

# The Power of **CITIZENSHIP**

Why John F. Kennedy Matters  
to a New Generation

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**BENBELLA BOOKS, INC.**  
DALLAS, TEXAS

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First hardcover edition October 2013



BenBella Books, Inc.

10300 N. Central Expressway, Suite 530

Dallas, TX 75231

[www.benbellabooks.com](http://www.benbellabooks.com)

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available for this title.

978-1-939529-36-7

Text design and composition by E. Strongin, Neuwirth & Associates, Inc.

Printed by TK

Distributed by Perseus Distribution

([www.perseusdistribution.com](http://www.perseusdistribution.com))

To place orders through Perseus Distribution:

Tel: (800) 343-4499

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*Credit: Photograph by Abbie Rowe, White House Photographs/John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston*

JFK is photographed at his desk in the Oval Office for the first time, January 21, 1961.

# The Kennedy Promise

*“Don’t let it be forgot  
That once there was a spot,  
For one brief shining moment  
That was known as Camelot.”<sup>2</sup>*  
—from the 1960 musical *Camelot*

HALF A CENTURY ago, a charismatic young president challenged Americans to be good citizens. He spoke of the need for a new generation to take up the torch of progress and lift the nation to new heights of greatness—daring Americans to be better, to reject the status quo, and to shape a bright future. He envisioned a country and world of increased cooperation, of collective responsibility, where anything was achievable if people saw past their differences and worked together. It was a time of excitement and adventure and promise—a new frontier, he called it—a time for Americans to be bold and courageous.

At the peak of it all, the voice that inspired so much was silenced, leaving the country and future generations wondering what might have been. Yet rather than lament the past, we have the opportunity to look closely at the man and his mission—specifically, the ideals of citizenship he promoted and his belief that there were new horizons for Americans to explore—and to consider how we can revitalize that same quest for greatness today. In a word, Camelot—the quixotic

name we give to John F. Kennedy's presidency and that unique time in our collective past—did not have to end in 1963. We can bring it back today.

The familiar story goes that Kennedy's bold rhetoric swept an entire generation of Americans into careers of public service and government, marking a historical turning point when the prestige of government itself increased and a more robust spirit of service permeated public discourse and action. It was a time when people seemed inclined to pursue careers serving the public interest—when civil service jobs were appealing and engagement in public affairs was deep.

To be sure, informal historical accounts by nature tend to gloss over certain details, and perhaps our collective memory of the trumpet's call to service during the 1960s is too rosy, overdone, and enhanced by the romance of Camelot. But the seeming contrast with modern times nonetheless begs reflection on contemporary understandings of individual responsibility in public affairs and the manner in which our civic discourse seems to have veered so far off course.

To understand the mission, we must first look at the man.

## **The King of Camelot**

John F. Kennedy was not a great president in the traditional sense. His presidency boasted no sweeping legislative achievements. He won no wars. The economy did not boom under his leadership. The soaring rhetoric at times did not match the actions actually taken or offer a true reshaping of the status quo that might vault him into the traditional pantheon of presidential greatness that includes the likes of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and the Roosevelts. Yet when we recall his not quite three years in office, we think of the term the media loves to use for him: Camelot.

When Jacqueline Kennedy first brought to mind the imagery of Camelot in an interview with the journalist Theodore White shortly

after his death, this was perhaps a young widow's attempt to secure for her late husband a place in the rich history of the country he loved. It was also, undoubtedly, a conscious endeavor to cement in the public view the notion that the early 1960s were a magical, transformative time for America and the world under Kennedy's watch. In some ways, her tying Camelot to him was the beginning of the shaping of his legacy—a legacy that has ebbed and flowed with the passage of time but that nonetheless remains a point of fascination for men and women of all ages.

The world loves to remember JFK. Schools and streets have been named for him; parks, buildings, and an airport bear his name. Children are named after him. He is quoted in speeches. His words rest on plaques and refrigerator magnets and bumper stickers. Images of his face adorn book covers, posters, and the walls of college dorm rooms, offices, and people's homes. He is one of only a few figures in American history known simply by his initials—no further identifying factors are needed.

