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JOHN F. KENNEDY AND THEODORE ROOSEVELT

PARALLELS AND COMMON GROUND, INCLUDING NORTH DAKOTA

By Clay S. Jenkinson

John Fitzgerald Kennedy became the thirty-fifth president of the United States on January 20, 1961. He was forty-three years old, the youngest elected president in American history. Although Kennedy's favorite presidents appear to have been Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams, an examination of Kennedy's understanding of the life and achievement of the other youngest president, Theodore Roosevelt, indicates that they shared more than youth and a belief that America was in a state of stagnancy at the time of their inaugurations.

Roosevelt was just forty-two years old at the time he stepped in to complete the term of William McKinley, who was assassinated on September 6, 1901. Although Kennedy was a Democrat who belonged to a presidential genealogy that includes Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Harry S. Truman, he had a special interest in the Republican Theodore Roosevelt, who shared Kennedy's commitment to a muscular foreign policy, cautiously improved race relations at home, progressive domestic reforms, and a healthier, more strenuous American citizenry. According to British historian Henry Fairlie, the Kennedys and their brain trust modeled their view of an expanded executive branch of government, and an increased presence of the national government in all aspects of American life, on a self-conscious study of Theodore Roosevelt's writings and actions during and after his presidency. In addition, there are also a number of fascinating resonances in the presidential styles of the Kennedy and Roosevelt administrations.

Although Kennedy could not have joined TR in declaring, "I would never have become the president of the United States were it not for the time I spent in North Dakota," he formed enduring friendships in North Dakota. He found special allies in Senator Quentin Burdick and Governor William L. Guy, like Kennedy, a World War II naval veteran and a young Democrat with a family of photogenic and adventuresome children.

Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) and John Fitzgerald Kennedy (1917-1963) were part of large, rambunctious, unusually visible families famous for their pursuit of the strenuous life. Both were writers of books. They read voraciously; both were regarded as speed-readers. They both believed that the country they presided over was in need of bold new leadership after a period of stagnancy and lackluster government. They were both enamored of the idea of frontier, though in this respect Roosevelt, an admirer of Frederick Jackson Turner, looked backward to the formative dynamics of the American experiment,

and Kennedy ("born in this century, tempered by war") looked forward to a new era in which mankind would venture beyond the limits of the established world.¹ Their administrations were noted for a special commitment to the arts. Both of them made the White House a center of intellectual and artistic performance. Both men undertook major renovations of the White House and entrusted much of the supervision to their first ladies. Both were regarded as war heroes, though their service in the wars of their time was limited to one concentrated episode each. They both loved the navy. They were both shot by assassins.

As John F. Kennedy prepared to assume the office of president, he naturally compared himself to some of his predecessors, including the other youngest man to become the president of the United States. Among the papers of Theodore Sorensen, JFK's main speechwriter and trusted advisor, is a set of preliminary notes, made a few days after the November 8, 1960, election, about the kind of inaugural address John F. Kennedy wanted to deliver. Brevity was the dominant theme in the notes. Sorensen wrote, "Count words in Ike '57, FDR '41, Wilson '17, Wilson '13." Then, a few lines later, "Shorten sentences and words," and "Make it the shortest since TR (except for FDR's abbreviated wartime ceremony in 1945)."²

The shortest since TR. Although Theodore Roosevelt's first annual message to Congress on December 3, 1901, was a massive document—almost 20,000 words—his inaugural address on March 4, 1905, was brief, just 984 words. It was oddly out of character for Roosevelt to address the nation in such brevity, particularly after his triumph of winning the 1904 election by the largest plurality thus far in the nation's history. Roosevelt was a man who would manage to give an eighty-four-minute speech after being shot by an assassin on October 14, 1912.

On January 20, 1961, Kennedy delivered the thirteenth shortest inaugural address in American history: 1,366 words. It took him just thirteen minutes, forty-two seconds to deliver, on a cold day after a freak blizzard had nearly shut down the nation's capital. Kennedy's speech is regarded as one of the greatest inaugural addresses in American history. When 137 rhetoric professors in 1999 ranked the top one hundred American speeches of the twentieth century, Kennedy's inaugural was ranked second only to Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech.³ Theodore Roosevelt's 984 words delivered outside on March 4, 1905, are never ranked high. In fact, they have been entirely forgotten, even by Roosevelt scholars.



Both John Kennedy and Theodore Roosevelt brought young and energetic families to the White House. Above, the Roosevelt family in 1903. From left to right, Quentin, Theodore, Ted, Archibald, Alice, Kermit, Edith and Ethel. SHSND 0410-062 Below: President John F. Kennedy, John F. Kennedy, Jr., Jacqueline Kennedy, and Caroline Kennedy with their dogs during a weekend in Hyannis Port, August 14, 1963. Photograph by Cecil Stoughten. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston

Theodore Roosevelt would not seem to be a president that John F. Kennedy would find particularly attractive. Kennedy was a man of elegance and emotional detachment, who preferred a cool display of wit to traditional oratory. Roosevelt was precisely opposite to all of that. Kennedy eschewed enthusiasm, which he appeared to regard as vulgar. Irony mattered more to him than earnestness. He was famously elusive, even to those who had spent significant portions of their lives with him. Roosevelt was as extroverted as any president in American history, including Lyndon Johnson and William Jefferson Clinton. He could be bored but never detached. He threw himself into every arena that he found interesting or necessary, and he was never a man to hold himself back.



He was criticized early in his presidency for letting White House guests call him by his first name. At an Army-Navy football game, he touched off serious criticism when he bounded across the field and jumped over a fence.⁴ He set the record for most number of hands shaken in a single day, at 8,513, in 1907. Roosevelt loved life and held forth with lusty abandon. His wife Edith sometimes joked that she regarded him as her seventh child, and the British ambassador Cecil Spring-Rice, who was his close friend, once told a perplexed foreign diplomat, "You must always remember that the president is about six."⁵

Both presidents were voracious and rapid readers. Both men had sickly youths that led them to read more than many of their contemporaries. In her interview with the journalist Theodore White a week after her husband's assassination, Jacqueline Kennedy said, in the course of a rambling monologue,

History made him what he was . . . this lonely sick boy . . . he sat and read history . . . scarlet fever . . . this little boy in bed for so much of the time . . . all the time he was in bed this little boy was reading Marlborough, he devours the Knights of the Round Table . . . history made Jack that way, made him see heroes.⁶

Young Roosevelt, who suffered from a range of maladies, chiefly life-threatening asthma, cut his teeth on dime novels and the fiction of Mayne Reid, who specialized in highly romanticized tales of the American West. Roosevelt read widely in serious literature, too, and eventually became one of the best-read presidents of the United States. He is reported to have read a book a day all of his life, while John Kennedy was a self-styled speed reader.

