) and defeated [Republican](#) incumbent [Kenneth Keating](#). In office, Kennedy opposed racial discrimination and U.S. involvement in the [Vietnam War](#). He was an advocate for issues related to [human rights](#) and [social justice](#) and formed relationships with [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) and [Cesar Chavez](#).

Robert F. Kennedy



United States Senator from New York

In office

January 3, 1965 – June 6, 1968

Preceded by [Kenneth Keating](#)

Succeeded by [Charles Goodell](#)

64th United States Attorney General

In office

January 20, 1961 – September 3, 1964

President [John F. Kennedy](#)
[Lyndon B. Johnson](#)

Preceded by [William P. Rogers](#)

Succeeded by [Nicholas Katzenbach](#)

Personal details

Born [Robert Francis Kennedy](#)
November 20, 1925
[Brookline, Massachusetts](#),
U.S.

Died [June 6, 1968](#) (aged 42)
[Los Angeles, California](#), U.S.

Cause of death [Assassination](#)

Resting place [Arlington National Cemetery](#)

Political party [Democratic](#)

Spouse(s) [Ethel Skakel](#) (1950)

Relations [Kennedy family](#)

Children [Kathleen](#) · [Joseph](#) · [Robert Jr.](#) · [David](#) · [Courtney](#) · [Michael](#) · [Kerry](#) · [Chris](#) · [Max](#) · [Douglas](#) · [Rory](#)

In [1968](#), Kennedy was a leading candidate for the Democratic nomination for the presidency; he appealed especially to [poor](#), [African American](#), [Hispanic](#), [Catholic](#) and [young](#) voters. He had defeated Senator [Eugene McCarthy](#) in the California and South Dakota presidential primaries. Shortly after midnight on June 5, 1968, Kennedy was [mortally wounded](#) by [Sirhan Sirhan](#), a 24-year-old Palestinian, because he had advocated American support for Israel following the 1967 [Six-Day War](#). Kennedy died the following day and Sirhan was sentenced to [life imprisonment](#).

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Parents	Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. <div>Rose Fitzgerald</div>
Education	Harvard University (BA) <div>University of Virginia (LLB)</div>
Signature	
Military service	
Allegiance	 United States
Service/branch	 U.S. Naval Reserve
Years of service	1944–1946
Rank	 Seaman Apprentice
Unit	USS <i>Joseph P. Kennedy Jr.</i>
Battles/wars	World War II

Early life [edit]

Robert Francis Kennedy was born on November 20, 1925, in [Brookline, Massachusetts](#), the seventh child of businessman/politician [Joseph P. Kennedy Sr.](#) and philanthropist/socialite [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy](#).^[2] His older brothers were [Joseph P. Kennedy Jr.](#) and [John F. "Jack" Kennedy](#), who was elected the 35th President of the United States in 1960. His younger brother was longtime United States Senator [Edward M. "Ted" Kennedy](#).^[3] All four of his grandparents were children of Irish immigrants.^[4]

His father was a wealthy businessman and a leading Irish figure in the Democratic Party. After he stepped down as ambassador to the United Kingdom in 1940, Joe Sr. focused his attention on his oldest son, Joseph Jr., expecting that he would enter politics and be elected president. He also urged the younger children to examine and discuss current events in order to propel them to public service.^[5] After Joseph Jr. was killed during [World War II](#), the senior Kennedy's hopes fell on his second son, John, to become president. Joseph Sr. had the money and connections to play a central role in the family's political ambitions.^[6]



The Kennedy family at [Hyannis Port, Massachusetts](#), in 1931 with Robert on the bottom left in a jacket [info]

Kennedy's older brother John was often bedridden by illness and, as a result, became a voracious reader. Although he made little effort to get to know his younger brother during his childhood, John would take him for walks^[7] and regale him with the stories of heroes and adventures he had read.^[8] One of their favorite authors was [John Buchan](#), who wrote *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, which influenced both Robert and John.^[7] John sometimes referred to Robert as "Black Robert" due to his prudishness and disposition.^[9]

Unlike his older brothers, Kennedy took to heart their mother Rose's agenda for everything to have "a purpose," which included visiting historic sites during family outings, visits to the church during morning walks, and games used to expand vocabulary and

math skills.^[10] He described his position in the family hierarchy by saying, "When you come from that far down, you have to struggle to survive."^[11] As the boys were growing up, he tried frequently to get his older brothers' attention, but was seldom successful.^{[7][8]}

In September 1927, the [Kennedy family](#) moved to [Riverdale, Bronx](#), New York and two years later, they relocated 5 miles (8.0 km) northeast to [Bronxville](#), a small town in suburban [Westchester County](#). During his childhood, Kennedy spent summers and early autumns^[12] with his family at [their home](#) (rented in 1926, then purchased in 1929)^[13] in [Hyannis Port, Massachusetts](#), and Christmas and Easter holidays at their winter retreat in [Palm Beach, Florida](#), later purchased in 1933.

He attended [Riverdale Country School](#)—a private school for boys—from kindergarten through second grade. He then attended [Bronxville Public School](#) in lower Westchester County from third through fifth grade. He repeated the third grade.^[14] A teacher at Bronxville reflected that he was "a regular boy". She added, "It seemed hard for him to finish his work sometimes. But he was only ten after all."^{[11][15]} He then attended Riverdale Country School for the sixth grade. Kennedy would later recall that during childhood he was "going to different schools, always having to make new friends, and that I was very awkward...[a]nd I was pretty quiet most of the time. And I didn't mind being alone."^[16] He developed an interest in American history. He also decorated his bedroom with pictures of U.S. presidents and filled his bookshelves with volumes on the [American Civil War](#). He also became an avid stamp collector and once received a handwritten letter from [Franklin Roosevelt](#), who was also a philatelist.^[11]

In March 1938, Kennedy sailed to [London](#) with his mother and four youngest siblings to join his father who had begun serving as Ambassador to the United Kingdom. He attended the private Gibbs School for Boys in London for seventh grade. In April 1939, he gave his first public speech at the placing of a cornerstone for a youth club in England. According to embassy and newspaper reports, his statements were pencilled in his own hand and

were delivered in a "calm and confident" manner.^[17] Bobby returned to the United States just before the outbreak of World War II in Europe.

St. Paul's and Portsmouth Priory [\[edit \]](#)

In September 1939, Kennedy began eighth grade at [St. Paul's School](#), an elite Protestant private preparatory school for boys in [Concord, New Hampshire](#),^[18] that his father favored.^[19] Rose Kennedy was unhappy with the school's use of the Protestant Bible. After two months, she took advantage of her ambassador husband's absence from Boston and withdrew Kennedy from St. Paul's. She enrolled him in [Portsmouth Priory School](#), a [Benedictine](#) Catholic boarding school for boys in [Portsmouth, Rhode Island](#), which held daily morning and evening prayers and Mass three times a week, with a High Mass on Sundays.^[20] Kennedy attended Portsmouth for eighth through tenth grade.^[21]

At Portsmouth Priory School, Kennedy was known as "Mrs. Kennedy's little boy Bobby" after he introduced his mother to classmates, who made fun of them. He was defensive of his mother, and on one occasion chased a student out of the dormitory after the boy had commented on her appearance.^[22] He befriended Peter MacLellan and wrote to him, when his brother John was serving in the [U.S. Navy](#), that he would be visiting his brother "because he might be killed any minute".^[23] Kennedy blamed himself when his grades failed to improve. In letters to her son, Rose urged him to read more and to strengthen his vocabulary.^[24] Rose also expressed disappointment and wrote that she did not expect him to let her down.^[25] He began developing in other ways, and his brother John noticed his increased physical strength, predicting that the younger Kennedy "would be bouncing me around plenty in two more years".^[24] Monks at Portsmouth Priory School regarded him as a moody and indifferent student. Father Damian Kearney, who was two classes behind Kennedy, reflected that he "didn't look happy" and that he did not "smile much". According to Father Damian's review of school records, Kennedy was a "poor-to-mediocre student, except for history".^[22]

Milton Academy [\[edit \]](#)

In September 1942, Kennedy transferred to his third boarding school, [Milton Academy](#), in [Milton, Massachusetts](#), for eleventh and twelfth grades.^[26] His father, Joseph Kennedy Sr., wanted Kennedy to transfer to Milton, believing it would better prepare his son for Harvard.^[26] At Milton, he met and became friends with [David Hackett](#). He invited Hackett to join him for Sunday mass. Hackett started accompanying him, and was impressed when Kennedy took it upon himself to fill in for a missing altar boy one Sunday.^[7] Hackett admired Kennedy's determination to bypass his shortcomings, and remembered him redoubling his efforts whenever something did not come easy to him, which included athletics, studies, success with girls, and popularity.^[25] Hackett remembered the two of them being "misfits", a commonality that drew him to Kennedy, along with an unwillingness to conform to how others acted even if doing so meant not being accepted.^[7] Kennedy's grades improved.