In Washington, D.C., millions of people have visited his grave set high on a hill at Arlington National Cemetery. Indeed, many children have had perhaps their first conscious interaction with Kennedy by visiting the grave and receiving an explanation of the importance of this man with the eternal flame over his final resting place. To hear such explanations offers a telling glimpse into the ways in which Kennedy endures. Some speak of his tragic death; others emphasize aspects of his life; still others wonder, sometimes aloud, what things might have been like for the country and the world had he lived longer and served a second term.

Near the grave is a low memorial wall inscribed with quotations from the president's historic inaugural address. Here, for all time, are words chiseled into granite to offer generations of visitors a chance to bear witness to the guiding principles of the Kennedy presidency. Seeing such beautiful prose on the wall—including lines such as, "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay

any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty,” and “The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it, and the glow from that fire can truly light the world”—makes one wonder: if, over the centuries, our whole civilization were to disappear but for that wall, would it alone tell future historians enough about who we were as a people?<sup>3</sup>

A short drive from the cemetery is the performing arts center that bears his name, which honors the arts in ways commensurate with the manner in which Kennedy promoted them. Not far from the performing arts center is the White House, where the most famous portrait of Kennedy—the painting with the president looking downward over his folded arms—hangs prominently on the first floor.

And still, Kennedy is remembered in other ways. He is honored by the presidential library dedicated to his memory in Columbia Point, Boston. His birthplace in Brookline, Massachusetts, has been designated a national historic site. There is a museum in Dallas near the fateful place he was shot. Items that belonged to the president regularly fetch large sums at auctions (in February 2013, for instance, the president’s Air Force One bomber jacket was sold for \$570,000).<sup>4</sup> Films and television miniseries such as *JFK*, *The Kennedys*, *The Missiles of October*, *Thirteen Days*, and others have depicted his life, aspects of his time in office, and his assassination. New books are published about him every year. Teachers recite words that he spoke. His name enters the national discourse during every political convention and amidst coverage of almost any presidential election debate. The media hovers around Kennedy as subject matter on every five-year anniversary of his birth, death, historic election, and inauguration.

Year after year, we seem only to increase this longing, this devotion to learning more about Kennedy—we want to see him again; we want to understand him from a different angle; we want to be reminded of this time in our collective past. He is, undeniably, an

American icon embedded deeply in our national consciousness. But why? Why this man?

## The Power of Television

There are several explanations for why Kennedy remains as pervasive in American culture as he does. Television, among other media, powerfully captured the essence of Kennedy's presidency in ways that perpetuate our collective remembrance of this period in ways not available to most presidents who preceded him.

The swelling of television ownership during Kennedy's presidency transformed—almost overnight—the manner in which citizens interacted with their president. Just as radio helped connect presidents and citizens in prior years (think Franklin Roosevelt's "fireside chats"), television brought this interaction to a whole new level that invited a different kind of presidential dialogue and a more personalized view of the president. Rather than read about the news or listen to it, individuals could watch it from the comfort of their living rooms and see their president in action. Television lessened the gap that separated the news from the viewer, in turn making the president seem more accessible and more concrete.

Kennedy understood this newfound power, and he wielded it in constructive ways. He used the new medium as a tool to bolster his initiatives and bring his case for a host of issues directly to the American people. This effort included regularly televised press conferences and major speeches captured live with audiences customarily in the millions. These changes enabled him to communicate more effectively with the American people, giving him a forum to convey to the public at large whatever messages he wanted—meaning he could, for example, offer a personal apology to his fellow citizens for his mistakes (such as in the wake of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion), which would ingratiate



him with a sympathetic electorate; convey the refined tastes and style of the First Lady (such as her televised tour of the refurbished White House), which would add to the perceived sense of nobility many had begun to see; put the weight of his office behind a particular issue (such as the way he handled his landmark civil rights speech) and appear very “presidential” while so doing.