Both were authors. Depending on how one counts, Roosevelt wrote between thirty-five and forty books. Although he sometimes dictated to several stenographers more or less simultaneously, Roosevelt is known to have written all of his own books and speeches with little or no help from others. Depending on how one counts, John F. Kennedy wrote three books: *Why England Slept* (1940), a polished version of his senior thesis at Harvard; *Profiles in Courage* (1955); and a slender but passionate volume entitled *A Nation of Immigrants* (1959). Although Kennedy won the Pulitzer Prize for *Profiles in Courage* (awarded

1957), the accusation that he did not write all or even most of his books has dogged his reputation ever since. Kennedy was unusually thin-skinned about the charge that his books were actually written by others. Sorensen remembered, in Thurston Clarke's words, "that nothing in Kennedy's life would make him more angry than the charge that he was not the author of his own book."⁷ Clarke discretely concluded that JFK "dictated his contributions" to *Profiles in Courage*, by which he meant, not the majority of the writing, by far.⁸

Although their personal lives bore some resemblance (love of children, a love of rough family sporting activities, love of being out on ocean water, a very light use of alcohol), in one respect they could not have been more different. Historian Thurston Clarke speaks of Kennedy's "frenetic adultery."⁹ Kennedy had hundreds of extramarital affairs in the course of his short life. He told British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan that if he went without sex even for one full day he suffered from painful headaches.¹⁰ In his most recent book, *JFK: The Last Hundred Days*, Clarke writes that Kennedy's affairs constituted "a womanizing so compulsive and careless that even those who believed they knew him well would struggle for decades to fathom it."¹¹ Theodore Roosevelt was a man so deeply committed to personal virtue that not even his greatest enemies ever alleged extramarital activity. If Kennedy, assuming they had been contemporaries, had revealed to Roosevelt what he said to Prime Minister Macmillan, Roosevelt would certainly have ended any relationship he had with his fellow Harvard graduate, and he might have punched him in the snout.

Theodore Roosevelt was a devoted and even obsessive hunter who killed birds and quadrupeds on four continents. The handling of guns was second nature to him, and he was never afraid to pull the trigger. He owned a small arsenal, and he was constantly writing to gun manufacturers to suggest refinements or order adjustments to the guns he purchased. He believed that hunting was a sign of a manly character, and he had significant doubts about the character of people who abhorred hunting. The Kennedys pursued more decidedly urbane habits and had no interest in hunting. On a visit to the LBJ ranch in Texas Kennedy had been bullied into shooting a deer. Afterward,

“The three most overrated things in the world are the state of Texas, the FBI, and mounted deer's heads.” John F. Kennedy

he said to a friend, "That will never be a sport until they give the deer a gun."¹² Johnson had the head of Kennedy's deer mounted and sent to the White House. When it arrived, JFK said to Jacqueline, "The three most overrated things in the world are the state of Texas, the FBI, and mounted deer's heads."¹³

Both men spent time in North Dakota. Roosevelt fell in love with the badlands of the Little Missouri River valley when he came to Dakota Territory to kill a buffalo in September 1883. Although he never owned a single acre of land in the badlands, he invested in two ranches, and spent a significant portion of the next four years (1883-1887) managing his cattle herds, organizing a grazing association, and playing cowboy in what he regarded as one of America's last frontiers. Roosevelt came to regard the Elkhorn Ranch in western North Dakota as his second home.

John F. Kennedy had a much thinner relationship with North Dakota, which he visited just five times, all in the last six years of his life. On each of these occasions he gave speeches. The most significant of these was a serious and substantive historical lecture on Roosevelt at a symposium at Dickinson State Teachers College (now Dickinson State University) marking the centenary of TR's birth. His address, "The Moral and Spiritual Imperatives of Free Government," was delivered on April 12, 1958.

Theodore Roosevelt Symposium in Dickinson

Between 1957 and 1960, John Kennedy traveled the United States extensively to prepare for the 1960 presidential election. Although he routinely said his only essential interest was being re-elected to the US Senate from Massachusetts, everyone understood he was testing the waters for his 1960 bid for the Democratic nomination for president. Theodore Sorensen wrote, "It was clear to me after the 1956 convention that the presidency had become his primary goal, in politics and indeed in life."¹⁴ Moreover, his remarkable showing in the 1956 Democratic Convention in Chicago had made him one of the most sought-after public speakers in America. According to Fletcher Knebel, a political reporter and novelist, writing in the fall of 1960, "Since the Democratic national convention of August 1956, which blasted him into national view as suddenly as though he had leapt from the wrong launching pad at Cape Canaveral or scored the losing touchdown in the Rose Bowl, Senator Kennedy has given more than 1,000 such speeches. He has been far

and away the most sought-after Democratic orator of the era."¹⁵

As 1958 approached, Congress appropriated \$150,000 for a national observance of the hundredth anniversary of Theodore Roosevelt's birth. Hermann Hagedorn, a Roosevelt biographer, friend, and the director of the Theodore Roosevelt Association, was chosen to be the national chairman of the Theodore Roosevelt Centennial. Hagedorn had first visited the badlands of North Dakota a few months after Roosevelt's death in 1919. While in the badlands, Hagedorn did research for what would become his book *Roosevelt in the Badlands* (1921), and he worked with a film crew to make a documentary about Roosevelt called *Through the Roosevelt Country with Roosevelt's Friends*.