One of his first relationships was with a girl named Piedy Bailey. The pair was photographed together when he walked her home after chapel on a Sunday night. Bailey was fond of him and remembered him as being "very appealing". She recalled him being funny, "separate, larky; outside the cliques; private all the time". Soon after he transferred to Milton, he pressed his father to allow him to enlist, as he wanted to catch up to his brothers who were both serving in the military.^[7] Kennedy had arrived at Milton unfamiliar with his peers and made little attempt to know the names of his classmates; he called most of the other boys "fella" instead. For this, he was nicknamed "Fella". Most of the school's students had come in eighth or ninth grade and cliques had already been formed. Despite this, his schoolmates would later say the school had no prejudice. He had an early sense of virtue; he disliked dirty jokes and bullying, once stepping in when an upperclassman tried bothering a younger student.^[7] The headmaster at Milton would later summarize that he was a "very intelligent boy, quiet and shy, but not outstanding, and he left no special mark on Milton".^[11]

Relationship with parents [\[edit \]](#)

In Kennedy's younger years, his father dubbed him the "runt" of the family and wrote him off. Close family friend [Lem Billings](#) once remarked to Joe Sr. that he was "the most generous little boy", and Joe Sr. replied that he did not know where his son "got that". Billings commented that the only similarity between Robert and Joe Sr. was their eye color.^[22] As Kennedy grew, his father worried that he was soft on others, conflicting with his ideology.

In response, Kennedy developed a tough persona that masked his gentle personality, attempting to appease his father.^[27] Biographer Judie Mills wrote that Joe Sr.'s lack of interest in Robert was evident by the length of time it took for him to decide to transfer him to Milton Academy. Both Joe Jr. and John attended the exclusive Protestant prep school [Choate](#) from their freshman year, while Robert was already a junior by the time he was enrolled at Milton. Despite his father's disdain, Kennedy continued to seek his approval, requesting that Joe Sr. write him a letter about his opinions on different political events and World War II.^[25]

As a child, Kennedy also strove to meet his mother's expectations to become the most dutiful, religious, affectionate, and obedient of the Kennedy children, but the father and son grew distant.^[8] Rose found his gentle personality endearing, though this was noted as having made him "invisible to his father".^[25] She influenced him heavily and like her, he became a devout Catholic and throughout his lifetime he practiced his religion more seriously than the other boys in the family.^[28] He impressed his parents as a child by taking on a newspaper route, seeking their approval and wishing to distinguish himself. However, he had the family chauffeur driving him in a [Rolls-Royce](#) so that he could make his deliveries. His mother discovered this and the deliveries ceased.^[27]

Joe Sr. was satisfied with Kennedy as an adult, believing him to have become "hard as nails", more like him than any of the other children, while his mother believed he exemplified all she had wanted in a child. Mills wrote, "His parents' conflicting views would be echoed in the opinions of millions of people throughout Bobby's life. Robert Kennedy was a ruthless opportunist who would stop at nothing to attain his ambitions. Robert Kennedy was America's most compassionate public figure, the only person who could save a divided country."^[27]

Naval service (1944–1946) [[edit](#)]

Six weeks before his 18th birthday in 1943, Kennedy enlisted in the [United States Naval Reserve](#) as a [seaman apprentice](#).^[29] He was released from active duty in March 1944, when he left Milton Academy early to report to the [V-12 Navy College Training Program](#) at [Harvard College](#) in [Cambridge, Massachusetts](#). His V-12 training occurred at Harvard (March–November 1944), [Bates College](#) in [Lewiston, Maine](#) (November 1944–June 1945), and Harvard once again (June 1945–January 1946).^{[30][31]} At Bates he received a specialized [V-12 degree](#) along with 15 others and during its [Winter Carnival](#) built a snow replica of a Navy boat.^{[32][33][34]} While in Maine, he wrote a letter to David Hackett in which he expressed feelings of inadequacy and frustration at being isolated from the action. He talked of filling his free time by taking classes with other sailors and remarked that "things are the same as usual up here, and me being my usual moody self I get very sad at times." He added, "If I don't get the hell out of here soon I'll die." Aside from Hackett, who was serving as a paratrooper, more of his [Parker Hall](#) dorm mates went overseas and left him behind. With others entering combat before him, Kennedy said this made him "feel more and more like a Draft Dodger (sic) or something". He was also frustrated with the apparent desire to shirk military responsibility by some of the other V-12 students.^[35]

Kennedy's brother Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. died in August 1944,^[36] when his bomber exploded during a volunteer mission known as [Operation Aphrodite](#). Robert was most affected by his father's reaction to his eldest son's passing. He appeared completely heartbroken and his peer Fred Garfield commented that Kennedy developed depression and questioned his faith for a short time. After his brother's death, Kennedy gained more attention, moving higher up the family patriarchy.^[35] On December 15, 1945, the [U.S. Navy](#) commissioned the [destroyer USS Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.](#), and shortly thereafter granted Kennedy's request to be released from naval-officer training to serve aboard *Kennedy* starting on February 1, 1946 as a seaman apprentice on the ship's [shakedown cruise](#) in the [Caribbean](#).^{[30][37]} On May 30, 1946, he received his [honorable discharge](#) from the Navy.^[38] For his service in the Navy, Kennedy was eligible for the [American Campaign Medal](#) and the [World War II Victory Medal](#).



Kennedy (second from left) during his time at [Bates College](#) in front of a snow replica of a Navy boat

Further study and journalism (1946–1951) [\[edit \]](#)

In September 1946, Kennedy entered Harvard as a junior, having received credit for his time in the V-12 program.^[39] He worked hard to make the [varsity football](#) team as an [end](#); he was a [starter](#) and scored a [touchdown](#) in the first game of his senior year before breaking his leg in practice.^[39] He earned his [varsity letter](#) when his coach sent him in wearing a cast during the last minutes of a game against [Yale](#).^[40] His father spoke positively of him when he served as a blocking back and sometime receiver for the faster Dave Hackett. Joseph Sr. attended some of Kennedy's practices and saw his son catch a touchdown pass in an early-season rout of Western Maryland. His teammates admired his physical courage. He was five feet ten and 155 pounds, which made him too small for college football. Despite this, he was a fearless hitter and once tackled a 230-pound fullback head-on. Wally Flynn, another player, looked up in the huddle after one play to see him crying after he broke his leg. He disregarded the injury and kept playing.^[41] Kennedy earned two varsity letters over the course of the 1946 and 1947 seasons.^[42]

Throughout 1946, Kennedy became active in his brother John's campaign for the U.S. Representative seat that was vacated by [James Curley](#); he joined the campaign full-time after his naval discharge. Biographer Schlesinger wrote that the election served as an entry into politics for both Robert and John.^[43] Two years later in March 1948, Robert graduated from Harvard with a bachelor's degree in [political science](#).^[44] After graduating, he sailed immediately on the [RMS Queen Mary](#) with a college friend for a six-month tour of Europe and the Middle East, accredited as a correspondent for the [Boston Post](#), filing six stories.^[45] Four of these stories, submitted from [Palestine](#) shortly before the end of the [British Mandate](#), provided [a first-hand view of the tensions](#) in the land.^[45] He was critical of British policy on Palestine, and praised the Jewish people he met there calling them "hardy and tough". He held out some hope after seeing Arabs and Jews working side by side but, in the end, feared that the hatred between the groups was too strong and would lead to a war.^[46]

In September 1948, he enrolled at the [University of Virginia School of Law](#) in [Charlottesville](#).^[47] Kennedy adapted to this new environment, being elected president of the Student Legal Forum, where he successfully produced outside speakers including [James M. Landis](#), [William O. Douglas](#), [Arthur Krock](#), and [Joseph McCarthy](#) and his family members Joe Sr. and John F. Kennedy. Kennedy's paper on [Yalta](#), written during his senior year, is deposited in the Law Library's Treasure Trove.^[48] On June 17, 1950, Kennedy married [Ethel Skakel](#) at St. Mary's Catholic Church in [Greenwich, Connecticut](#). His brother John served as his best man. Kennedy graduated from law school in June 1951 and flew with Ethel to Greenwich to stay in his father-in-law's guest house. The couple's first child, [Kathleen](#), was born on July 4, 1951.^[49] Kennedy spent the summer studying for the [Massachusetts bar exam](#).^[50] During this time, his brother John tried to keep Joe Sr. "at arm's length". The brothers rarely interacted until Robert was contacted by [Kenny O'Donnell](#) to repair the relationship between John and their father during John's Senate campaign. As a result of this, Joe Sr. came to view Kennedy favorably as reliable and "willing to sacrifice himself" for the family.^[51] Robert Kennedy passed the Massachusetts bar exam in 1951.^[52]

