

John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1917–1963)

John F. Kennedy was the second of nine children born to Joseph and Rose Kennedy. He was the first Irishman and the first Catholic to hold office as president of the United States. Named after his grandfather, John Francis Fitzgerald, mayor of Boston, he was nicknamed Jack. A sickly child, he contracted scarlet fever and other maladies, and was administered the last rites three times. His father, Joseph Kennedy, was driven to overcome the stigma of being an Irish Catholic. He became a millionaire and wanted his sons to enter public office. The oldest son, Joe Junior, handsome, athletic and personable, seemed like the most likely choice, in comparison to his sickly younger brother Jack who was bookish and withdrawn. Jack attended Choate Boarding School for boys and excelled in history and English, his favourite subjects, but was better known for his unruly behaviour and lack of ambition. His father reprimanded Jack: "I will not be disappointed if you don't turn out to be a real genius, but I think you can be a really worthwhile citizen with good judgment and understanding." Jack attended Princeton University but was forced to withdraw after contracting Addison's disease. He had recovered by 1936 when he joined Joe Junior at Harvard. In 1937 Joseph Kennedy became ambassador to England (an unusual choice considering he was an avowed Anglophobe.) Jack took an instant interest in European politics and when war broke wrote

a best seller *Why England Slept* (1940). Joe and Jack enlisted in the Navy. Joe became a pilot and went to Europe hunting U-boats; Jack to the Pacific as the skipper of the torpedo boat P.T. 109; sunk by the Japanese in 1943. Seriously injuring his back he nevertheless managed to avoid capture, saved his crew and was decorated for bravery and leadership. Joe was killed in 1944 flying on a secret mission. Post-war Jack ran for Congress in 1946 and served three terms. In 1952 he was elected as Senator from Massachusetts. In 1953 he married Jacqueline Bouvier. They had two children, Caroline (1957) and John Jr (1960). In 1956 he was nearly selected as vice-presidential candidate. In 1957, recovering from back surgery, he wrote the Pulitzer Prize winning *Profiles in Courage* (although a co-author was confirmed in 2008) In July 1960 he was nominated as the Democratic Party's candidate for the presidency, and became President, defeating Richard Nixon. The election was notable for featuring the first nationally televised debate. President Kennedy (JFK as he was known) was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963. The events surrounding JFK's assassination remain a source of historical controversy, speculation and debate 50 years on.

