

From VOA Learning English, this is As It Is. I'm Caty Weaver.

Fifty years ago today, the United States lost President John F. Kennedy. The president was shot and killed during a visit to Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963. His death shocked Americans and people around the world.

President Kennedy was 46 years old. He was the youngest man ever elected president. He served only 1,000 days in office. Yet many Americans remember him as a great and beloved leader.

Today on As It Is we report on the life of John F. Kennedy. VOA National reporter Jim Malone will join us in the studio to help us better understand Kennedy's life, career and tragic death.

"And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you -- ask what you can do for your country."

John Kennedy was elected president in 1960. It was a close battle between the Democratic Party senator from Massachusetts and the Republican nominee Vice President Richard Nixon.

The new president was just 43 years old. His wife, Jackie, was a beautiful, stylish and cultured young woman. She quickly captured the hearts of Americans and others. In fact, she had such an effect on the people of France during a presidential visit to that country that her husband later joked about it.

“I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris, and I’ve enjoyed it.”

The Kennedys with their children, Caroline and John Jr., were the kind of family people dream of having. Their years in the White House were later likened to Camelot -- the imaginary castle and court of King Arthur.

Thurston Clarke is a historian. He wrote two books about John F. Kennedy. He describes a famous photograph that captures the romance between John F. Kennedy and his wife Jacqueline.

“...and he gets off the helicopter in Hyannis Port and she rushes up and they throw their arms around each other and give this incredible hug.”

In truth, the Kennedys had a complex relationship. John Kennedy had relationships with other women while he was married.

“For many years, she had to pretend that her marriage was perfect.”

President Kennedy faced difficult foreign policy decisions during his less than three years in office. The United States and the Soviet Union were in the midst of a cold war. John Kennedy came to office with the goal of fighting Communism. He suffered early in his term with a failed invasion of Cuba. But his public image recovered during a visit to Germany. In Berlin, Kennedy became famous for a speech denouncing Soviet Communism.

Later, he ordered a naval blockade of Cuba in an effort to stop the shipment of Soviet missiles to the island. He successfully persuaded the Soviet Union to remove the missiles already there and disarm the weapons sites.

Kennedy’s creation of the PeaceCorps and his support of the space program were major victories at home during his presidency. Kennedy also helped move forward civil rights efforts.

VOA's national reporter, Jim Malone, researched and produced an extensive program on President Kennedy for the 50th anniversary of his death. Our own Christopher Cruise spoke with Jim to find out what he learned about America's 35th president.

Jim, where were you when you heard that the president had been shot?

I was in 3rd grade in an elementary school in Massachusetts. I remember the reactions of family members, especially my parents. When you're young, I think, that has an incredible impression on you: when you see your parents get sad, when you see your parents break down in tears, then you know something big is happening. And, of course you realize, over time, it was happening to the whole country.

Kennedy has a special place. A lot of John Kennedy is tied up in the idea of the hope, the promise, and then a leadership example that inspires people to this day and so people still are inspired by John Kennedy. And the fact that he was struck down in the prime of life: all the photographs, all the films, show him in the prime of his life. It's almost as though there's a moment frozen in time.

And a deep and dispassionate look at his presidency would indicate that he probably would not rank in the greatest of presidents.

Most historians tend to rank John Kennedy in sort of the middle categories, in terms of how presidents fare. But, it's interesting. Public opinion polls, to this day, of Americans show he remains one of the most popular and that many Americans consider him one of the best presidents. Even though John Kennedy served just a little more than a thousand days in office, less than three years and had, as you point out, some serious mistakes early on.

John Kennedy, before he became president, was a young man in a hurry. He had a lot of money. He had a very powerful father who financed his campaign. And he found the key to success early in politics: the use of television, which he used very effectively.

In your reporting what did you learn about John Kennedy that you didn't know from years of being exposed to this?

You could see, through the reading I did, and just watching numerous films that we have of him and looking at his decisions, how he grew in office. Kennedy came in a little unsure how to deal with the great threat of the time, which was the Cold War, the Soviet Union. And he was determined to see if he could do something about Fidel Castro in Cuba. That proved to be a failure.

The counterpoint to that comes two years into his presidency, a little more than that, by his very expert handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis and being able to find a way to bring the United States and the Soviet Union a step back from nuclear war...which was a real possibility at that time when the Russians had put missiles into Cuba...a great threat to the United States.

So, Kennedy comes into office, inexperienced, but learns on the job, and toward the end of his presidency was able to complete a limited test ban treaty on nuclear weapons with the Soviets.

It looks like you've interviewed historians; professors; members of the Kennedy family; Clint Hill, the Secret Service agent. Is there anybody out there you didn't interview and wanted to? It seems like people are more accessible now than they were.

I'm very happy that we spoke with Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, who is the eldest child of Robert Kennedy, who was John Kennedy's brother; later assassinated, himself, in 1968. I was surprised that, after all these years, it still can strike an emotional chord.

And Kathleen Kennedy Townsend was surprisingly emotional. To the point where she could hardly bring herself, when talking about the assassination, to say that John Kennedy had been killed. She actually stumbled over the word.

So, this was a revelation. This time in our history was poignant. And, 50 years have gone by. But for those who remember it, it can seem like it was yesterday. And for those who had a personal involvement with it, or a personal connection to it, the memories never fade.

Jim, thank you.

You're welcome. Thank you.

That was Chris Cruise speaking with VOA National reporter Jim Malone. For a link to Jim's program, go to our website voalearningenglish.com.

And that's all the time we have for As It Is. Join us tomorrow when June Simms has more about President Kennedy's creation of the Peace Corps. I'm Caty Weaver.