In September 1951, he went to San Francisco as a correspondent for the *Boston Post* to cover the convention that concluded the [Treaty of Peace with Japan](#).^[53] In October 1951, he embarked on a seven-week Asian trip with his brother John (then [Massachusetts 11th district congressman](#)) and their sister Patricia to Israel, India, Pakistan, [Vietnam](#), and Japan.^[54] Because of their age gap, the two brothers had previously seen little of each other—this 25,000-mile (40,000 km) trip came at the behest of their father^[51] and was the first extended time they had spent together, serving to deepen their relationship. On this trip, the brothers met [Liaquat Ali Khan](#) just prior to his death by assassination, and India's prime minister [Jawaharlal Nehru](#).^[55]

Senate committee counsel and political campaigns (1951–1960) [\[edit \]](#)

JFK Senate campaign and Joseph McCarthy (1952–1955) [\[edit \]](#)

In November 1951, Kennedy moved with his wife and daughter to a townhouse in [Georgetown](#) in Washington, D.C., and started work as a lawyer in the Internal Security Section of the [Criminal Division](#) of the [U.S. Department of Justice](#); the section was charged with investigating suspected Soviet agents.^[56] In February 1952, he was transferred to the [Eastern District of New York](#) in [Brooklyn](#) to prosecute fraud cases.^[57] On June 6, 1952, Kennedy resigned to manage his brother John's successful [1952 U.S. Senate campaign](#) in

[Massachusetts](#).^[57] JFK's victory was of great importance to the Kennedy family, elevating him to national prominence, and turning him into a serious potential presidential candidate. But his brother's victory was equally important to Robert, who felt he had succeeded in eliminating his father's negative perceptions of him.^[58]

In December 1952, at the behest of his father, Kennedy was appointed by family friend [Republican](#) Senator [Joseph McCarthy](#) as assistant counsel of the [U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations](#).^{[59][60]} However, Kennedy disapproved of the senator's aggressive methods of garnering intelligence on suspected communists.^[61] This was a highly visible job for him. He resigned in July 1953, but "retained a fondness for McCarthy".^[62] The period of July 1953 to January 1954 saw him at "a professional and personal nadir", feeling that he was adrift while trying to prove himself to the rest of the Kennedy family.^[63]

After a period as an assistant to his father on the [Hoover Commission](#), Kennedy rejoined the Senate committee staff as chief counsel for the Democratic minority in February 1954.^[64] That month, McCarthy's chief counsel [Roy Cohn](#) subpoenaed [Annie Lee Moss](#), accusing her of membership in the Communist Party. Kennedy revealed that Cohn had called the wrong Annie Lee Moss and he requested the file on Moss from the FBI. FBI director [J. Edgar Hoover](#) had been forewarned by Cohn and denied him access, referring to RFK as "an arrogant whipper-snapper".^[65] When the Democrats gained the majority in the Senate in January 1955, Kennedy became chief counsel and was a background figure in the televised [Army-McCarthy Hearings](#) of 1954 into McCarthy's conduct.^[66] The Annie Lee Moss incident turned Cohn into an enemy, which led to Kennedy assisting Democratic senators in ridiculing Cohn during the hearings. The animosity grew to the point where Cohn had to be restrained after asking RFK if he wanted to fight him.^[65] For his work on the McCarthy committee, Kennedy was included in a list of Ten Outstanding Young Men of 1954, created by the U.S. Junior Chamber of Commerce. His father had arranged the nomination, his first national award.^[67] In 1955, Kennedy was admitted to practice before the [United States Supreme Court](#).^[68]

Stevenson aide and focus on organized labor (1956–1960) [[edit](#)]

Kennedy went on to work as an aide to [Adlai Stevenson](#) during the [1956 presidential election](#) which helped him learn how national campaigns worked, in preparation for a future run by his brother, Jack.^[69] Unimpressed with Stevenson, he reportedly voted for incumbent [Dwight D. Eisenhower](#).^[70] Kennedy was also a delegate at the [1956 Democratic National Convention](#), having replaced [Tip O'Neil](#) at the request of his brother John, joining in what was ultimately an unsuccessful effort to help JFK get the vice presidential nomination.^[71] Shortly after this, following instructions by his father, Kennedy tried making amends with J. Edgar Hoover.^[72] There seemed to be some improvement in their interactions, which came to be seen as "elemental political necessity" by Kennedy. This later changed after Kennedy was appointed attorney general, where Hoover saw him as an "unprecedented threat".^[73]

From 1957 to 1959 he made a name for himself while serving as the chief counsel to the Senate's [McClellan Committee](#) under chairman [John L. McClellan](#). Kennedy was given authority over testimony scheduling, areas of investigation, and witness questioning by McClellan, a move that was made by the chairman to limit attention to himself and allow outrage by organized labor to be directed toward Kennedy.^[74] In a famous scene, Kennedy squared off with [Teamsters Union](#) President [Jimmy Hoffa](#) during the antagonistic argument that marked Hoffa's testimony.^[75] During the hearings, Kennedy received criticism from liberal critics and other commentators both for his outburst of impassioned anger and doubts about the innocence of those who invoked the [Fifth Amendment](#).^[76] Senators [Barry Goldwater](#) and [Karl Mundt](#) wrote to each other and complained about "the Kennedy boys" having hijacked the McClellan Committee by their focus on Hoffa and the Teamsters. They believed Kennedy covered for [Walter Reuther](#) and the [United Automobile Workers](#), a union which typically would back Democratic office seekers. Amidst the allegations, Kennedy wrote in his journal that the two senators had "no guts" as they never addressed him directly, only through the press.^[77] He left the committee in late 1959 in order to run his brother's presidential campaign.



Robert, Ted, and President John F. Kennedy outside the Oval Office in 1963

JFK presidential campaign (1960) [[edit](#)]

In 1960, Kennedy published the successful book, which he had drafted over the summer of the previous year, *The Enemy Within*, describing the corrupt practices within the Teamsters and other unions that he had helped investigate. Biographer Evan Thomas wrote that the book was a bestseller and could have launched a political career on its own, but "family duty called",^[78] and Kennedy went to work on the presidential campaign of his brother, John. In contrast to his role in his brother's previous campaign eight years prior, Kennedy gave stump speeches throughout the primary season, gaining confidence as time went on.^[79] His strategy "to win at any cost" led him to call on [Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr.](#) to attack [Hubert Humphrey](#) as a draft dodger; Roosevelt eventually did make the statement that Humphrey avoided service.^[80]

Concerned that John Kennedy was going to receive the Democratic Party's nomination, some supporters of Lyndon Johnson, who was also running for the nomination, revealed to the press that JFK had [Addison's disease](#), saying that he required life-sustaining cortisone treatments. Though in fact a diagnosis had been made, Kennedy tried to protect his brother by denying the allegation, saying that JFK had never had "an ailment described classically as Addison's disease".^[81] After securing the nomination, John Kennedy nonetheless decided to offer Lyndon Johnson the vice presidency. This did not sit well with some Kennedy supporters, and Robert tried unsuccessfully to convince Johnson to turn down the offer, leading him to view Robert with contempt afterward.^[82] RFK had already disliked Johnson prior to the presidential campaign, seeing him as a threat to his brother's ambitions.^[83] RFK wanted his brother to choose labor leader [Walter Reuther](#).^[84] Despite Kennedy's attempts, Johnson became his brother's running mate.^[85]

Kennedy worked toward downplaying his brother's Catholic faith during the primary but took a more aggressive and supportive stance during the general election. These concerns were mostly calmed after JFK delivered a speech in September in Houston where he said that he was in favor of the [separation of church and state](#).^[86] The following month, Kennedy was involved in securing the release of civil rights leader [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) from a jail in [Atlanta](#). Kennedy spoke with Georgia governor [Ernest Vandiver](#) and later, Judge Oscar Mitchell, after the judge had sentenced King for violating his probation when he protested at a whites-only snack bar.^[87]

Attorney General of the United States (1961–1964) [[edit](#)]


After winning the 1960 presidential election, President-elect John F. Kennedy appointed his younger brother attorney general. The choice was controversial, with publications including *The New York Times* and *The New Republic* calling him inexperienced and unqualified.^[88] He had no experience in any state or federal court,^[89] causing the president to joke, "I can't see that it's wrong to give him a little legal experience before he goes out to practice law."^[90] However, Kennedy was hardly a novice as a lawyer, having gained significant experience conducting investigations and questioning witnesses as a Justice Department attorney and Senate committee counsel and staff director.^[91]

According to [Bobby Baker](#), the Senate majority secretary and a protégé of Lyndon Johnson, President-elect Kennedy did not want to name his brother attorney general. However, their father overruled the president-elect. At the behest of Johnson, Baker persuaded the influential Southern senator [Richard Russell](#) to allow a voice vote to confirm the president's brother in January 1961, as Kennedy "would have been lucky to get 40 votes" on a roll-call vote.^[92] [Evelyn Lincoln](#) wrote of that November 19, 1963, conversation just three days before [Kennedy's assassination](#).^[93]

Kennedy performed well in his confirmation hearing and chose what friend and biographer [Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.](#) called an "outstanding" group of deputy and assistant attorneys general, including [Byron White](#) and [Nicholas Katzenbach](#).^[89]