Because Theodore Roosevelt had spent several years in the badlands of Dakota Territory, written and spoken appreciatively about those experiences in four books and a large number of magazine articles, and said, in 1910 in Fargo, that he would never have become the president of the United States were it not for his time in North Dakota, the state of North Dakota took inordinate pride in the life and legacy of the twenty-sixth president. Hagedorn singled out North Dakota for special praise in his final report to Congress about the nation's centennial activities. "No other State came within arm's reach of the extraordinary, ingenious, continuing and brilliantly developed program for the observance that was carried out in and by the State of North Dakota."¹⁶

Dickinson (population 9,800 in 1958) took particular pride in the twenty-sixth president because Roosevelt brought to Dickinson the three desperadoes who had stolen his boat in April 1886 and later that summer delivered the town's first Fourth of July oration. Dickinson was the home of Dr. Victor Hugo Stickney, who had patched up TR's feet after the first adventure and invited him to deliver the Fourth of July speech. With all this in mind, the faculty and administration of Dickinson State Teachers College determined to celebrate Roosevelt's life and achievement by hosting an ambitious centennial symposium.

Dickinson State was nothing if not ambitious. Among the luminaries President Charles E. Scott invited to speak were: President Dwight David Eisenhower; Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Earl Warren, Vice President Richard Nixon, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., and Sherman Adams (the controversial aide to President Eisenhower). None of these well-known Americans was able to attend the symposium.¹⁷

Dr. Edward C. Blackorby was at the time a professor of history at Dickinson State. Born and educated in North Dakota, he earned his M.A. and Ph.D. at the University of North Dakota. After his time in Dickinson he wrote two important books: *Prairie Rebel: The Public Life of William Lemke* (1963), and *Prairie Populist: The Life and Times of Usher L. Burdick* (2001). The Roosevelt symposium was largely Blackorby's initiative. He lectured about Theodore Roosevelt to students and citizens of Dickinson and placed several articles about Roosevelt in the *Dickinson Press*.

At some point early in the process a local Episcopal priest Reverend F.G. (Goldy) Sherrill let the organizing committee know he had potential ties to the nationally popular senator from Massachusetts, John Kennedy. Sherrill had attended the Milton Academy in Massachusetts during the same time as Robert Kennedy, whom he regarded as a friend. On October 8, 1957, Reverend Sherrill wrote to Robert Kennedy, after speaking to him by telephone. Sherrill explained the nature of the Roosevelt symposium, provided some background on Dickinson and western North Dakota, and outlined the five proposed topics for the lecture series. He asked RFK to approach his brother about making an appearance in Dickinson during the TR centennial year.

John Kennedy actually turned down Dickinson State College's invitation in the first instance. On November 27, 1957, he wrote to Sherrill, "I would like very much to come to Dickinson this next year, but inasmuch as I am up for reelection I am concentrating my efforts this coming year on my own State of Massachusetts. Therefore, much as I regret it, it will be impossible for me to accept your very kind invitation." Sherrill persisted. He wrote again to Robert Kennedy ("Dear Bob") on January 3, 1958, suggesting the possibility that Senator Kennedy's visit could coincide with a meeting of the North Dakota Democratic Party. "You never can tell!" Sherrill wrote. "I'm sure that the invitation would stand for us as long as there was a possibility."¹⁸ Sherrill's persistence paid off. In the end, Kennedy agreed to appear in Dickinson in the second week of April.¹⁹

Kennedy wrote to Blackorby on April 2, 1958, just ten days before his appearance. He thanked the historian for sending him a newspaper clipping about Roosevelt's first visit to Dickinson, and informed the symposium director that he had borrowed a copy of Lincoln Lang's *Ranching with Roosevelt in the Badlands* from the library. Lang's book, published in 1926, is one of the best accounts of TR's time in Dakota Territory. It is clear that Kennedy (or his speechwriter Sorensen) had access to Hermann Hagedorn's



In this previously unpublished photograph, John F. Kennedy is greeted at his arrival at the Dickinson airport by the Reverend F.G. Sherrill. *Private Sherrill Collection*

classic *Roosevelt in the Badlands*, from which a number of details of the Dickinson State address were gleaned.

On April 11, 1958, Senator Kennedy, accompanied by Theodore Sorensen, flew into Bismarck, where he gave a speech that evening at a North Dakota Democratic Party fundraising dinner. The following morning, April 12, the senator's small private plane left Bismarck for Dickinson, arriving at the Dickinson municipal airport sometime after 9 a.m. A small delegation of individuals, including Reverend Sherrill and President Scott, met the senator's plane at the Dickinson airport. Sherrill recalls that the welcoming committee borrowed a limousine from a local funeral home to drive the senator from the airport to Dickinson State. "The driver sat on one side and Kennedy on the other, and I was in the middle," he said.²⁰ Kennedy's speech at Scott Gymnasium on the Dickinson State campus was scheduled for 10 a.m.

Sorensen later wrote about the division of duties on these early trips. "Before we got off the plane at each stop, I briefed the senator on who would welcome us. In addition to writing speeches, I did a lot of listening—listening to local politicians, to reporters on the bus, to voters at the edge of crowds, conveying to them his empathy, conveying to him their opinions. When we got back into the plane, I offered him an evaluation of the speech and the crowd

reaction.”²¹

Kennedy felt a particular need to visit places like North Dakota as he contemplated his run for the presidency. According to Sorensen, “As my Christmas present to him in 1956, I had constructed a map of the United States shaded to show his strength in the Vice Presidential balloting. The almost totally blank areas west of the Mississippi made clear the task confronting him if he was to become a national figure and explained the frequency of his visits to small Western and Midwestern states.”²² Kennedy used events such as the Dickinson State symposium not just to get to know people from the farm states of America, but to refine his forensic abilities. At this point in his career, according to Sorensen, “His speech-making style was often not as relaxed as his social presence or his question-and-answer sessions, but he learned to slow down and improved constantly.” Sorensen remembered, “As 1957 became 1958 and then 1959, the senator gave speeches, speeches and more speeches.”²³

The *Dickinson Press* provided what can only be called heroic coverage. After a series of articles building up to the event, the *Press* on Saturday, April 12, 1958, included a banner headline at the top of the front page, above the masthead, that read, “Senator Kennedy Speaking Here at College Today.” According to the *Press*, approximately 1,100 people attended the speech. Reverend Sherrill gave the invocation, and President Scott introduced Hal S. Davies, a member of the national TR centennial commission. Davies in turn introduced Senator Kennedy.

