How JFK Moved the World Towards Peace

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Fifty years ago this very week, global war seemed likely, even inevitable. The near disaster of the Cuban Missile Crisis cast a shadow over human survival. And yet from that darkness, President John F. Kennedy conjured a shaft of light. Through an astounding combination of soaring vision, stunning eloquence, and masterful political tactics, Kennedy forged the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with his Soviet counterpart Nikita Khrushchev, and moved it through Senate ratification. As I describe in my new book, To Move the World, Kennedy's leadership not only helped save the world, but also provided enduring lessons on the arts of world leadership.

In early June 1963, peace with the Soviet Union seemed just as unlikely as U.S.-Iranian rapprochement or Israeli-Palestinian peace does today. Kennedy recognized that convincing Americans (including the Senate) to support a test ban treaty outlawing nuclear arms testing, to slow the arms race and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, would be at least as hard as convincing the Soviet side. Trust on both sides was at low ebb; each was convinced the other would never uphold a treaty. Kennedy would have to win hearts, minds, and debates on three fronts: American skeptics, foot-dragging allies such as France and Germany, and Soviet counterparts.

JFK used his commencement address at American University on June 10, 1963, to bring his vision, rhetoric, and tactics into play. Kennedy spoke about peace on that day, in a speech that is rightly regarded as one of the greatest of modern history. Kennedy's approach was unprecedented. Instead of presenting the Soviets with a list of demands, Kennedy called on his fellow
Americans to "reexamine our own attitudes, as individuals and as a Nation, for our attitude is as essential as theirs."

Kennedy's vision drew upon that of his youthful hero and lifelong role model, Winston Churchill. We remember Churchill for his heroic stand against Hitler, but should remember too his insistence in the early Cold War that the Soviet Union could be moved to peace. Churchill famously argued that it is better to "jaw-jaw" than "war-war," which Kennedy echoed in declaring, "Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate."

Arguing urgently against the belief that "war is inevitable, that mankind is doomed," Kennedy insisted that, "our problems are manmade, and therefore can be solved by man." Indeed, his overriding theme was the common humanity of Americans and Russians, and their shared will to live in peace. Among JFK's most beautiful passages was his assertion that, "In the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's futures. And we are all mortal."

Kennedy's soaring rhetoric on that day, and his remarkable ongoing exchange of private letters with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, convinced his Soviet counterpart to pursue a peace agreement. Khrushchev called the U.S. envoy, Averell Harriman, to tell him that JFK's peace speech was the finest by an American president since Franklin D. Roosevelt. Just seven weeks later, the countless obstacles to a test ban treaty, which had delayed any agreement for well over a decade, had been cleared away and the treaty was initialed in Moscow.

Yet Kennedy knew that signing with the Soviets was only half the battle, and his astounding eloquence would only get the treaty so far. Faced with difficult allies, for example the West German Chancellor who sought nuclear weapons, he took his case for peace straight to the people. He won the vast affection of the West German people in his unforgettable speech in Berlin,
gaining space to negotiate. Faced with a skeptical Senate holding the power of treaty ratification, Kennedy worked relentlessly to win the Senate vote, giving a national address, marshaling prominent supporters, and negotiating the vital support of the military top brass. His tireless campaigning ultimately resulted in an overwhelming bipartisan majority.

In his final address to world leaders at the UN just weeks before his death, Kennedy laid out a pragmatic program of future cooperation, much of which eventually came to pass, most notably the nuclear non-proliferation treaty ratified just five years later. JFK's grand quest for peace was thereby translated into a series of practical actions, exemplifying Kennedy's leadership maxim: "By defining our goal more clearly, by making it seem more practical and less remote, we help all people to see it, to draw hope from it, and to move relentlessly towards it."

Kennedy's success teaches us about problem solving in our own time, whether to avert war or save the planet from human-induced environment catastrophe. Peace and environmental sustainability are possible, but never inevitable. Nations can forge binding agreements even with seemingly implacable foes or competitors. Our attitudes will be as important as theirs. Great eloquence can raise hopes and the world's courage to act, yet must be also accompanied by careful negotiations, deft politics, and practical steps. This combination is the essence of leadership, and leadership can still move the world towards peace and wellbeing.