Author James W. Hilty concludes that Kennedy "played an unusual combination of roles—campaign director, attorney general, executive overseer, controller of patronage, chief adviser, and brother protector" and that



Robert Kennedy testifying  before the [Senate Committee on Government Operations' Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations](#) about organized crime, September 1963

nobody before him had had such power.^[94] His tenure as attorney general was easily the period of greatest power for the office – no previous United States attorney general had enjoyed such clear influence on all areas of policy during an administration.^[95] To a great extent, President Kennedy sought the advice and counsel of his younger brother, with Robert being the president's closest political adviser. He was relied upon as both the president's primary source of administrative information, and as a general counsel with whom trust was implicit. He exercised widespread authority over every cabinet department, leading the [Associated Press](#) to dub him "Bobby—Washington's No. 2-man".^[95]

The president once remarked about his brother, "If I want something done and done immediately I rely on the Attorney General. He is very much the doer in this administration, and has an organizational gift I have rarely if ever seen surpassed."^[96]

Berlin [\[edit \]](#)

As one of the president's closest White House advisers, Kennedy played a crucial role in the events surrounding the [Berlin Crisis of 1961](#).^[97] Operating mainly through a private [backchannel](#) connection to Soviet spy [Georgi Bolshakov](#), he relayed important diplomatic communications between the American and Soviet governments.^[98] Most significantly, this connection helped the U.S. set up the [Vienna Summit](#) in June 1961, and later defuse the tank standoff with the Soviets at Berlin's [Checkpoint Charlie](#) in October.^[99]

Organized crime and the Teamsters [\[edit \]](#)

As attorney general, Kennedy pursued a relentless crusade against [organized crime](#) and the [Mafia](#), sometimes disagreeing on strategy with [FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover](#). Convictions against organized crime figures rose by 800 percent during his term.^[100] Kennedy worked to shift Hoover's focus away from communism, which Hoover saw as a more serious threat, to organized crime. According to [James Neff](#), Kennedy's success in this endeavor was due to his brother's position, giving the attorney general leverage over Hoover.^[101] Biographer [Richard Hack](#) concluded that Hoover's dislike for Kennedy came from his being unable to control him.^[102]



He was relentless in his pursuit of Teamsters Union president [Jimmy Hoffa](#), due to Hoffa's known corruption in financial and electoral matters, both personally and organizationally.^[103] The enmity between the two men was intense, with accusations of a personal vendetta - what Hoffa called a "blood feud" - exchanged between them.^[104] On July 7, 1961, after Hoffa was reelected to the Teamsters presidency, RFK told reporters the government's case against Hoffa had not been changed by what he called "a small group of teamsters" supporting him.^[105] The following year, it was leaked that Hoffa had claimed to a Teamster local that Kennedy had been "bodily" removed from his office, the statement being confirmed by a Teamster press agent and Hoffa saying Kennedy had only been ejected.^[106] In 1964 Hoffa was imprisoned for jury tampering.^[107] After learning of Hoffa's conviction by telephone, Kennedy issued congratulatory messages to the three prosecutors.^[108]

Civil rights [\[edit \]](#)

Kennedy expressed the administration's commitment to civil rights during a 1961 [speech](#) at the [University of Georgia Law School](#):

We will not stand by or be aloof—we will move. I happen to believe that [the 1954 decision](#) was right. But my belief does not matter. It is now the law. Some of you may believe the decision was wrong. That does not matter. It is the law.^[109]

In May 1961, he predicted that an African-American "can also achieve the same position that my brother has as President of the United States" over the course of the next thirty to forty years. Larry Sabato would later write that when RFK's family backed [Barack Obama](#) in 2008, they picked a candidate with great differences in upbringing from that of the privileged President Kennedy.^[110]

In February 1962,^[111] FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who viewed civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. as an upstart troublemaker,^[112] calling him an "enemy of the state",^[113] presented Kennedy with allegations that some of King's close confidants and advisers were communists.^[114] Concerned about the allegations, the FBI deployed agents to monitor King in the following months.^[111] Kennedy warned King to discontinue the suspected associations. In response, King agreed to ask suspected Communist [Jack O'Dell](#) to resign from the SCLC, but refused to heed to the request to ask [Stanley Levison](#), whom he regarded as a trusted advisor, to resign.^[115] In October 1963,^[115] Kennedy issued a written directive authorizing the FBI to wiretap King and other leaders of the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference](#), King's civil rights organization.^[116] Although Kennedy only gave written approval for limited wiretapping of King's phones "on a trial basis, for a month or so",^[117] Hoover extended the clearance so that his men were "unshackled" to look for evidence in any areas of King's life they deemed worthy.^[118] The wiretapping continued through June 1966 and was revealed in 1968, days before Kennedy's death.^[119]



Robert Kennedy speaking to civil rights demonstrators in front of the [Justice Department](#) on June 14, 1963

Kennedy remained committed to civil rights enforcement to such a degree that he commented in 1962 that it seemed to envelop almost every area of his public and private life, from prosecuting corrupt Southern electoral officials to answering late night calls from [Coretta Scott King](#) concerning the imprisonment of her husband for demonstrations in Alabama.^[120] During his tenure as attorney general, he undertook the most energetic and persistent desegregation of the administration that Capitol Hill had ever experienced. He demanded that every area of government begin recruiting realistic levels of black and other ethnic workers, going so far as to criticize Vice President Johnson for his failure to desegregate his own office staff. However, relations between the Kennedys and civil rights activists could be tense, partly due to the administration's decision that a number of complaints which King filed with the Justice Department between 1961 and 1963 be handled "through negotiation between the city commission and Negro citizens."^[115]

Although it has become commonplace to assert the phrase "[The Kennedy Administration](#)" or even "President Kennedy" when discussing the legislative and executive support of the civil rights movement, between 1960 and 1963 a great many of the initiatives that occurred during his tenure were the result of the passion and determination of an emboldened Robert Kennedy, who, through his rapid education in the realities of Southern racism, underwent a thorough conversion of purpose as attorney general. Asked in an interview in May 1962, "What do you see as the big problem ahead for you, is it crime or internal security?" Kennedy replied, "Civil rights."^[121] The president came to share his brother's sense of urgency on the matters at hand to such an extent that it was at the attorney general's insistence that he made his famous [June 1963 address to the nation on civil rights](#).^[89]

Kennedy played a large role in the response to the [Freedom Riders](#) protests. He acted after the [Anniston bus bombings](#) to protect the Riders in continuing their journey, sending [John Seigenthaler](#), his administrative assistant, to Alabama to attempt to secure the Riders' safety there. Despite a work rule which allowed a driver to decline an assignment which he regarded as a potentially unsafe one, he persuaded a manager of [The Greyhound Corporation](#) to obtain a coach operator who was willing to drive a special bus for the continuance of the Freedom Ride from Birmingham, Alabama, to Montgomery, Alabama, on the circuitous journey to Jackson, Mississippi.^[122]

Later, during the attack and burning by a white mob of the First Baptist Church in Montgomery, at which Martin Luther King Jr. and some 1,500 sympathizers were in attendance, the attorney general



Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy in Washington, D.C. on June 22, 1963

telephoned King to ask for his assurance that they would not leave the building until the force of [U.S. Marshals](#) and [National Guard](#) he sent had secured the area. King proceeded to berate Kennedy for "allowing the situation to continue". King later publicly thanked him for dispatching the forces to break up the attack that might otherwise have ended his life.^{[89][123]} Kennedy then negotiated the safe passage of the Freedom Riders from the First Baptist Church to Jackson, Mississippi, where they were arrested.^[124] He offered to bail the Freedom Riders out of jail, but they refused, which upset him, leading him to call any bandwagoners of the original freedom rides "honkers".^[citation needed]

Kennedy's attempts to end the Freedom Rides early were tied to an upcoming summit with [Nikita Khrushchev](#) and [Charles de Gaulle](#). He believed the continued international publicity of race riots would tarnish the president heading into international negotiations.^[125] This attempt to curtail the Freedom Rides alienated many of the civil rights leaders who, at the time, perceived him as intolerant and narrow-minded.^[126] In an attempt to better understand and improve race relations, Kennedy held a [private meeting in New York City in May 1963](#) with a black delegation coordinated by prominent author [James Baldwin](#).