John F. Kennedy’s address to the people of Dickinson was entitled, “The Moral and Spiritual Imperatives of Free Government.” It was a topic that had been suggested to him by the organizers of the symposium, who outlined the nationally-adopted themes of the Roosevelt centennial to all prospective speakers. While the main theme of his speech was a general call to public service, Kennedy carefully localized his remarks at the beginning and the end of his address. Someone, probably Hermann Hagedorn, the author of *Roosevelt in the Bad Lands*, who helped the Dickinson State organizers plan the symposium, had alerted Kennedy that he would by coincidence be speaking on the anniversary of the day in

1886 when Roosevelt brought the three (JFK says two) boat thieves he arrested near Cherry Creek (McKenzie County) on the Little Missouri River to justice in Dickinson. Kennedy also noted it was on that same occasion that Roosevelt met Dr. Stickney, after whom Stickney Hall at Dickinson State was named.

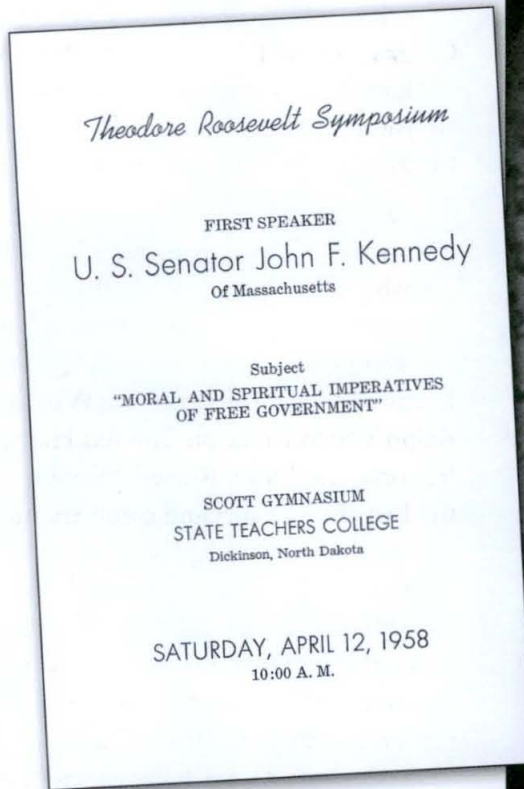
Kennedy’s Dickinson address was the most sustained discussion of Theodore Roosevelt in his career. Someone, probably Theodore Sorensen, had spent a good deal of time researching it. In the course of his speech, Kennedy invoked John C. Calhoun, John Quincy Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Goethe, Longfellow, William Cullen Bryant, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas Hart Benton, Queen Victoria, Lord John Russell, Woodrow Wilson, and the British journalist and commentator Alistair Cooke. Roosevelt wrote a biography of Benton in 1887, and Benton was one of the eight US Senators Kennedy extolled in *Profiles in Courage*. In his address, after describing Benton’s principled distaste for slavery and his willingness to stand up to the corrupt political establishment of his time, Kennedy said, “This is the kind of dauntless, rugged, determined politician Theodore Roosevelt admired, as he rode and wrote in the Dakota Territory.” Most Roosevelt scholars have concluded that TR’s *Thomas Hart Benton* is as much autobiography as genuine biography; that is, TR praised in Benton the qualities he most prized in himself. It may be that Senator Kennedy, who had won the Pulitzer Prize for his exploration of political courage in US history, was praising in Roosevelt qualities he saw, or wished to develop, in himself. The formidable Eleanor Roosevelt had skewered JFK in the 1950s by calling for “a little less profile and a little more courage.”²⁴

Kennedy described Roosevelt’s adventure with the boat thieves in considerable detail.

When it became apparent that a long hard journey of more than two weeks and 200 miles was involved [in marching the thieves to the sheriff in Dickinson], he did not turn back. And perhaps most significant of all, when he apprehended the thieves 60 miles away from the nearest jail and courthouse, he did not reclaim his boat and set them free—neither did he execute them

“The almost totally blank areas west of the Mississippi made clear the task confronting him if he was to become a national figure and explained the frequency of his visits to small Western and Midwestern states.”

Theodore Sorensen



John Kennedy is seated at Dickinson State Teachers College, with school president Charles E. Scott. This program was prepared for Kennedy's speech on April 12, 1958. *Both courtesy of Dickinson State University*



on the spot. This, it turns out, was what they had expected—this is what the circumstances would have permitted him to do without fear of punishment—and this is what the townspeople of Dickinson expressed astonishment that he had not done.

Roosevelt's dogged restraint, said Kennedy, revealed not only TR's character but his understanding of the necessity of the rule of law in American life, including on the wild frontier. "The example of Theodore Roosevelt was an important lesson in the badlands. For it was at that time that the area was passing out of a state of unorganized lawlessness into a condition resembling organized government. There was understandable reluctance in those days to embrace such a move."

Kennedy reminded the folks in Dickinson that Theodore Roosevelt had been invited to give the Independence Day address in Dickinson in 1886, when it was a tiny frontier village. "Looking very young and embarrassed, on a platform in the public square, Roosevelt talked simply, directly, earnestly and emphatically."²⁵ Kennedy quoted highlights from TR's speech—his first great national speech—about the duties and responsibilities of citizenship. He cited the passages that

resonated best with his soon-to-be-immortal words, "Ask not what your country can do for you..." Then he quoted the most famous passage from Roosevelt's speech:

Like all Americans I like big things; big prairies, big forests, and mountains, big wheat fields, railroads—and herds of cattle too—big factories, steam boats and everything else. But we must keep steadily in mind that no people were ever yet benefitted by riches if their prosperity corrupted their virtue. . . . We are not ruled over by others . . . We have the responsibility of sovereigns not subjects.

Kennedy admitted that in studying Roosevelt he was taken aback by some of TR's more dismissive responses to Congress. "Some of these may seem like harsh sentiments," he said, quoting several of TR's diatribes, including "I do not much admire the Senate, because it is such a helpless body when efficient work for good is to be done." He also quoted TR's friend, the political humorist Finley Peter Dunne who, through his fictional character, "Mr. Dooley," defined political leaders as "fine, strong American citizens—with their hand on the pulse of the people and their free forearm against the windpipe."

Kennedy acknowledged that politicians were also held in low esteem in his time. Even President Eisenhower, he said, bristled at an early news conference when he was asked how he liked “the game of politics.” Kennedy said it had not always been so—the Founding Fathers were still highly regarded in American memory.