Television had other consequences, too. It meant that the “middle man” role played by the media was altered to become at times simply the medium of delivery rather than a curator of the message. Instead of receiving condensed versions of speeches and positions articulated by a president in newspaper articles and radio broadcasts, viewers could formulate their own opinions about presidential action more directly, more basically, and more immediately. This ability permitted a more intimate exchange between the president and the average citizen—leaving room for a more personal interpretation of the president’s message. Kennedy therefore became a tangible figure to the electorate—perhaps the first truly tangible president in the sense that his image was regularly broadcast into the homes of Americans and, in consequence, he became universally recognized in his role as president, his image cemented in the minds of viewers in ways images of other presidents had not been.

Though we revere men such as Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln, we do not feel the same connection to them that we feel with modern leaders—those who have joined us in our living rooms. We don’t know what these great men of the past were truly like, or whether they were even likable. What we know about them is based on what others have told us about their words and deeds. They remain impersonal; relics of history whose impact on our lives no doubt remains strong but nonetheless distant.

The prevalence of television also dramatized the Kennedy assassination and its aftermath in ways that fortified public perception of the late president. Television enabled the news of his death to spread faster than any other bit of news had been relayed perhaps in history up to

then. When Walter Cronkite's live early afternoon broadcast relayed the sad news from Dallas, it was so momentous, so earth-shattering, that as the message was conveyed, an entire generation of Americans' lives stopped and became frozen in time forever. Indeed, news of the assassination shocked a generation the way the bombing of Pearl Harbor had done and the way another generation would be so heavily affected by the events of September 11.

Two days later, Americans watched as Lee Harvey Oswald was murdered live on television by nightclub owner Jack Ruby while being transported from a Dallas police station to a county jail. Events were spinning out of control and seemed so far-fetched, so foreign, that they bordered on the imaginary.

In the wake of the assassination was the state funeral for the slain president—intricately modeled after the state funeral conducted for Abraham Lincoln at the First Lady's request—again broadcast live for the country and world to see, allowing all to agonize with the young widow (Jackie was thirty-four) as she marched with the late president's surviving brothers; to cry when the president's three-year-old namesake famously saluted his father's coffin as it passed him by, a salute captured for all time by the rolling cameras; to grieve for the young daughter, just shy of her six birthday, who seemed on the cusp of understanding at least the permanence of the tragedy, that her father would not be coming home. The country was heartbroken, and these dreadful images were seared deeply and eternally into the American consciousness.

Later, the existence of the famous Zapruder film—which caught the assassination live on camera from the amateur hands of an innocent bystander—became public, and soon Americans could actually watch the haunting images of the murder: the slow progression of the presidential limousine; the gunshots; the president clutching his throat; the chaos surrounding the motorcade; Jackie climbing onto the back of the car to retrieve what was apparently a piece of her husband's scalp; Secret Service agent Clint Hill sprinting toward the

First Couple and hitching himself to the car for the ride to Parkland Hospital, where they hoped that emergency medical assistance would prevent the dreaded fears from becoming reality. Even fifty years later, viewers of the film are instilled with the impossible desire of somehow stopping the motorcade—wishing that they could only press “pause” on the videotape, or speed up Kennedy’s car, or avoid the turn onto Elm Street, or offer a warning, or cancel the trip to Dallas altogether—a trip Kennedy made only begrudgingly in an effort to assuage tensions that had arisen among warring factions of the Democratic Party in Texas.

Then the conspiracy theories spread, as countless people questioned the claim that Oswald had acted alone. Was it the enemies the Kennedys had made in the CIA? Hoover’s people at the FBI? The Soviets? The Cubans? The Italian Mafia? Oil interests? A disgruntled civil rights opponent? Some sort of “divine retribution,” as Lyndon Johnson put it, for allegedly condoning the murders of foreign heads of state (Raphael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic and Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam)?<sup>5</sup> The subsequent release of the Warren Commission’s report seemed dubious to many, generating a whole new slew of theories. All of these events had the collective impact of securing a certain kind of immortality for Kennedy that may never fade.

