



## Kennedy and the Promise of the Sixties

By W. J. Rorabaugh

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### **Kennedy and the Promise of the Sixties** By W. J. Rorabaugh

This book explores life in America during that brief promising period in the early sixties when John F. Kennedy was the U.S. president. Kennedy's optimism and charm helped to give promise to the times. At the same time, Cold War frustrations in Cuba and Vietnam worried Americans, while the 1962 Missile Crisis narrowly avoided a nuclear disaster. Early in the decade, the Civil Rights movement gained momentum through student sit-ins and Freedom Rides. Martin Luther King, Jr. emerged as a powerful spokesman for non-violent social change and gave his powerful "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington in 1963. The Civil Rights movement proved to be the seedbed for many other movements in the decade. The American family was also undergoing rapid change and Betty Friedan launched what became the Women's Movement in 1963. Culture, too, underwent transformation. The Beat authors Jack Kerouac and Alan Ginsburg gained respectability, Joan Baez and Bob Dylan revived folk music, and Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol produced Pop Art. Ginsberg, Aldous Huxley, Timothy Leary and Ken Kesey began to promote psychedelic drugs. The Sixties was a decade of marked political, social, and cultural change. Since 1976 W.J. Rorabaugh has taught at the University of Washington in Seattle. He is the author of *The Alcoholic Republic* (Oxford, 1979), *The Craft Apprentice* (Oxford, 1986), and *Berkeley at War: The 1960s* (Oxford, 1989). Professor Rorabaugh has held fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Humanities Center, the Newberry Library, the Huntington Library, and the John F. Kennedy Library. He has served on editorial boards for the *Journal of Early Republic* and the *History of Education Quarterly*.

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## Editorial Review

### Amazon.com Review

W.J. Rorabaugh offers a social history of the early 1960s through the lens of John F. Kennedy's presidential career. JFK, writes Rorabaugh, "was both a unique figure and a true representative of his times." He governed during the bleakest years of the Cold War, which coincided with the emergence of the civil rights movement, the rise of feminist ambition, and, through the Beats, the invention of postmodernism. The myth of Camelot has led many Americans to believe that these were a final few idyllic years before the disastrous arrival of political assassinations, urban riots, and failure in Vietnam, but Rorabaugh shows how these explosive developments all had roots in social commotion taking place less visibly under Kennedy's watch. Americans may have been "hooked on hope" during these years, Rorabaugh writes, but they were also setting themselves up for a hard fall: "A general mood of optimism is necessary to launch any period of reform, but the prevalence to that very mood causes reformers to push for changes that go well beyond the society's capacity for change in a short period of time." It is impossible to understand modern America without understanding what happened during this period, and *Kennedy and the Promise of the Sixties* is an excellent introduction to it. --*John J. Miller*

### From Publishers Weekly

University of Washington history professor Rorabaugh (Berkeley at War, etc.) argues persuasively that John F. Kennedy personified a narrow slice of American history that was both brazenly optimistic and wantonly self-deceiving. Rorabaugh paints Kennedy as a mirror of his age and Camelot as a highly romanticized fiction of a golden moment that never was. Golden it wasn't, writes the author, promising it was. Rorabaugh sees Kennedy's tenure as a unique in-between time, coming just after the more conservative, cautious and complacent 1950s and just before the more frenzied, often raucous, and even violent late '60s. (In 1962, Rorabaugh notes, the conservative Young Americans for Freedom boasted a national campus membership of over 20,000, while the New Left Students for a Democratic Society carried a roster of just 500. These proportions would be reversed within six years.) And he shows how many of the optimistic seeds sewn by Kennedy, who believed, among other things, that he could confidently defend all free-world borders against Communism, were quickly strangled by weeds of cynicism and doubt as the '60s progressed. In the final analysis, Rorabaugh sees Kennedy's America as a place of clearly delineated rights and wrongs, good and evil, the defining lines of which began to dissolve not long after (though certainly not because of) Kennedy's death. Upon closing this fresh analysis of an era, one is left wondering whether JFK would have even recognized the United States where his brother Bobby campaigned for a second Camelot, and where he himself became a martyr in 1968.

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### From Library Journal

The Kennedy era (1961-63) was not the golden age of Camelot, but it was promising, concludes Rorabaugh (Berkeley at War: The 1960s). In what is more a social than a political study, he makes good use of oral histories and personal correspondence to show that these years were distinct from the 1950s and the later 1960s, owing in no small part to the Kennedy presence. Although these were the worst years of the Cold War, a sense of optimism projected by the President helped energize the Civil Rights and the new feminist movements. The events and social movements described here the Beats, folk music, Pop Art, changing family roles, and drug use have been discussed in numerous other investigations of the Sixties, but Rorabaugh frames them within their own specific era. Kennedy is viewed much as he was by James Giglio in *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* as a talented leader who followed and contributed to the spirit of his times but was not the great president that many Americans think they remember. Recommended for public and academic libraries. Karl Helicher, Upper Merion Twp. Lib., King of Prussia, PA

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