Echoing Roosevelt, the Bible, and his mother, Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy, the senator then observed that to those to whom much has been given, much will be required. He urged college students to give part of their lives to public service. “I cannot believe that all of this,” he said, “was undertaken merely to give the school’s graduates an economic advantage in the life struggle.” These stirring words were not unique to the Dickinson State address—Kennedy employed this sentence frequently in his campus speeches. At Wittenberg College in October 1960, for example, he said, “This college was not founded and has not been maintained merely to give this school’s graduates an economic advantage in this life struggle. There is a higher purpose.”²⁶ It is clear that JFK enjoyed addressing college and university students. He frequently challenged America’s young people to realize that higher education offered them more than skills and credentials, calling upon them to spend at least part of their lives serving the cause of mankind. In that regard, Theodore Roosevelt was an ideal subject for his address.

Kennedy ended his lecture on an excellent Roosevelt note. He quoted again from TR’s Fourth of July speech. “Citizens of North Dakota,” he said, “heirs to what Theodore Roosevelt called ‘the most glorious heritage a people ever received,’ we who are here today concerned with the dark and difficult task ahead ask once again that you bring candles to help illuminate our way.”

A number of North Dakotans remember Kennedy’s Dickinson appearance well and provide previously unpublished details about the occasion. Roswell Henke remembers that Senator Kennedy told the crowd that the Dickinson State band’s rendition of “The Star Spangled Banner” was the best he had ever heard. Henke, who was then 18, played the baritone saxophone in the band. “He may have been unusually charismatic, but he was still a typical politician,” Henke said.²⁷ Clarence Corneil was a student at Dickinson State at the time. After the speech, he stood in a very long line to shake



President Kennedy and Theodore Sorensen, his main speech writer and trusted advisor, walk across the White House lawn on March 12, 1963. Sorensen accompanied Kennedy on his 1958 visit to Dickinson, North Dakota. Photograph by Robert Knudsen. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston

the hands of the senator from Massachusetts. Just when he finally reached the front of the line, and had actually extended his hand to the senator, Corneil experienced a disappointment that has continued to annoy him for the rest of his life. "My hand was extended and Senator Kennedy's hand was reaching out towards mine, and just then Palmer Aasmundstad [the business manager of the college] literally moved my hand away and escorted Kennedy out of the gym." Corneil says he expressed his "good-humored displeasure" to Aasmundstad for many years thereafter.²⁸

Fay Connell was also a student at Dickinson State in 1958. He recalls standing in a long receiving line to meet Senator Kennedy, following the senator's speech, which Connell says was outstanding. "He was amazing, youthful, good looking, brilliant, outgoing. When I finally got to the front of the line I blurted out, 'If you ever run for President, Senator Kennedy, I plan to vote for you.'" This was perhaps more of a revelation to Connell than to Kennedy. Connell comes from what he calls a long line of conservative ranch Republicans. "Believe me, if I had voted for a Democrat it would have been a first in my family's history. I was just so impressed with him that I found myself saying something I had not really planned to say." When asked if he had indeed voted for John Kennedy in the 1960 election, Connell confessed. "No, I voted for the other guy. I guess you could say I had the distinction of lying to a future president of the United States."²⁹

After the event in Scott Gym, Kennedy attended a luncheon at the Elks Club in downtown Dickinson, where seats were available at five dollars a plate. According to Elks manager Edgar Beyers, 127 people attended the event. The luncheon was dominated by local businessman Theodore Kellogg, who provided a brief history of North Dakota to bring the future presidential candidate up to speed about the nature of the Peace Garden State.³⁰

Senator Kennedy did not give a speech, but in a brief question and answer session he, perhaps predictably, was asked whether he was a believer in state's rights or federal control. With his usual wit, Kennedy "replied that in his experience when persons were opposed to something they talked of 'state's rights,' but when they were seeking something such as a dam, they talked of 'the responsibility of the federal government.'" One can imagine the toothy smile that put an end to his remark, and also the laughter of the small crowd. Then he got more serious and said, as the *Press* paraphrased it, "that rather than a consideration of which authority should predominate, the energies and interest of everyone should center on the 'complicated

problems to be met and which demand that both state and nation give of their best.'" The next ten years, he concluded, will probably be the most critical. One can hear the themes of the 1960 campaign in these remarks, as well as statements that would be echoed in the inaugural address.

At the close of the Elks luncheon, Kennedy turned back briefly to Roosevelt. According to the *Press* account, "In parting, Kennedy mentioned how he had noticed in studying Roosevelt's life what a tremendous force the late president's experiences in the west had had on his thought and action."

Kennedy was gone by 2 p.m. He had been in Dickinson less than five hours. His small private plane took him next to Huron, South Dakota, where he attended a Democratic fundraiser. According to the Associated Press, 1,000 people attended the ten-dollar-per-plate dinner. "On trips with several stops," Sorensen later wrote, "the Senator, after an intensive visit of one state, would sometimes sigh at the prospect of 'starting all over again' in another, meeting new faces and seeking new friends. Yet at the close of each visit he often expressed amazement at the number of men and women willing to devote time away from their jobs and families to help his candidacy, often with no thought and certainly with no assurance of any reward or recognition."³¹

Several pages of typewritten lists of names and addresses of North Dakotans, including citizens of Bismarck and Dickinson, who might be useful in advancing JFK's presidential ambitions are preserved in the archives of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. They were taken from cards compiled by Theodore Sorensen during the April 1958 visit. Included on that list were two of the local political figures who worked tirelessly for Kennedy's nomination and provided local logistical assistance in those early journeys: George McGovern in South Dakota, and in North Dakota, John Lord, who drove Kennedy around Bismarck during his 1958 appearance.³² McGovern's political career is well known, and Lord would make an unsuccessful run for North Dakota governor in 1958. He and Kennedy became friends and wrote several letters back and forth even after Lord's defeat.

In his subsequent letter of thanks to Senator Kennedy, President Scott expressed his appreciation that JFK had been "so generous with your time and energies in spite of the extremely tight schedule under which you are working." President Scott added a postscript to his letter that—at the time—may not have seemed as ironic as it does in retrospect. "I hope you will find it possible to visit with

“President Charles E. Scott and his Symposium steering committee should be commended for their fine job in securing Kennedy as the first speaker of the series.”