## **The Kennedy Mystique**

While television captured images of Kennedy, including the assassination, it also highlighted the youth and vitality he and his family exuded that in turn created an aura of royalty for the president and his family. At forty-three, he was the youngest person ever elected president (Theodore Roosevelt became president at age forty-two by virtue of William McKinley’s death). By nature of his age, he remains one of the few presidents who had very young children in the White House

(even the children of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama were not quite as young as Kennedy's were at the time). Images of Kennedy playing with his children in the Oval Office—including John Jr. hiding underneath his father's desk, and Caroline skipping around the perimeter of the room while the president clapped his hands and encouraged her—resonated deeply with an adoring public, as did Americans' fascination with Jackie's chic styles and sophisticated taste. Likewise, there was the Kennedys' enormous wealth, their good looks, and popular images from the family estates in Hyannis Port and Palm Beach, where they played games of touch football and sunbathed.

One element of this aura is the profound sense of tragedy associated with the family. Before Kennedy was elected president, he had lost two siblings in plane crashes, and another was kept out of the public eye after a botched brain surgery left her incapacitated. Nearly five years after Kennedy's death, his brother Bobby was killed, and shortly after that, his youngest brother Ted was engulfed in the disaster remembered as Chappaquiddick. Later was a failed presidential run for Ted in which he challenged a sitting president in a primary. One Kennedy cousin was accused of rape in a high-profile court case that brought many family members to court. Other cousins died in accidents, including a drug overdose and a ski crash. Then John Jr.'s plane went down, so the prince of Camelot was gone, too. Were they cursed? All this reinforced the notion that there was something romantic about this family; it all deepened the public's curiosity.

Yet another component of the Kennedy appeal is the nostalgic feeling Americans have for the era that ended in November 1963. The military build-up in Vietnam was already underway, but it was not yet the issue that would tear the nation apart. The wave of assassinations that began with Kennedy, which later included Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Bobby, had not yet begun. Watergate was in a distant future. In the wake of the relative peace and prosperity of the 1950s, Americans felt good about where they were in the early 1960s.

It was a time of movement and action—an almost ineffable sense that America was on the threshold of better times, when a president regularly invoked patriotic motifs like American uniqueness, great national purpose, individual empowerment, and a generational imperative. There seemed to be a kinetic, restless energy offering big goals, common aspirations, excitement, adventure, and pride—a spirit of collective progress that reminded us of our potential, that we can do better—all believable because of Kennedy’s seemingly effortless ability to persuade. His death left people aching for a continuation of these themes, searching to capture this unattainable essence in ways that have kept him in our orbit.

Kennedy’s death was indeed a transformative event. As we look back at this era, the assassination is an exact time we can pinpoint as the culmination of one epoch—an era of peace, progress, hopeful optimism, and American prestige—and the beginning of another—one of war, destruction, reignited racial conflict, and perceived American decline. It was the end of people’s trust in government and general faith in “the system,” and the beginning of distrust, disbelief, and disappointment. The idea of American greatness morphed from a feeling of collective invincibility that united citizens into a cheapened campaign slogan that divided them. Politicians spoke to voters’ fears rather than their hopes. America became a different place.

Americans who lived during this turning point therefore recall Kennedy with fondness—fondness for a fallen leader who inspired them, but also a fondness for where the country had been and seemed to be going—fondness for the sense of innocence that, after JFK’s death, seemed lost. To these individuals, a political candidate’s promise to return to better days implies some sort of homecoming to Camelot—a world where the strong are just, the weak are secure, people are safe, and everyone can partake in national advancement.

## The Kennedy Brand of Citizenship

It's interesting to note how far we as a people have come. The idea of citizenship has existed since the ancient world, and our republic was founded by individuals who sought political inspiration from ancient models—such as those established by the Greeks and the Romans—where engagement in public affairs was not merely an opportunity to participate in one's community but the most basic realization of one's citizenship. Individuals living in the same community had common concerns and therefore needed to act in certain ways not merely for the benefit of their community but for the very preservation of it. Citizens understood that to look after the affairs of their country was to look after their own at the same time, and that serving in public office represented the greatest trust bestowed upon citizens and was viewed as an honor and a privilege—in fact, the highest privilege in society.