In September 1962, Kennedy sent U.S. marshals to [Oxford, Mississippi](#) to enforce a federal court order allowing the admittance of the first African-American student, [James Meredith](#), to the [University of Mississippi](#). The attorney general had hoped that legal means, along with the escort of U.S. marshals, would be enough to force Governor [Ross Barnett](#) to allow Meredith's admission. He also was very concerned there might be a "mini-civil war" between U.S. Army troops and armed protesters.^[127] President Kennedy reluctantly sent federal troops after the situation on campus turned violent.^[128]

Ensuing [riots during the period of Meredith's admittance](#) resulted in hundreds of injuries and two deaths,^[129] yet Kennedy remained adamant that black students had the right to enjoy the benefits of all levels of the educational system. The Office of Civil Rights also hired its first African-American lawyer^[when?] and began to work cautiously with leaders of the [Civil Rights Movement](#).^[citation needed] Kennedy saw voting as the key to racial justice and collaborated with Presidents Kennedy and Johnson to create the landmark [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#), which helped bring an end to [Jim Crow laws](#). Between December 1961 and December 1963, Kennedy also expanded the [United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division](#) by 60 percent.^[130]

U.S. Steel [[edit](#)]

At the direction of the president, Kennedy also used the power of federal agencies to influence [U.S. Steel](#) not to institute a price increase.^[131] *The Wall Street Journal* wrote that the administration had set prices of steel "by naked power, by threats, by agents of the state security police."^[132] Yale law professor [Charles Reich](#) wrote in *The New Republic* that the Justice Department had violated [civil liberties](#) by calling a federal grand jury to indict U.S. Steel so quickly, then disbanding it after the price increase did not occur.^[132]

Death penalty issues [[edit](#)]

During the Kennedy administration, the [federal government](#) carried out its last pre-*Furman* federal execution (of [Victor Feguer](#) in [Iowa](#), 1963)^[133] and Kennedy, as attorney general, represented the government in this case.^[134]

In 1968, Kennedy expressed his strong willingness to support a bill then under consideration for the abolition of the death penalty.^[135]

Cuba [[edit](#)]

As his brother's confidant, Kennedy oversaw the CIA's anti-[Castro](#) activities after the failed [Bay of Pigs Invasion](#). He also helped develop the strategy to blockade Cuba during the [Cuban Missile Crisis](#) instead of initiating a military strike that might have led to nuclear war. He had initially been among the more hawkish members of the administration on matters concerning Cuban insurrectionist aid. His initial strong support for covert actions in Cuba soon changed to a position of removal from further involvement once he became aware of the CIA's tendency to draw out initiatives, and provide itself with almost unchecked authority in matters of foreign covert operations.^[citation needed]

Allegations that the Kennedys knew of plans by the CIA to kill [Fidel Castro](#), or approved of such plans, have been debated by historians over the years. JFK's friend and associate, historian [Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.](#), for



President Kennedy with his brother Robert, 1963

example, expressed the opinion that operatives linked to the CIA were among the most reckless individuals to have operated during the period—providing themselves with unscrutinized freedoms to threaten the lives of Castro and other members of the Cuban revolutionary government regardless of the legislative apparatus in Washington—freedoms that, unbeknownst to those at the White House attempting to prevent a nuclear war, placed the entire U.S.–Soviet relationship in perilous danger.^[citation needed]

The "[Family Jewels](#)" documents, declassified by the CIA in 2007, suggest that before the Bay of Pigs Invasion, the attorney general personally authorized one such assassination attempt.^{[136][137]} However, ample evidence exists to the contrary, specifically that Kennedy was only informed of an earlier plot involving the CIA's use of Mafia bosses [Santo Trafficante Jr.](#) and [John Roselli](#) during a briefing on May 7, 1962, and in fact directed the CIA to halt any existing efforts directed at Castro's assassination.^[138] Concurrently, Kennedy served

as the president's personal representative in [Operation Mongoose](#), the post-Bay of Pigs covert operations program established in November 1961 by the president.^[139] Mongoose was meant to incite a revolution within Cuba that would result in the downfall of Castro, not Castro's assassination.^{[140][141]}

During the [Cuban Missile Crisis](#), Kennedy proved himself to be a gifted politician with an ability to obtain compromises, tempering aggressive positions of key figures in the hawk camp. The trust the President placed in him on matters of negotiation was such that his role in the crisis is today seen as having been of vital importance in securing a blockade, which averted a full military engagement between the United States and Soviet Russia. His clandestine meetings with members of the Soviet Government continued to provide a key link to Nikita Khrushchev during even the darkest moments of the Crisis, in which the threat of nuclear strikes was considered a very present reality.^[142]

On the last night of the Cuban Missile Crisis, President Kennedy was so grateful for his brother's work in averting nuclear war that he summed it up by saying, "Thank God for Bobby."^[143]

Assassination of President John F. Kennedy [[edit](#)]

At the time that President Kennedy was [felled](#) by an assassin's bullets on November 22, 1963, RFK was at home with aides from the Justice Department when J. Edgar Hoover called and told him his brother had been shot.^[144] Before he could ask any questions, Hoover hung up. Kennedy later said he thought Hoover had enjoyed telling him the news.^[145] Kennedy then received a call from Tazewell Shepard, a naval aide to the president, who told him that his brother was dead.^[144] Shortly after the call from Hoover, Kennedy phoned [McGeorge Bundy](#) at the White House, instructing him to change the locks on the president's files. He ordered the Secret Service to dismantle the Oval Office and cabinet room's secret taping systems. He scheduled a meeting with CIA director [John McCone](#) and asked if the CIA had any involvement in his brother's death. McCone denied it, with Kennedy later telling investigator Walter Sheridan that he asked the director "in a way that he couldn't lie to me, and they [the CIA] hadn't".^[146]

An hour after the president was shot, Bobby Kennedy received a phone call from Vice President Johnson before Johnson boarded [Air Force One](#). RFK remembered their conversation starting with Johnson demonstrating sympathy before the vice president stated his belief that he should be sworn in immediately; RFK opposed the idea since he felt "it would be nice" for President Kennedy's body to return to Washington with the deceased president still being the incumbent.^[147] Eventually, the two concluded that the best course of action would be for Johnson to take the oath of office before returning to Washington.^[148] In his 1971 book *We Band of Brothers*,



Robert Kennedy at his brother President John F. Kennedy's funeral, November 25, 1963

aide [Edwin O. Guthman](#) recounted Kennedy admitting to him an hour after receiving word of his brother's death that he thought he would be the one "they would get" as opposed to his brother.^[149] In the days following the assassination, he wrote letters to his two eldest children, Kathleen and Joseph, saying that as the oldest Kennedy family members of their generation, they had a special responsibility to remember what their uncle had started and to love and serve their country.^{[150][151]} He was originally opposed to Jacqueline Kennedy's decision to have a closed casket, as he wanted the funeral to keep with tradition, but he changed his mind after seeing the cosmetic, waxen remains.^[152]

Kennedy was asked by [Democratic Party](#) leaders to introduce a film about his late brother at [the 1964 party convention](#). When he was introduced, the crowd, including party bosses, elected officials, and delegates, applauded thunderously and tearfully for a full 22 minutes before they would let him speak.^[153] He was close to breaking down before he spoke about his brother's vision for both the party and the nation and recited a quote from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (3.2) that Jacqueline had given him:

When [he] shall die
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun.

The ten-month investigation by the [Warren Commission](#) of 1963–1964 concluded that the president had been assassinated by [Lee Harvey Oswald](#) and that Oswald had acted alone. On September 27, 1964, Kennedy issued a statement through his New York campaign office: "As I said in Poland last summer, I am convinced Oswald was solely responsible for what happened and that he did not have any outside help or assistance. He was a malcontent who could not get along here or in the Soviet Union."^[154] He added, "I have not read the report, nor do I intend to. But I have been briefed on it and I am completely satisfied that the Commission investigated every lead and examined every piece of evidence. The Commission's inquiry was thorough and conscientious."^[154] After a meeting with Kennedy in 1966, [Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.](#) wrote: "It is evident that he believes that [the Warren Commission's report] was a poor job and will not endorse it, but that he is unwilling to criticize it and thereby reopen the whole tragic business."^[155] Jerry Bruno, an "[advance man](#)" for JFK who also worked on RFK's 1968 presidential campaign, would later state in 1993: "I talked to Robert Kennedy many times about the Warren Commission, and he never doubted their result."^[156] In a 2013 interview with [CBS](#) journalist [Charlie Rose](#), son [Robert F. Kennedy Jr.](#) stated that his father was "fairly convinced" that others besides Oswald were involved in his brother's assassination and that he privately believed the Commission's report was a "shoddy piece of craftsmanship".^[157]

The killing was judged as having a profound impact on Kennedy. Beran assesses the assassination as having moved Kennedy away from reliance on the political system and become more questioning.^[158] Tye views Kennedy following the death of his brother as "more fatalistic, having seen how fast he could lose what he cherished the most."^[159]

Vice presidential candidate [\[edit \]](#)

In the wake of the assassination of his brother and Lyndon Johnson's ascension to the presidency, with the office of vice president now vacant, Kennedy was viewed favorably as a potential candidate for the position in the 1964 presidential election. Several Kennedy partisans called for him to be drafted in tribute to his brother; national polling showing that three of four Democrats were in favor of him as Johnson's running mate. Democratic organizers supported him as a write-in candidate in the New Hampshire primary and 25,000 Democrats wrote in Kennedy's name in March 1964, only 3,700 fewer than the number of Democrats who wrote in Johnson's name as their pick for president.^[144]