Dickinson Press

Vice President Nixon about our Centennial Symposium and encourage him to accept our invitation.” Kennedy and Nixon had served in the House of Representatives together and they belonged to the same freshman class in the US Senate (1952). For many years they were friendly with each other, and even friends. It was not until several years later that Kennedy would say of Nixon, “before he deals, someone had better cut the cards.”³³

On Thursday, April 15, the editor and publisher of the *Dickinson Press*, Sam Burgess, provided a brief editorial comment about Kennedy’s address. When it first became known that the local committee was inviting Kennedy to participate in the Theodore Roosevelt symposium, Burgess had written a comment grumbling that the Massachusetts senator would betray the spirit of the symposium by spouting his brand of New England, East Coast liberalism. Without quite admitting it, he ate a little crow on the April 15 editorial page:

The first lecture of the College Symposium series of five honoring Theodore Roosevelt was successfully staged Saturday with Senator John F. Kennedy as the speaker. Senator Kennedy spoke to a highly interested cross section audience of North Dakota. He spoke with a good knowledge of the life of Roosevelt in a scholarly fashion. The non-partisan address was dotted with amusing subtleties regarding politics and was well received by every member of the audience. President Charles E. Scott and his Symposium steering committee should be commended for their fine job in securing Kennedy as the first speaker of the series. The success of this first lecture almost assures the success of the four which are to follow. The college, Dickinson and the State of North Dakota have already received some very favorable publicity as a result of the Symposium committee and the first lecture.³⁴

The *Dickinson Press* also published the full text of Kennedy’s address on page five of the same edition.

The other four presenters in the symposium delivered

their lectures during the summer and fall of 1958. Howard K. Beale of the University of Wisconsin spoke on May 29, Hermann Hagedorn on August 1,

Secretary of the Interior Fred A. Seaton on September 15, and Governor Theodore Roosevelt McKeldin of Maryland on October 14. In accepting an invitation to speak about “The Individual’s Participation in Government,” McKeldin, widely regarded as a future presidential candidate, also agreed to participate in the dedication ceremonies for the new Theodore Roosevelt National Memorial Park Administration Building in Medora. From Medora, Governor McKeldin was taken to the Elkhorn Ranch by Roger Myers and Fay Connell, students of Dickinson State who had family roots in the Little Missouri River Valley.³⁵

In the final report of the Theodore Roosevelt Centennial Commission to Congress, Hagedorn wrote that the symposium “was born at DSTC [Dickinson State Teachers College], nurtured at DSTC, and presented at DSTC. The credit for its magnificent success is due mainly to the efforts and stick-to-it attitude of DSTC President Charles E. Scott and ‘TR’ Commission Member and DSTC History Professor Dr. E.C. Blackorby.”³⁶ The symposium, Hagedorn concluded, “was undoubtedly one of the major academic highlights of the centennial year. The prestige of North Dakota was greatly enhanced by this project.”³⁷

On January 2, 1960, John F. Kennedy formally announced his candidacy for presidency. One month later, on February 6, he campaigned in Bismarck at a Young Democrats luncheon at the Patterson Hotel and in Jamestown at a Stutsman County Democratic Dinner in the Memorial Building. Kennedy returned to North Dakota to help Quentin Burdick campaign shortly before a special senatorial election that Burdick won by a narrow margin. On September 22, 1960, Kennedy returned to Fargo for less than a half hour to give a brief speech at Hector Airport.

Despite his four appearances in North Dakota in 1960, Kennedy failed to capture the majority of votes in a state that had traditionally voted Republican. Vice President Richard Nixon won 55.4% of the vote, Kennedy 44.5%. Kennedy lost in North Dakota in 1960, but managed to increase the state’s vote for the Democratic candidate by 27, 221 (about 28%) over Adlai Stevenson’s 1956 showing.



Above, the State Dining Room in 1904, at the conclusion of the Roosevelt renovation. The fireplace mantelpiece features the bison Roosevelt specifically ordered. Renovations during the Truman administration replaced the mantelpiece with a plainer version, and the Roosevelt mantelpiece left the White House with Truman, eventually ending in the Truman Presidential Library, where it was copied for the replacement installed by Jacqueline Kennedy. Below, President Kennedy and First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy greeted visitors at the unveiling of the refurbished State Dining Room, standing in front of the refurbished mantelpiece, complete with Roosevelt bison. Alice Roosevelt Longworth, in hat, observed both renovations of the White House. *Photographs courtesy of the Library of Congress.*



The White House During the Presidencies of TR and JFK

When John Kennedy first walked through the White House on the day of his inauguration, January 20, 1961, with his brother Ted and his brother-in-law Stephen Smith, he began turning over chairs and small tables. “Look at this. Reproductions,” he said. “Sears, Roebuck stuff.”³⁹ Kennedy determined to restore the decor and ambience of the White House to the severe dignity of the Age of Jefferson. He put the talented First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy in charge. The Kennedy makeover was more about furnishings and decoration than about structure. Most of the essential structural changes had been made by Roosevelt and in later renovations by Harry S. Truman.

When the Roosevelt family moved into the Executive Mansion in late September 1901, they found the family quarters too overcrowded for their large family. The house was also rat infested. According to TR biographer Kathleen Dalton, “The president joined his sons in rat-chasing during family dinners.”⁴⁰ The Roosevelt renovations, under the direction of famous New York architect Charles Follen McKim, involved major structural changes. Essentially the building designed in 1793-1794 by James Hoban was being restructured for modern use. The office of the presidency had grown dramatically, and modern conveniences were now necessary, especially for a large family of children ranging in age from two to seventeen.

Under McKim’s direction, the executive offices were removed from the second floor of the White House and placed in what were expected to be temporary quarters—the new West



Pablo Casals performs at the White House on November 13, 1961. *Photograph courtesy of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston*

On November 13, 1961, Spanish cellist Pablo Casals performed at the Kennedy White House. He was then eighty-four years old. Casals had last performed in the White House on January 15, 1904, at the age of twenty-eight, when Theodore Roosevelt was president. He ceased his American appearances in 1938 to protest US recognition of the fascist regime of Francisco Franco in Spain, but, sensing that Kennedy represented a new era in American foreign policy, he had been persuaded to break his boycott and appear once more on a White House stage.