Kennedy eloquently gave voice to the modern expression of this concept. In the process, he developed a brand of citizenship that underscored the role of individual citizens in society and the related responsibilities that they must fulfill.

This may seem like an intuitive concept, but to Kennedy, this notion of citizenship was so fundamental and critical that it needed to be emphasized in fresh and practical ways to reshape the means by which individuals thought about their country. Citizenship, in theoretical terms, connotes belonging to a wider community; in concrete terms, Kennedy reasoned, this reality is borne out in the actions individuals take to advance the interests of that wider community. Hence, individual action forms the basis of collective progress, and a leader's job, in part, is to summon the action needed to meet national imperatives. In turn, Kennedy recognized the importance of articulating an inspiring call to service that would encourage people to be good citizens.

In classical times, fulfilling the obligations of one's citizenship meant taking part in commonsense things like defending a community from external threats, or ensuring that food was adequately distributed to all in search of it. In the 1960s, Kennedy endeavored to transform the abstraction of service into a mode of living that went beyond the basics of merely preserving community life. This meant challenging Americans to consider not only what role they could play in the quest for communal advances, but also, on a more fundamental level, to recognize the interrelatedness of their existence—that the actions of one can affect those of others; that there are indeed issues of common concern; that being a good citizen requires us to do something for someone else.

This brand of citizenship was not based merely on the well-established rights of the citizenry—the right to vote or the right to free speech, for example—but on the obligations that come hand in hand with those rights. In other words, in return for the privilege of being a citizen, one must live in certain ways and fulfill certain prescribed responsibilities. This means that being a good citizen is not merely having a job or taking care of one's family; it is about taking action to help others and improve one's community or even the world. We are not simply individuals who live in the same place; we are people with collective hopes and dreams with obligations to one another. The Kennedy era was a time when we felt this way, a time when the popular culture could, without embarrassment, extol the qualities of courage and public-mindedness that in ways large and small were not uncharacteristic of the era.

## **The Citizenship Gap**

In recalling Kennedy's emphatic inaugural declaration that "the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans," we may consider starkly different sets of values between that generation and this one in

terms of how we view the role of government and public servants generally. Today we live in an era that almost devalues these elements of a successful democracy. Our discourse lacks civility, and we regularly seem to fail at having a genuine, constructive debate without keeping political tallies and seeking to destroy those who don't share a particular view. We mock people who seek public office; we are suspicious of their motives and often appear eager to read about their failures. In fact, to call someone a "politician" is undoubtedly an insult intended to suggest insincerity and an affinity for *quid pro quos* of some kind. We seem to define who we are on the basis of whom we vote for. We've lost some of that sense of "all for the common cause" that Kennedy stressed. Our discourse suggests in many cases that we do not actually see one another as equals—that someone's views, if disagreeable, can make him or her of less value to society. At times, we seem nearly blind to our common humanity, ignoring the uniting factors that should define us, such as our hopes and fears and common concerns as people who compose the same community.

Our politicians have helped foster this environment with their fanatic loyalty to party and seeming inability, or unwillingness, to compromise or even hold a dignified exchange of ideas. But we seem also to have let this spirit permeate other aspects of public life that highlight our differences and promote a "me first" mentality we cannot afford in these challenging times—when individuals place private comfort above public gain, people resent the beliefs and values of others, and we are less interested in the plight of our neighbor. In short, we have a "citizenship gap" that speaks to the difference between who we are as a people and who we aspire to be—it is a distinction between the values Kennedy expressed and the values we actually promote.

