

1000 ELECTRIFYING DAYS

Fifty years after John F Kennedy's assassination, Wellington political scientist NIGEL ROBERTS shares his personal encounters with the highly inspirational US President.



It is often claimed that people remember where they were when they heard about the assassination of President John F Kennedy. I know exactly where I was on November 22, 1963. It was a Friday. Fifty years later, November 22, 2013, is also a Friday.

Although Lee Harvey Oswald shot Kennedy during a lunch-hour motorcade through the streets of Dallas, it was evening when I heard the news on the radio in the London flat I was staying in. I was shocked.

Less than four months earlier, I'd arrived in Britain after spending a year as an American Field Service scholar in the United States. During that time, I had been privileged to see Kennedy in person twice, as well as countless times on television. I was a student with an intense interest in politics,

and the 35th President of the United States made a huge impression on me.

I first saw Kennedy on Friday morning, October 19, 1962. He was campaigning in Cleveland, the largest city in Ohio. It was a sunny autumn day and thousands of people – I estimate 10,000 or more – had flocked to a large square in the centre of the city to hear the President speak in support of Democratic Party candidates in the mid-term elections

(for all the members of the US House of Representatives and a third of the Senate, plus a host of state and local offices).

The crowd was good-natured. A man with a car shaped like a bowling pin had erected a large sign saying, "Welcome Mr President", and Kennedy campaigned vigorously. I took a photograph of him – the first picture I ever took of a politician. The President was miles away and I could barely see him through the crush of people in front of me.

CRISIS, WHAT CRISIS?

Later that afternoon, Kennedy left Ohio and flew to Illinois for further engagements on the campaign trail. The following morning, however, it was announced that the President had an "upper respiratory infection" and he returned to Washington, DC. At the time, only a handful of people knew that the day I saw Kennedy campaigning





American commuters on November 22, 1963.

in Cleveland was, in fact, day four of the “Thirteen Days” of the Cuba missile crisis.

The world learnt about the crisis the following Monday evening, October 22, when Kennedy addressed the nation – and, in reality, the world – in a live television broadcast. I was having dinner at the home of the American Field Service chapter chairperson in Kent, Ohio. We stopped eating to watch the President speak.

It was the most dramatic and compelling television broadcast I have ever seen. Kennedy outlined the course of events behind the build-up of Soviet missiles in Cuba. He dissected the misleading assurances he’d been given by Soviet spokesmen, and I can still hear his Boston-Brahmin voice saying, “That statement was false” – not just once, but several times.

As the speech progressed, it did not seem beyond the bounds of possibility that it

would conclude with an announcement of war – maybe even nuclear war. Thankfully, though, Kennedy and his advisers opted instead for “a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba”.

Six days later – on day 13 of the crisis – the leader of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, announced on Radio Moscow that the his country’s missiles would be removed from Cuba.

Historian Arthur M Schlesinger Jr described Kennedy’s decision as “a thought of breathtaking simplicity and ingenuity”.

CASE STUDY IN DECISION-MAKING

Not surprisingly, we now know a lot more about the Cuba missile crisis than we did in 1962. As a political scientist, I’ve taught university students about the crisis because it’s a case study in decision-making. Two key lessons stand out – and they apply equally well both to government policy formation and to the way we run our own lives.

In the first place, Kennedy insisted he heard alternative views and differing opinions. He was highly aware – partly because of his own administration’s disastrous handling of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in early 1961 – that it was all too easy for government officials and advisers to fall prey to “group think”.

The President’s brother, Attorney-General

Bobby Kennedy, played a crucial role in this regard. One of the President's biographers, Theodore Sorensen, has described Bobby Kennedy's "constant prodding, questioning, eliciting arguments and alternatives and keeping the discussions concrete and moving ahead". John F Kennedy was determined to avoid any action that "might escalate the Soviet Union into a nuclear war".

A second valuable lesson from the President's handling of the Cuba missile crisis relates to letters he received from Chairman Khrushchev. On November 26 – the 11th day of the crisis – Kennedy received a long and rambling letter in which Khrushchev said "war is our enemy and a calamity for all".

Kennedy and his advisers thought this line in the letter offered hope that the crisis could be resolved peacefully. But the following day they were dismayed to receive another letter from Khrushchev suggesting a course of action the US simply could not follow. In what historian Arthur M Schlesinger Jr has described as "a thought of breathtaking simplicity and ingenuity", Kennedy decided to "ignore the second Khrushchev message and reply to the first".

These are also telling examples of the way we should run our lives. In a speech I gave at a graduation ceremony at an Australian university six years ago, I deliberately drew on the lessons of the Cuban missile crisis and offered the following advice to students getting their degrees: "Don't rush in; think things through first. Let your ideas mature. Don't press 'Reply all' in anger." Kennedy and his advisers used these techniques to pull the world back from the nuclear brink in 1962; we can all still use them today.