Kennedy discussed the vice presidency with Arthur Schlesinger. Schlesinger thought that he should develop his own political base first, and Kennedy observed that the job "was really based on waiting around for someone to die". In his first interview after the assassination Kennedy said he was not considering the vice presidency. During this time he said of the coalescing Johnson administration, "It's too early for me to even think about '64,



Robert Kennedy with [David Dubinsky](#) in an undated photo. The sign in the background reads, "For President - Lyndon B. Johnson".

because I don't know whether I want to have any part of these people.... if they don't fulfill and follow out my brother's program, I don't want to have anything to do with them."^[160] However, in January 1964 Kennedy did begin low key inquiries as to the vice-presidential position and by the summer was developing plans to help Johnson in cities and in the Northeast based on the 1960 JFK campaign strategies.^[161]

Despite the fanfare within the Democratic Party, President Johnson was not inclined to have Kennedy on his ticket. The two men disliked one another intensely, with feelings often described as "mutual contempt" that went back to their first meeting in 1953 and had only intensified during JFK's presidency.^{[162][163]} Johnson instead chose [Hubert Humphrey](#) to be his running mate.^[144]

During a post-presidency interview with historian [Doris Kearns Goodwin](#), Johnson claimed that Kennedy "acted like he was the custodian of the Kennedy dream" despite Johnson being seen as this after JFK was assassinated, arguing that he had "waited" his turn and Kennedy should have done the same. Johnson recalled a "tidal wave of

letters and memos about how great a vice president Bobby would be" being swept upon him, but knowing that he could not "let it happen" as he viewed the possibility of having Kennedy on the ticket as ensuring that he would never know if he could be elected "on my own".^[164]

In July 1964, Johnson issued an official statement ruling out all of his current cabinet members as potential running mates, judging them to be "so valuable ... in their current posts". In response to this statement, angry letters poured in directed towards both Johnson and his wife, [Lady Bird](#), expressing disappointment at Kennedy being dropped from the field of potential running mates.^[164] Johnson, worried that delegates at the convention would draft Kennedy onto the ticket, ordered the FBI to monitor Kennedy's contacts, actions, and to make sure that he could not speak until after Hubert Humphrey was confirmed as his running mate.^[144]

U.S. Senate (1965–1968) [[edit](#)]

1964 election [[edit](#)]

See also: *[United States Senate election in New York, 1964](#)*

Nine months after his brother's assassination, Kennedy left the cabinet to run for a seat in the [U.S. Senate](#) representing New York,^[165] announcing his candidacy on August 22, 1964, two days before that year's Democratic National Convention. He had considered the possibility of running since early spring, but also giving consideration to leaving politics altogether after the plane crash and injury of his brother Ted in June, two months earlier. Positive reception in Europe convinced him to remain in politics.^[166] Kennedy was lauded during concurrent trips to Germany and Poland, the denizens of the latter country's greetings to Kennedy being interpreted by Leaming as evaporating the agony he had sustained since his brother's passing.^[167] Kennedy was given permission to run by the [New York State Democratic Committee](#) on September 1, amid mixed feelings in regards to his candidacy.^[168] Despite their notoriously difficult relationship, Johnson gave considerable support to Kennedy's campaign. His opponent in the [1964 race](#) was [Republican](#) incumbent [Kenneth Keating](#), who attempted to portray Kennedy as an arrogant [carpetbagger](#).^[169] RFK charged Keating with having "not done much of anything constructive" despite his presence in Congress during a September 8 press conference.^[170] Kennedy won the November election, helped in part by Johnson's huge victory margin in New York.^[171]



Kennedy at the 1964 Democratic National Convention

Tenure [[edit](#)]

Kennedy drew attention in Congress early on as the brother of President Kennedy, which set him apart from other senators. He drew more than fifty senators as spectators when he delivered a speech in the Senate on nuclear proliferation in June 1965.^[172] However, he also saw a decline in his power, going from the president's most trusted advisor to one of a hundred senators, and his impatience with collaborative lawmaking showed.^[173] Though fellow senator [Fred R. Harris](#) expected not to like Kennedy, the two became allies, Harris even calling them "each other's best friends in the Senate".^[174] Kennedy's younger brother Ted was his senior there. Robert saw his brother as a guide on managing within the Senate and the arrangement worked to deepen their relationship.^[173] Senator Harris noted, Kennedy was intense about matters and issues which concerned him.^[175] Kennedy gained a reputation in the Senate of being well prepared for debate, however his tendency to speak to other senators in a more "blunt" fashion caused him to be "unpopular... with many of his colleagues".^[175]

While serving in the Senate, Kennedy advocated [gun control](#). In May 1965 he co-sponsored S.1592, proposed by President Johnson and sponsored by Senator [Thomas J. Dodd](#), that would put federal restrictions on mail-order gun sales.^[176] Speaking in support of the bill, Kennedy said, "For too long we dealt with these deadly weapons as if they were harmless toys. Yet their very presence, the ease of their acquisition and the familiarity of their appearance have led to thousands of deaths each year. With the passage of this bill we will begin to meet our responsibilities. It would save hundreds of thousands of lives in this country and spare thousands of families...grief and heartache...."^{[176][177]} In remarks during a May 1968 campaign stop in [Roseburg, Oregon](#), Kennedy defended the bill as keeping firearms away from "people who have no business with guns or rifles": the bill forbade "mail order sale of guns to the very young, those with criminal records and the insane," according to [The Oregonian](#)'s report.^{[178][179]} S.1592 and subsequent bills, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, paved the way for the eventual passage of the [Gun Control Act of 1968](#).^[180]

Kennedy and his staff had employed a cautionary "amendments-only" strategy for his first year in the senate. In 1966 and 1967 they took more direct legislative action, but were met with increasing resistance from the Johnson administration.^[181] Despite perceptions that the two were hostile in their respective offices to each other, [U.S. News](#) reported Kennedy's support of the Johnson administration's "[Great Society](#)" program through his voting record. Kennedy supported both major and minor parts of the program and each year, over 60% of his roll call votes were consistently in favor of Johnson's policies.^[182]

On February 8, 1966, Kennedy urged the United States to pledge that it would not be the first country to use nuclear weapons against countries that did not have them noting that China had made the pledge and the [Soviet Union](#) indicated it was also willing to do so.^[183]

In June 1966, he visited [apartheid-era South Africa](#) accompanied by his wife, Ethel, and a few aides. The tour was greeted with international praise at a time when few politicians dared to entangle themselves in the politics of South Africa. He spoke out against the oppression of the native population, and was welcomed by the black population as though he were a visiting head of state. In an interview with [Look](#) magazine he said:

At the [University of Natal](#) in [Durban](#), I was told the church to which most of the white population belongs teaches apartheid as a moral necessity. A questioner declared that few churches allow black Africans to pray with the white because the Bible says that is the way it should be, because God created Negroes to serve. 'But suppose God is black', I replied. 'What if we go to Heaven and we, all our lives, have treated the Negro as an inferior, and God is there, and we look up and He is not white? What then is our response?' There was no answer. Only silence.^[184]

At the [University of Cape Town](#) he delivered the annual [Day of Affirmation Address](#). A quote from this address appears on his memorial at [Arlington National Cemetery](#): "Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope."^[185]



President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the [Immigration Act of 1965](#) as Ted and Robert Kennedy, and others look on.

On January 28, 1967, Kennedy began a ten-day stay in Europe, meeting [Harold Wilson](#) in [London](#) and advising him to tell President Johnson about his belief that the ongoing Vietnam conflict was wrong. Upon returning to the U.S. in early February, he was confronted by the press who asked him if his conversations abroad had negatively impacted American foreign relations.^[186]

During his years as a senator, he helped to start a [successful redevelopment project](#) in poverty-stricken [Bedford–Stuyvesant, Brooklyn](#) in New York City.^[187] Schlesinger wrote that Kennedy had hoped Bedford-Stuyvesant would become an example of self-imposed growth for other impoverished neighborhoods. Kennedy had difficulty securing support from President Johnson, whose administration was charged by Kennedy as having opposed a "special impact" program meant to bring about the federal progress that he had supported. [Robert B. Semple Jr.](#) repeated similar sentiments in September 1967, writing the Johnson administration was preparing "a concentrated attack" on Robert F. Kennedy's proposal that Semple claimed would "build more and better low-cost housing in the slums through private enterprise." Kennedy confided to journalist [Jack Newfield](#) that while he tried collaborating with the administration through courting its members and compromising with the bill, "They didn't even try to work something out together. To them it's all just politics."^[188]

He also [visited](#) the [Mississippi Delta](#) as a member of the Senate committee reviewing the effectiveness of 'War on Poverty' programs, particularly that of the [Economic Opportunity Act of 1964](#).^[189] [Marian Wright Edelman](#) described Kennedy as "deeply moved and outraged" by the sight of the starving children living in the economically abysmal climate, changing her impression of him from "tough, arrogant, and politically driven."^[190] Edelman noted further that the senator requested she call on Martin Luther King Jr. to bring the impoverished to Washington, D.C., to make them more visible, leading to the creation of the [Poor People's Campaign](#).^[191]