We can do better. We can refocus our efforts and retool our creative energies and refashion our commitment in favor of a renewed national purpose. We can revive the prestige of government and increase emphasis on the critical need for public service. We can nurture individual

achievement without sacrificing our devotion to public betterment. We can change the tenor of our political debate. We can harness what Martin Luther King Jr. labeled during the Kennedy presidency as “the fierce urgency of now” to cultivate a new national spirit.<sup>6</sup>

We sometimes hear that these efforts will be hopeless so long as our perceived adversaries do not adopt more enlightened positions. A more civil discourse will promote such enlightenment. But by the same token, each of us must also look inward and assess our own positions—to see whether we, too, can be more enlightened. For every thoughtful citizen who cherishes what America stands for, and what America aspires to be, has an obligation to look beyond the prism of the present and assess what he or she can do to further national progress—and this effort begins at home.

What we need is a rededication to the tenets of good citizenship. It requires individual responsibility and accountability; it demands courage and sacrifice; it asks for much more than it promises. But it can be done. In fact, fifty years ago we had such a rededication, and many people have already embraced this spirit today. In studying this effort—in interpreting its foundation and meaning—in seeking to understand what impact it had a generation ago—we will be armed and inspired to seek a better and more hopeful world. Looking back at Kennedy in this way is not hero worship or demagoguery; it is a framework that can be used to help us regain the great national purpose remembered as the New Frontier. Then we can reclaim our rightful place as heirs to the greatest national legacy ever bequeathed in the history of the world, and we can usher in a new era when words such as “patriot” and “citizen” will again be the vernacular of the American people—a time when we each accept the nation’s responsibilities as if they were our own—a time when we each play a role, however small, in building something bigger and better for the next generation to inherit—when we all feel we are doing something to advance the cause of our country.

It may be hard to imagine that the factory worker or the bus driver or the salesman or the attorney approaches his everyday affairs with

his president in mind or thinking that he is doing his country's work. Harder still is it to picture an individual who seeks merely to provide for his family thinking that he is bearing the burden of his citizenship each time he enters his office. But there was a time, perhaps, when we felt that way. Or perhaps we want to believe that there was a time when we felt that way, because it means that we can feel that way again—and we need this spirit.

The Kennedy ethos suggests that such action—such ordinary action—collectively provides the thrust of necessary generational movement, and it is this thrust that brings us closer to perfecting the ideals present at the birth of the republic.

### ***Atticus Finch***

The notion of everyday heroism is personified artfully by Gregory Peck's Academy Award-winning portrayal of Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a story about tolerance and racial injustice, which was released during Kennedy's presidency. Finch is a small-town lawyer with little money but ample courage and a strong sense of duty. When told by the local judge that he is considering appointing Finch to defend Tom Robinson—a black man wrongly accused of raping a white woman in 1932 Alabama—Finch does not hesitate, despite the inevitable threats and intimidation he is sure to endure from the local white community. When reminded by the judge of the steep sacrifice that would lie ahead, including risk to his reputation and therefore his livelihood, Finch responds without hesitation: "I'll do it."<sup>7</sup>

Atticus Finch is in many ways a worthy representation of what Kennedy was asking Americans to do. He was asking people to place the public good above self-interest—he was asking people to embrace a code of honor and morality that spoke to their sense of community. This is the concept underlying his famous call to action; the idea that service could be an everyday aspect of life. And in this regard, ordinary people can do extraordinary things.

Atticus Finch's decision to defend Tom Robinson is emblematic of how a person with an everyday job can play his part in the pursuit of progress. When citizens behave in these ways—when citizens place the public interest ahead of private comfort—they pave the way to achievement and improvement and live up to their responsibility to ask what they can do for their country.

In the film, Atticus Finch voices justification for his actions that fulfill the necessity of service highlighted by Kennedy. In teaching his daughter about justice and equality, Finch instructs: “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb inside his skin and walk around in it.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, as Kennedy would later say in another context, “Who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place?”<sup>9</sup> We are all connected, this idea implies. We should treat others as we would wish to be treated. Our freedom and future are bound up with the fate of those who surround us. Therefore, we serve the public interest.