"FUTURE LEADERS" OF NEW ZEALAND

The second time I saw Kennedy was at the White House on July 18, 1963. I was one of 2500 American Field Service students who gathered on the south lawn of the executive mansion to hear him. When Kennedy appeared on a dais in front of us, he began by saying, "You are not the quietest group that has come to visit us at the White House!" The resultant roar of approval and laughter was deafening; later, some of the students mobbed the President when he finished his speech.

On the White House lawn on that hot summer's day, Kennedy stressed to us that a judgment had "been made that you will be among the future leaders of your country". With regard to New Zealand, the President was certainly right.

Kiwi teenagers at the White House that day included some people who would go on to be high achievers. Mary Anne Thorpe from Gisborne was there; she's now better



known as Dame Anne Salmond, the 2013 New Zealander of the Year. Margaret Gibson later became Margaret Evans, mayor of Hamilton for nine years. Diana Shand from Culverden went on to serve on the Canterbury Regional Council and the Human Rights Commission.

Blair Badcock from New Plymouth became a successful university teacher and geographer in Australia; and Helen Marieskind, originally from Christchurch, has had an active career in education and politics in the US. Timi te Heuheu – the Ngati Tuwharetoa leader who was married to former National Party Cabinet minister Georgina te Heuheu – was another member of the enthusiastic throng

of foreign-exchange students that President Kennedy addressed on July 18.

It is an interesting reflection on the values of the era – fully half a century ago – that Kennedy envisaged the possibility that some of us might eventually return to the US as a leader of our country "or, even more importantly, as a First Lady". He couldn't foresee a female political leader because politics was almost exclusively a man's game in 1963. For example, when Kennedy spoke to us there were only two women in the 100-member US Senate, and across the Pacific there were just four female MPs in the 80-member New Zealand House of Representatives.

However, the President's main message to us was he hoped that when we went home, "you will be a friend of peace: that you will desire to see goodwill among all nations" and you will stand "for a fair chance for everyone".





Clockwise from far left: Kennedy and wife Jacqueline in New York; with Khrushchev in 1961; the Kennedy family at the funeral; Kennedy addresses American Field Service students, including Nigel Roberts, in 1963.



TWO CRUCIAL KENNEDY IDEAS

These two themes – peace and a fair chance for all – were the two crucial ideas that dominated Kennedy's brief "Thousand Days" presidency. On two consecutive days, on June 10 and 11, 1963, less than six weeks before I saw the President on the White House lawn, I saw him give two of the most significant televised speeches of his life. Together, the two speeches are the apex of his administration.

The first speech was an open-air commencement address (the term used by Americans for a graduation speech). It was delivered on a sports field at the American University in Washington, DC. It was about a strategy of peace – for the US, for the Soviet Union and for the world.

"Let us not be blind to our differences," said the President, "but let us also direct attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved." He continued by pointing out

that "if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity".

Crucially, this speech was not long on promise and short on action. Towards the end of the speech, he took the world by surprise when he announced that "high-level discussions will shortly begin in Moscow looking toward early agreement on a comprehensive test-ban treaty". The President also declared that "the United States does not propose to conduct nuclear tests in the atmosphere so long as other states do not do so".

"One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs are not fully free".

The world had stepped back from the nuclear precipice, and – seated in the Treaty Room of the White House – Kennedy signed a test-ban treaty into law seven short weeks before he was killed in Dallas.

"THE MOST FAR-REACHING CIVIL RIGHTS BILL"

The next night, Kennedy addressed an equally pressing problem at home. In response to Alabama Governor George Wallace's attempts – which, famously and fatuously, included standing in the school-house door – to deny James Hood and Vivian Malone, two young African-Americans, admission to the University of Alabama, Kennedy spoke to the nation on television.

"It ought to be possible," Kennedy said, "for every American to enjoy the privileges of being American without regard to his race or his colour ... But this is not the case."

Sensibly, the President pointed out that the problem was not confined to the South. "This is not a sectional issue. Difficulties over segregation and discrimination exist in every city, in every state of the Union ...

"One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves," he noted (it was almost exactly 100 years: the Emancipation Proclamation was issued by Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863), before adding, "yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free."

Kennedy concluded his June 11 televised address to the nation by saying, "Next week I shall ask the Congress of the United States to act, to make a commitment it has not fully made in this century to the proposition that race has no place in American life or law."

True to his word, on June 19 President Kennedy sent Congress what Theodore Sorensen has described as "the most comprehensive and far-reaching civil rights bill ever proposed".

Five months later, the President was dead, but Lyndon Johnson – Kennedy's Vice President and successor as President – signed the Civil Rights Act on July 2, 1964, after it had been passed by both the House of Representatives and the Senate. And by the time Johnson (widely known as LBJ) signed the Civil Rights Act, I was studying political science at university, inspired by what I had learnt in America and by the young President I'd seen and heard. ■

Nigel Roberts is adjunct professor of political science at Victoria University.

For a preview of a new dramatisation of the JFK story, Killing Kennedy, see page 64.