Kennedy worked on the [Senate Labor Committee](#) at the time of the [workers' rights](#) activism of [Cesar Chavez](#), [Dolores Huerta](#), and the [National Farm Workers Association](#) (NFWA).^[192] At the request of labor leader Walter Reuther, who had previously marched with and provided money to Chavez, Kennedy flew out to [Delano, California](#) to investigate the situation.^[193] Although the first two committee hearings in March 1966 for legislation to amend the [National Labor Relations Act](#) to include farm workers received little attention, Kennedy's attendance at the third hearing brought media coverage.^[194] Biographer Thomas wrote that Kennedy was moved after seeing the conditions of the workers, who he deemed were being taken advantage of.^[195] Chavez stressed to Kennedy that migrant workers needed to be recognized as human beings. Kennedy later engaged in an exchange with [Kern County](#) sheriff Leroy Galyen where he criticized the sheriff's deputies for taking photographs of "people on picket lines."^[196]

As a senator, he was popular among African Americans and other minorities including Native Americans and immigrant groups. He spoke forcefully in favor of what he called the "disaffected",^[197] the impoverished,^[198] and "the excluded",^[199] thereby aligning himself with leaders of the civil rights struggle and social justice campaigners, leading the Democratic party in pursuit of a more aggressive agenda to eliminate perceived discrimination on all levels. He supported [desegregation busing](#), integration of all public facilities, the [Voting Rights Act of 1965](#), and anti-poverty social programs to increase education, offer opportunities for employment, and provide health care for African Americans. Consistent with President Kennedy's [Alliance for Progress](#), he also placed increasing emphasis on human rights as a central focus of U.S. foreign policy.

Vietnam [\[edit \]](#)

The JFK administration had backed U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world in the frame of the Cold War, but Kennedy was not known to be involved in discussions on the [Vietnam War](#) when he was his brother's attorney general.^{[200][201]} According to historian [Doris Kearns Goodwin](#), before choosing to run for the Senate, Kennedy had sought an ambassadorship to [South Vietnam](#).^[202] Entering the Senate, Kennedy initially kept private his disagreements with President Johnson on the war. While Kennedy vigorously supported



Kennedy speaks with a youth while touring Bedford–Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, N.Y. [↗](#)



Senator Robert F. Kennedy and President Lyndon B. Johnson in the [Oval Office](#), 1966

his brother's earlier efforts, he never publicly advocated commitment of ground troops. Though bothered by the beginning of the bombing of [North Vietnam](#) in February 1965, Kennedy did not wish to appear antipathetic to the president's agenda.^[203] But by April, Kennedy was advocating a halt to the bombing to Johnson, who acknowledged that Kennedy played a part in influencing his choice to temporarily cease bombing the following month.^[204] Kennedy cautioned Johnson against sending combat troops as early as 1965, but Johnson chose instead to follow the recommendation of the rest of his predecessor's still intact staff of advisers. In July, after Johnson made a large commitment of American ground forces to Vietnam, Kennedy made multiple calls

for a settlement through negotiation. The next month, [John Paul Vann](#), a [lieutenant colonel](#) in the [U.S. Army](#), wrote that Kennedy "indicat[ed] comprehension of the problems we face", in a letter to the senator.^[205]

In April 1966, Kennedy had a private meeting with [Philip Heymann](#) of the [State Department's](#) Bureau of Security and Consular Affairs to discuss efforts to secure the release of American prisoners of war in Vietnam. Kennedy wanted to press the Johnson administration to do more, but Heymann insisted that the administration believed the "consequences of sitting down with the Viet Cong" mattered more than the prisoners they were holding captive.^[206] On June 29 of that year, Kennedy released a statement disavowing President Johnson's choice to bomb [Haiphong](#), but he avoided criticizing either the war or the president's overall foreign policy, believing that it might harm Democratic candidates in the 1966 [midterm elections](#).^[207] In August, the [International Herald Tribune](#) described Kennedy's popularity as outpacing President Johnson's, crediting Kennedy's attempts to end the Vietnam conflict which the public increasingly desired.^[208]

In the early part of 1967, Kennedy traveled to Europe, where he had discussions about Vietnam with leaders and diplomats. A story leaked to the State Department that Kennedy was talking about seeking peace while President Johnson was pursuing the war. Johnson became convinced that Kennedy was undermining his authority. He voiced this during a meeting with Kennedy, who reiterated the interest of the European leaders to pause the bombing while going forward with negotiations; Johnson declined to do so.^[209] On March 2, Kennedy outlined a three-point plan to end the war which included suspending the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam, and the eventual withdrawal of American and North Vietnamese soldiers from South Vietnam; this plan was rejected by [Secretary of State Dean Rusk](#), who believed North Vietnam would never agree to it.^[210] On May 15, Kennedy debated [Governor of California Ronald Reagan](#) about the war.^{[211][212]} On November 26, 1967, during an appearance on [Face the Nation](#), Kennedy asserted that the Johnson administration had deviated from his brother's policies in Vietnam, his first time contrasting the two administrations' policies on the war. He added that the view that Americans were fighting to end communism in Vietnam was "immoral".^{[213][214]}

On February 8, 1968, Kennedy delivered an address in [Chicago, Illinois](#), where he critiqued [Saigon](#) "government corruption" and expressed his disagreement with the Johnson administration's stance that the war would determine the future of Asia.^[215] On March 14, Kennedy met with defense secretary [Clark Clifford](#) at the [Pentagon](#) regarding the war. Clifford's notes indicate that Kennedy was offering not to enter the ongoing Democratic presidential primary if President Johnson would admit publicly to having been wrong in his war policy and appoint "a group of persons to conduct a study in depth of the issues and come up with a recommended course of action";^[216] Johnson rejected the proposal.^[217] On April 1, after President Johnson halted bombing of North Vietnam, RFK said the decision was a "step toward peace" and though offering to collaborate with Johnson for national unity, opted to continue his presidential bid.^[218] On May 1, while in [Lafayette, Indiana](#), Kennedy said continued delays in beginning peace talks with North Vietnam meant both more lives lost and the postponing of the "domestic progress" hoped for by the US.^[219] Later that month, Kennedy called the war "the gravest kind of error" in a speech in Corvallis, Oregon.^[220] In an interview on June 4, hours before he was shot, Kennedy continued to advocate for a change in policy towards the war.^[221]

Presidential candidate [\[edit \]](#)

Main article: [Robert F. Kennedy presidential campaign, 1968](#)

See also: [United States presidential election, 1968](#) and [1968 Democratic National Convention](#)

In 1968, President Johnson prepared to run for re-election. In January, faced with what was widely considered an unrealistic race against an incumbent president, Kennedy stated that he would not seek the presidency.^[222] After the [Tet Offensive](#) in Vietnam in early February 1968, he received a letter from writer [Pete Hamill](#) that said poor people kept pictures of President Kennedy on their walls and that Kennedy had an "obligation of staying true to whatever it was that put those pictures on those walls."^[223]

Kennedy traveled to [Delano, California](#), to meet with civil rights activist [César Chávez](#), who was on a 25-day hunger strike showing his commitment to [nonviolence](#).^[224] It was on this visit to California that Kennedy decided he would challenge Johnson for the presidency, telling his former Justice Department aides, [Edwin Guthman](#) and [Peter Edelman](#), that his first step was to get lesser-known Senator [Eugene McCarthy](#) of Minnesota to drop out of the presidential race.^[225]

The weekend before the New Hampshire primary, Kennedy announced to several aides that he would attempt to persuade McCarthy to withdraw from the race to avoid splitting the antiwar vote, but Senator [George McGovern](#) urged Kennedy to wait until after that primary to announce his candidacy.^[222] Johnson won a narrow victory in the New Hampshire primary on March 12, 1968, against McCarthy, but this close second-place result dramatically boosted McCarthy's standing in the race.^[226]

After much speculation, and reports leaking out about his plans,^[227] and seeing in McCarthy's success that Johnson's hold on the job was not as strong as originally thought, Kennedy declared his candidacy on March 16, 1968, in the Caucus Room of the old Senate office building, the same room where his brother had declared his own candidacy eight years earlier.^[228] He stated, "I do not run for the presidency merely to oppose any man, but to propose new policies. I run because I am convinced that this country is on a perilous course and because I have such strong feelings about what must be done, and I feel that I'm obliged to do all I can."^[229]

McCarthy supporters angrily denounced Kennedy as an opportunist. They believed that McCarthy had taken the most courageous stand by opposing the sitting president of his own party and that his surprising result in New Hampshire had earned him the mantle of being the anti-war candidate. Kennedy's announcement split the anti-war movement in two.^[230] On March 31, 1968, Johnson stunned the nation by dropping out of the race. Vice President [Hubert Humphrey](#), a champion of the labor unions and a long supporter of civil rights, entered the race with the financial backing and critical endorsement of the party "establishment", including most members of Congress, mayors, governors, "the south", and several major labor unions.^[231] With state registration deadlines long past, Humphrey joined the race too late to enter any primaries but had the support of the president.^{[232][233]} Kennedy, like his brother before him, planned to win the nomination through popular support in the primaries.