The Casals concert was one of the sources of the Kennedy myth—an administration of glamor, taste, artistic sophistication, and court culture. Some who were present at the concert noticed Kennedy fighting to stay awake, and the president later admitted, “Pablo Casals? I didn’t know what the hell he played—somebody had to tell me.”⁴¹ Much of the court culture of the Kennedy White House was the work of Jacqueline Kennedy.

Although John F. Kennedy is widely regarded as a man with a special sensibility to the arts, and Roosevelt as a kind of enlightened man’s man who preferred *Oom pah pah* music to high classical, the fact is that neither of them had much of an ear for fine music. According to biographer Kathleen Dalton, TR mostly “endured” the high musical culture Edith brought to the White House. She vetoed her husband’s preference for fight songs, which she regarded as undignified, at least in that august setting.⁴² According to Thurston Clarke, Kennedy was not really drawn to classical culture or high culture in music. “Kennedy preferred Broadway show tunes but feigned an interest in serious music.”⁴³

Wing. The president's office would be at the center of the West Wing. The original grand staircase was removed to make it possible to enlarge the State Dining Room. Bathrooms were installed on the second floor, the White House got its first elevator, and electrical lights were installed throughout the building. McKim was a brilliant architect but had little interest in preserving historical elements or the original structure of the White House. He made it modern, efficient, more functional, cleaner in design, and in some respects grander, but he made no attempt to restore it to the style of its first inhabitants.

One alteration McKim made did *not* meet with Roosevelt's approval. The two original fireplaces in the State Dining Room had been replaced by a single large fireplace, surrounded by a beautiful new marble mantelpiece featuring lions on each side. Roosevelt ordered the lions removed. Lions do not exist in North America, he argued, and they do not adequately represent the greatness of the American republic. He insisted that they be replaced by the heads of bison, America's greatest quadruped. Bison had a special meaning for Roosevelt. He first visited North Dakota in September 1883 for the express purpose of killing one. That bison trophy is still displayed in his Long Island home Sagamore Hill. McKim dutifully made the changes that President Roosevelt suggested.

In contrast to the work during the Roosevelt years, the Kennedy makeover was more about furnishings and decoration than about structure. Mrs. Kennedy began by creating the White House Historical Association to oversee the redecoration, and to raise funds for the projects she had in mind. She managed to find a large number of authentic early White House furniture tucked away in odd places in the White House, "on loan" in other government buildings, or scattered throughout the country in private hands. Mrs. Kennedy reacquired or restored these pieces whenever possible. The authentic White House furnishings were pieced out using the best available period pieces and carefully considered reproductions. The result was to create the look and ambience of the White House today.

In the famous CBS documentary about her labors (February 14, 1962), Mrs. Kennedy gave special attention to Theodore Roosevelt, quoting a letter from Roosevelt to Congress, and later pointing out in the State Dining Room that:

He [Roosevelt] designed the one thing that is missing here but which will soon be given to us, a superb mantle. McKim and White had designed one with lion's heads, and Theodore Roosevelt

said, no, a lion is not an American animal, so he designed it with buffalo heads of white marble, and McKim and White is now copying that for us and so you will soon see it here to replace this simple molding that was put here in 1948.

That moment came on July 2, 1962, when the new buffalo-head marble mantelpiece was dedicated. One of the guests at the dedication was Alice Roosevelt Longworth, now seventy-six years old. A fixture of Washington life for sixty years, Alice Roosevelt was a living link between the administrations of the twenty-sixth and the thirty-fifth presidents of the United States and a colorful prima donna in both.

The Famous Hike

According to White House Press Secretary Pierre Salinger, Kennedy got the idea of a fifty-mile hike when he discovered a 1908 executive order by President Theodore Roosevelt instructing the marines to undertake a hike of precisely that length. "President Kennedy," Salinger writes, "was a voracious reader and was forever coming up with fascinating bits of information, especially from American history. One day, he ran across a letter written by President Theodore Roosevelt in which the Rough Rider suggested to the commandant of the Marine Corps that it would be a good idea if his men would occasionally take a long hike to prove they were in good physical condition. TR's idea of a good long hike? Would you believe *fifty miles*?"⁴⁴

Kennedy sent TR's letter to his own US Marine Corps commandant David Shoup. Salinger quotes Kennedy as writing, "Why don't you send this back to me as your own discovery. You might want to add a comment that today's Marine Corps officers are just as fit as those of 1908, and are willing to prove it."⁴⁵ On February 5, 1963, the White House issued a short press release about General Shoup's "discovery," and the president's suggestion that Shoup and the White House determine whether the officers and staff could perform the TR test.

Robert Kennedy was the first American to answer President Kennedy's call to action, completing the hike in seventeen hours and fifty minutes, with no advance preparation, through snow and slush in freezing weather, wearing a pair of leather oxford dress shoes. The thermometer peaked at twenty degrees above zero. Four of his aides attempted to walk all fifty miles with him; none managed to do so.

The bespectacled originator of the fifty-mile hike tradition had regarded the challenge as a serious question of national security. Roosevelt, who regarded himself as the exemplar and chief national advocate of “the strenuous life,” decided the US officer corps was becoming effeminate. Roosevelt did not regard the hike as a mere stunt: “In battle, time is essential and ground may have to be covered on the run; if these officers are not equal to the average physical strength of their companies the men will be held back, resulting in unnecessary loss of life and probably defeat.”⁴⁷

Roosevelt’s executive order precipitated an outcry. “The newspapers denounced Roosevelt as a tyrant who followed his mere caprices. Some of the officers intrigued with congressmen to nullify the order. . . . But when the President himself, accompanied by Surgeon-General Rixey and two officers, rode more than one hundred miles in a single day over frozen and rutty Virginia roads, the objectors could not keep up open opposition.”⁴⁸ The TR-era Marine Corps march went ahead as planned. According to Thayer, three naval officers—inspired by their commander in chief—performed the whole fifty-mile hike in a single day.