As president, Kennedy did not claim authority over everything in daily life, but he did ask people to accept responsibility over their own lives and to direct their efforts in productive ways. Such was the depth of the need for citizenship in those times, and Atticus Finch serves as a heroic reminder of the citizenship qualities that Kennedy sought to elicit.

### ***A Generational Imperative***

A key element of citizenship, the Atticus Finch story makes clear, is embracing the burden of these responsibilities, particularly in the context of generational change. Previous generations earned the country we inherited at great expense, including the sacrifice of their comfort, their pleasures, and in many instances, their blood. Brave and selfless men and women in our generation have done the same. Such efforts have not been for the self-indulgence of ensuing generations, but as

part of a growing foundation upon which future improvements can be made.

This is why, in his inaugural address, Kennedy instructed that the torch had been passed to a new generation. He was sounding the trumpet's call not as a declaration of newfound privilege but as one of newfound responsibility. He was reminding his fellow citizens, as he said later in the speech, that "the graves of young Americans who answered the call to service surround the globe," and therefore, the country he and his fellow citizens loved required their best efforts. "We shall pay any price, bear any burden."<sup>10</sup>

This doctrine—this brand of citizenship—is the most fundamental element of the themes of Kennedy's presidency and the initiatives he sought to advance. It is the underlying premise upon which all actions were based. All can contribute—all are expected to participate in ways that benefit the wider community.

These ideas advanced a related point: that there is a distinction between what is legally permissible and what is morally justified, and that to fulfill the duties of citizenship—both at home and abroad—individuals and nations must meet both of these standards in their actions. Hence, the quest for civil rights at home during Kennedy's presidency was not merely about changing law but about accepting a higher law that reflected moral truth; those displaying prejudice breached the law *and* their duties of citizenship. Similarly, in a global context, the construction of the Berlin Wall was not illegal, but it reflected a violation of the moral code underpinning world order, signifying a failure of the Soviet Union to fulfill its obligations toward the international community. In effect, Kennedy was crafting a new American social contract that inspired citizens to fulfill a calling higher and more encompassing than their legal obligations. This thrust would be used to guide individual thought and action.

This meant that Kennedy's aim, as leader of a free society, would be not only to summon these efforts, but also to create a social climate filled with patriotism and pride. One must feel pride in one's

country in order to be inspired to serve it. One must be proud of national efforts in order to support them. One must love his country to accept sacrifice on its behalf. Sending a man to the moon, as Kennedy pledged, would elicit such pride. Restoring the White House would make citizens feel proud of their nation and their leader. Forming the Peace Corps, or protecting democratic interests abroad amidst the Cold War, or helping other nations escape poverty, made people love being American.

When Americans love their country and feel good about its future, Kennedy's paradigm suggested, they are more inclined to do good deeds—they are more likely to accept responsibility in their own lives that will increase their pride and increase their willingness to make personal sacrifices. The promise of better days ahead, based on these efforts, invites an atmosphere of shared optimism, a desire to cooperate, a sense that we can work together to make this world better. Hence, we treat one another with more respect. We are more willing to hear a different point of view. We are more tolerant. We are better positioned to achieve individual and national success.

A study of the major episodes of the Kennedy presidency reveals the depth of these themes, which he began articulating to the American people in his bold election campaign in 1960. But the concept of citizenship as a focal point in his life had been evolving for Kennedy for some time—before he was elected to public office, and even before he served heroically in the Navy in World War II. People and events molded the man we remember—experiences that clarified the mission he would seek to achieve.

And now, as we proceed further into the twenty-first century, we grapple with new challenges and new problems scarcely envisioned during Kennedy's time. Yet in studying his presidency—in learning what it meant to be a pioneer in the New Frontier—we can perhaps increase our own understanding of citizenship and what contemporary standards of such citizenship require from each of us in our daily lives. In turn, we might replicate some of the patriotic verve in our time that

made the Kennedy years as seemingly adventurous as they were half a century ago. This country is ready, indeed poised, for a revival of the themes that have always made it great; it will be up to the new generation of Americans to make this happen.