Robert Kennedy campaigns in Los Angeles (photo by [Evan Freed](#))

Kennedy ran on a platform of racial and economic justice, non-aggression in foreign policy, decentralization of power, and social change. A crucial element of his campaign was an engagement with the young, whom he identified as being the future of a reinvigorated American society based on partnership and equality. His policy objectives did not sit well with the business community, where he was viewed as something of a fiscal liability, opposed as they were to the tax increases necessary to fund social programs. At one of his university speeches (Indiana University Medical School), he was asked, "Where are we going to get the money to pay for all these new programs you're proposing?" He replied to the medical students, about to enter lucrative careers, "From you."^{[89][234]}

It was this intense and frank mode of dialogue with which he was to continue to engage those whom he viewed as not being traditional allies of Democratic ideals or initiatives. In a speech at the University of Alabama, he argued, "I believe that any who



Tired but still intense in the last days before his Oregon defeat, Robert Kennedy speaks from the platform of a campaign train.

seek high office this year must go before all Americans, not just those who agree with them, but also those who disagree, recognizing that it is not just our supporters, not just those who vote for us, but all Americans who we must lead in the difficult years ahead."^[235] He aroused rabid animosity in some quarters, with J. Edgar Hoover's Deputy [Clyde Tolson](#) reported as saying, "I hope that someone shoots and kills the son of a bitch."^[236]

Kennedy's presidential campaign brought out both "great enthusiasm" and anger in people. His message of change raised hope for some and brought fear to others. Kennedy wanted to be a bridge across the divide of American society. His bid for the presidency saw not only a continuation of the programs he and his brother had undertaken during the president's term in office, but also an extension of Johnson's Great Society.^[237]

Kennedy visited numerous small towns and made himself available to the masses by participating in long motorcades and street-corner stump speeches, often in troubled inner cities. He made urban poverty a chief concern of his campaign, which in part led to enormous crowds that would attend his events in poor urban areas or rural parts of [Appalachia](#).^[238]

On April 4, 1968, Kennedy learned of the assassination of [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) and gave a heartfelt [impromptu speech](#) in [Indianapolis's](#) inner city, calling for a reconciliation between the races. The address was the first time Kennedy spoke publicly about his brother's killing.^[239] [Riots broke out in 60 cities in the wake of King's death](#), but not in Indianapolis, a fact many attribute to the effect of this speech.^[240] Kennedy addressed the [City Club of Cleveland](#) the next day, on April 5, 1968, delivering the famous [On the Mindless Menace of Violence](#) speech.^[241] He attended King's funeral, accompanied by Jacqueline and Ted Kennedy. He was described as being the "only white politician to hear only cheers and applause."^[242]



Kennedy giving his [speech on Martin Luther King Jr.](#)

Kennedy won the [Indiana](#) Democratic primary on May 7 and the Nebraska primary on May 14 but lost the Oregon primary to McCarthy on May 28.^[243] If he could defeat McCarthy in the California primary, the leadership of the campaign thought, he would knock McCarthy out of the race and set up a one-on-one against Hubert Humphrey at the [Chicago national convention](#) in August.

Assassination [\[edit \]](#)

Main article: [Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy](#)

Kennedy scored a major victory when he won the California primary. He addressed his supporters shortly after midnight on June 5, 1968, in a [ballroom](#) at [The Ambassador Hotel](#) in Los Angeles, California.^[244] Leaving the ballroom, he went through the hotel kitchen after being told it was a shortcut to a press room.^[245] He did this despite being advised by his bodyguard—former FBI agent Bill Barry—to avoid the kitchen. In a crowded kitchen passageway, Kennedy turned to his left and shook hands with [busboy](#) Juan Romero just as [Sirhan Bishara Sirhan](#), a 24-year-old Palestinian,^[246] opened fire with a [.22-caliber revolver](#). Kennedy was hit three times, and five other people were wounded.^[247]

[George Plimpton](#), former [decathlete](#) [Rafer Johnson](#), and former professional football player [Rosey Grier](#) are credited with wrestling Sirhan Sirhan to the ground after he shot the senator.^[248] As Kennedy lay mortally wounded, Juan Romero cradled his head and placed a [rosary](#) in his hand. Kennedy asked Romero, "Is everybody OK?", and Romero responded, "Yes, everybody's OK." Kennedy then turned away from Romero and said, "Everything's going to be OK."^{[249][250]} After several minutes, medical attendants arrived and lifted the senator onto a stretcher, prompting him to whisper, "Don't lift me", which were his last words.^{[251][252]} He lost consciousness shortly thereafter.^[253] He was rushed first to Los Angeles' Central Receiving Hospital, and then to the city's [Good Samaritan Hospital](#), where he died early the next morning.^[254]

Robert Kennedy's death, like the [1963 assassination of his brother, President John F. Kennedy](#), has been the subject of [widespread analysis](#).^[*citation needed*]

Funeral [\[edit \]](#)

Kennedy's body was returned to Manhattan, where it [lay in repose](#) at [Saint Patrick's Cathedral](#) from approximately 10:00 p.m. until 10:00 a.m. on June 8.^{[255][256]} A [high requiem mass](#) was held at the cathedral at 10:00 a.m. on June 8. The service was attended by members of the extended Kennedy family, President [Lyndon B. Johnson](#) and his wife [Lady Bird Johnson](#), and members of the Johnson [cabinet](#).^[257] [Ted](#), the only surviving Kennedy brother, said the following:

My brother need not be idealized, or enlarged in death beyond what he was in life; to be remembered simply as a good and decent man, who saw wrong and tried to right it, saw suffering and tried to heal it, saw war and tried to stop it. Those of us who loved him and who take him to his rest today, pray that what he was to us and what he wished for others will some day come to pass for all the world. As he said many times, in many parts of this nation, to those he touched and who sought to touch him: 'Some men see things as they are and say why. I dream things that never were and say why not.'^[258]

The requiem mass concluded with the hymn "[The Battle Hymn of the Republic](#)", sung by [Andy Williams](#).^[259] Immediately following the mass, Kennedy's body was transported by a special private train to Washington, D.C. Kennedy's [funeral train](#) was pulled by two [Penn Central GG1](#) electric locomotives.^[260] Thousands of mourners lined the tracks and stations along the route, paying their respects as the train passed. The train departed New York at 12:30 p.m.^[261] When the train arrived in [Elizabeth, New Jersey](#), an eastbound train on a parallel track to the funeral train hit and killed two spectators^[who?] after they were unable^[clarification needed] to get off the track in time, even though the eastbound train's engineer had slowed to 30 mph for the normally 55 mph curve, blown his horn continuously, and rung his bell through the curve.^{[262][263][264]} The normally four-hour trip took more than eight hours because of the thick crowds lining the tracks on the 225-mile (362 km) journey.^[265] The train was scheduled to arrive at about 4:30 p.m.,^{[266][267]} but sticking brakes on theasket-bearing car contributed to delays,^[262] and the train finally arrived at 9:10 p.m. on June 8.^[265]



Burial [\[edit \]](#)

Main article: [Grave of Robert F. Kennedy](#)

Kennedy was buried close to his brother John in [Arlington National Cemetery](#) in [Arlington](#), Virginia, just across the [Potomac River](#) from Washington, D.C.^[259] Although he had always maintained that he wished to be buried in Massachusetts, his family believed Robert should be interred in Arlington next to his brother.^[268] The procession left Union Station and passed the [New Senate Office Building](#), where he had his offices, and then proceeded to the [Lincoln Memorial](#), where it paused. The [Marine Corps Band](#) played [The Battle Hymn of the Republic](#).^[263] The funeral motorcade arrived at the cemetery at 10:24 p.m. As the vehicles entered the cemetery, people lining the roadway spontaneously lit candles to guide the motorcade to the burial site.^[263]

The 15-minute ceremony began at 10:30 p.m. [Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle](#), [Roman Catholic Archbishop of Washington](#), officiated at the graveside service in lieu of Cardinal [Richard Cushing](#) of Boston, who fell ill during the trip.^[265] Also officiating was [Archbishop of New York Terence Cooke](#).^[263] On behalf of the United States, [John Glenn](#) presented the folded flag to Senator Ted Kennedy, who passed it to Robert's eldest son, Joe, who passed it to Ethel Kennedy. The [Navy Band](#) played [The Navy Hymn](#).^[263]

Officials at Arlington National Cemetery said that Kennedy's burial was the only night burial to have taken place at the cemetery.^[269] (The re-interment of [Patrick Bouvier Kennedy](#), who died two days after his birth in August 1963, and a stillborn daughter, Arabella, both children of President Kennedy and his wife, Jacqueline, also occurred at night. After the president was interred in Arlington Cemetery, the two infants were buried next to him on December 5, 1963, in a private ceremony without publicity.)^[263]