In 1963 Kennedy’s Marine Corps Commandant General Shoup ordered twenty officers at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, to take the initial march of fifty miles in less than twenty hours. On February 12, 1963, thirty-four officers made the march, led by Brigadier General Rathvon McClure Topkins, who was fifty years old and who limped because of an old shrapnel wound. Meanwhile, the challenge spread beyond the military to become something of a national fad. It spread to the Boy Scouts, high school students, and even a postal worker in Burlington, North Carolina, who completed the hike alone in ten hours and twenty-eight minutes.

John Kennedy, however, proved to be made of less heroic stuff than Roosevelt. According to biographer Richard Reeves, Kennedy’s version of the hike took place at Palm Beach, Florida, where a group of friends and relatives set out to hike the entire distance. “Kennedy followed in a white Lincoln convertible until he got bored,” Reeves wrote. He and the first lady were said to be drinking Daiquiris. At the end of the Palm Beach ordeal, each survivor received a faux “Medal of Honor” and an inscribed tea bag.⁴⁹ President Kennedy was a serious advocate of the strenuous life, but he was no Theodore Roosevelt.

Assassins

John F. Kennedy was shot by an assassin or assassins on November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas, while traveling to a luncheon speaking engagement in an open convertible. He died sometime between 12:30 and 1 p.m. local time. His body was flown back to Washington, DC, where, after an autopsy at Bethesda Naval Hospital, he lay in state first in the East Room of the White House and then in the Rotunda of the US Capitol. Kennedy was buried on a hillside in Arlington National Cemetery on Monday, November 25, 1963. Kennedy’s only known assassin did not live to stand trial. Lee Harvey Oswald was shot and killed on Sunday, November 24, 1963, while being transferred from the Dallas City jail to a county facility. His last declaration before his death about the assassination of the president is that he did not kill Kennedy and that he was nothing more than a “patsy.”

Theodore Roosevelt was shot by an assassin on October 14, 1912, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He was campaigning as the nominee of the Bull Moose (Progressive) Party for an unprecedented third term as president, though he had left office voluntarily in the spring of 1909, after serving seven years and 171 days as president. Like Kennedy, Roosevelt was shot in an open car. There is no doubt that his was a lone assassin, a saloon keeper named John Schrank, who later explained that he was opposed to third terms. Roosevelt slumped in the jalopy into which he had climbed before the shot was fired, said “he pinked me,” and coughed spittle into his palm to determine if he was fatally wounded; blood in his spittle would have meant that the bullet had penetrated his lungs. Insisting, against the urgent pleadings of his handlers, on delivering his scheduled speech, TR said, “You see, it takes more than one bullet to kill a Bull Moose.” Theodore Roosevelt lived another six years after the shooting incident. He died on January 6, 1919, of a pulmonary embolism.

Conclusion

Many of the similarities described above have more to do with style than substance, but they also reflect what the British historian Henry Fairlie described as a serious ideological relationship between Kennedy’s best and brightest and the administration of Theodore Roosevelt. If “manly” and “masterful” were two of the commonest words in Roosevelt’s prose, so “tough” and “tough-minded” dominated the discourse of the New Frontier. Richard Hofstadter wrote that TR regarded himself as “an impartial arbiter devoted to the

national good, and a custodian of the stern virtues without which the United States could not play its destined role of mastery in the world theater.”⁵⁰ These, says Fairlie, “were exactly the roles, for himself and the country, which John Kennedy assumed and proclaimed.”⁵¹ The new frontiersmen scoured the careers of Kennedy’s thirty-four predecessors in search of justifications for their activist and heroic concept of the presidency. “We can learn from the fact that, whether in the speeches of John Kennedy or in the writings of Arthur Schlesinger, this unideological activist [TR] was elevated in their pantheon. It was not only that Theodore Roosevelt exalted the presidency . . . but he exalted it as a personal office, unrestrained as far as possible, not only by prior doctrinaire commitment, but by any political values exterior to it.”⁵²

Roosevelt (1901-1909) had done everything in his power to lead the United States into the twentieth century, to make it clear to the world that the United States must now be regarded as a great power, and to expand the reach and authority of the national government, particularly the executive branch. The Kennedy team found this view of America irresistible, particularly after the quiescent Eisenhower years. Kennedy shared TR’s wry skepticism about the legislative branch of the national government. Like TR he preferred to rule by executive order when he was stymied by congressional inaction. Like TR, Kennedy believed that the most urgent reforms of American life could not wait until the slow-grinding gears of Congress finally attended to them. As the twentieth century began, Roosevelt helped to redefine the presidency in a way that sometimes strained the US Constitution. He was not for nothing called Theodore Rex by his detractors. Kennedy had been a relatively lackluster congressman and senator, and he was easily bored by the agonizing pace of the national legislative process. He found political cover and intellectual solace in Roosevelt’s concept of executive supremacy.

John F. Kennedy visited North Dakota in part because he had pledged to visit every state in the course of his long campaign for the presidency. There is no evidence that North Dakota got under his skin. The cumulative amount of time he spent in North Dakota comes to something less than five days, probably well short of five days. Beyond the usual political niceties of an ambitious senator, presidential candidate, and president, Kennedy said nothing memorable about North Dakota and gave no indication that North Dakota mattered to him beyond his political calculus. According to Thurston Clarke, the traveling press corps regarded Kennedy’s September 25, 1963, address at the

University of North Dakota as perhaps the dullest and worst of his presidency.⁵³

By contrast, Roosevelt spent a significant amount of time in North Dakota over a period of thirty-five years, but mostly between September 1883 and 1890, after which his political career became so demanding that he could not visit his western ranch home as often as he wished. Roosevelt never failed to insist that his time in Dakota Territory had been the making moment of his adult life. In his Fourth of July address in 1886, he told the people of Dickinson, “I am myself at heart as much a Westerner as an Easterner; I am proud indeed to be considered one of yourselves.” Roosevelt meant it. John Kennedy could never have made such a claim. Nor would he have engaged in that kind of political demagoguery.

When vice presidential candidate Roosevelt traveled through North Dakota in 1900, his handlers advised him to let the train race through the badlands without stopping in Medora. Roosevelt insisted on a short stop. From the back of the train he looked out upon the citizens who had gathered to pay their respects, many of whom he had known during the adventure years between 1883-1887. He paused, and then said: “It is here that the romance of my life began.”

The romance of John F. Kennedy’s life was somewhere far away.

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