

American History Online

Kennedy, Robert F.

Robert "Bobby" F. Kennedy, brother of President [John F. Kennedy](#), played an important role in American government from the early 1950s until he was assassinated in 1968.

Kennedy, born in Brookline, Massachusetts, on November 20, 1925, enjoyed the affluent lifestyle of the legendary Kennedy family. Many strong values were instilled in him during his youth. He enrolled at Harvard University and then left in 1944 to join the U.S. Navy near the end of World War II. After his discharge, Kennedy returned to Harvard where he played intercollegiate football and received his undergraduate degree in 1948. After graduation, he attended the University of Virginia Law School, from which he graduated in 1951. Soon after, Kennedy was admitted to the Massachusetts Bar.

With strong family political connections in Washington, D.C., Kennedy began his career as a congressional investigator working under [Joseph R. McCarthy](#). Kennedy did not stay in this position for long. Seven months later, he walked out on McCarthy in protest against the methods he used to expose people as communists. He later returned as a congressional investigator and helped lead the Senate Select Committee on Improper Activities. He resigned from his position in 1960 to help manage the presidential campaign of his brother John.

During his brother's presidency, Robert became attorney general. He received some criticism for obtaining such a powerful position so early in his career. When his brother was questioned about appointing Robert, John Kennedy stated, "I see nothing wrong with giving Robert some legal experience before he goes out to practice law." During his time in this office, Robert supported the Civil Rights movement. Through his work he encouraged the desegregation of schools across the South. He was also a strong supporter of the [Civil Rights Act of 1964](#), which extended equal rights to minorities.

In 1964, Kennedy ran for, and won, the senatorial election in New York. The win came easily due to the popularity of the Kennedy family and Robert's strong support of civil rights.

Kennedy found Senate work slow-paced compared to prior political activities. Even so, he accomplished several things for the state of New York. He secured funding to build parks in poor neighborhoods, sponsored parties for underprivileged children, and aided the disadvantaged around the state. Kennedy also waged a revolutionary campaign against cigarette companies. Realizing the potential health hazard associated with smoking, Kennedy pressured the cigarette companies, [television](#), and magazines alike to discontinue cigarette advertisements. Kennedy received little support on this issue, but he continued to fight against these powerful conglomerates. While in office, Kennedy also led the opposition to the escalation of the [Vietnam War](#). He was against the violence, and felt the matter could be solved through peaceful negotiations.

In March 1968, after much thought, Robert F. Kennedy announced his bid for the presidency. Kennedy again received massive support in his campaign, especially from minorities across the United States. He won 5 of the 6 presidential primaries that he entered, winning his last in California. On June 6, 1968, after delivering his victory speech to his supporters in Los Angeles, Kennedy was fatally shot by an Arab immigrant, Sirhan Bishara Sirhan, and he died shortly after at the Good Samaritan Hospital. Sirhan was quickly convicted of first-degree murder.

Since Kennedy's death, his political contributions and career have been memorialized in numerous ways. In 1968 Kennedy's widow, Ethel, founded the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial organization to continue her husband's legacy of social change. To emphasize the global nature of Kennedy's efforts, the memorial organization created an international awards program in 1984 to recognize human rights activists. In 1978 Congress posthumously awarded Kennedy its Gold Medal of Honor, the congressional equivalent of the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In 1994 a monument commemorating Kennedy's famous speech on the night of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination was erected in Indianapolis's King-Kennedy Park. Near the spot where Kennedy appealed for calm on the night of April 4, 1968, the monument depicts the two men reaching toward each other, symbolizing their efforts to bridge the nation's racial divide. In addition, Kennedy's tenure as attorney general was memorialized in November 2001 when the headquarters of the Department of Justice was renamed for him.

Kennedy's 11 children became a significant part of his legacy, as many have followed their father's example and become active in contemporary politics. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend served as Maryland's lieutenant governor from 1995 to 2003 and ran unsuccessfully for the governorship in 2002. She and sister Kerry, who headed the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Human Rights, also worked with the memorial organization founded after their father's death. Kennedy's son Joseph served as a U.S. representative for Massachusetts from 1986 to 1999, and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., became an environmental attorney.

Further Information

William J. Vanden Heuvel and Milton S. Gwirtzman, *On His Own: Robert F. Kennedy, 1964–1968* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970);

George Plimpton, ed., *American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970);

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978).

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