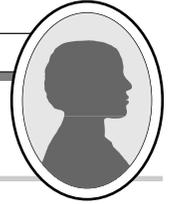


## BIOGRAPHY



## Robert F. Kennedy

Regarding his stand against an air strike during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Robert F. Kennedy said, “I did not believe the President of the United States could order such a military operation. . . . All our heritage and our ideals would be repugnant to such a sneak military attack.” Acting on the basis of heritage and ideals illustrates why Robert Kennedy was sometimes called “the conscience of the administration.”

*As you read the passage below, think about the influences in Robert F. Kennedy’s life that formed his idealism and strong social conscience.*

**R**obert F. Kennedy was born in Massachusetts in 1925, into a family of great wealth and power. He was the seventh of nine children and the third son. As a child, he was small for his age, slow in school, and not very athletic. One of his classmates later said, “Nothing came easily for him. What he had was a set of handicaps and a fantastic determination to overcome them. The handicaps made him redouble his effort.” His teachers noted that he had a deep religious faith and concern for others.

After graduating from law school in 1951, Kennedy joined the Justice Department in Washington, D.C., and became an assistant counsel to the McCarthy committee investigating Communists in government. Later, he became counsel to a Senate committee investigating improper activities in the labor and management field, a committee of which his brother, Senator John F. Kennedy, was a member. In 1960, when Senator Kennedy decided to run for President, Robert resigned from the committee to run his brother’s campaign.

Robert Kennedy’s travels during the 1960 campaign opened his eyes to the poverty and injustice he had never known in his privileged world. In Appalachia, in West Virginia, he blurted in disbelief “Can you believe it? Some of these

kids have never had a glass of milk.” Later, he would comment on his awakening: “I found out something I never knew. I found out that my world was not the real world.”

When his brother named him Attorney General, Kennedy’s education continued, as the struggle of minorities for equality gained momentum. He spearheaded the Justice Department’s efforts to end segregation and gain full voting rights for African Americans. He also became aware of injustices suffered by Native Americans, Hispanics, and Mexican Americans. “I never saw a change in his character,” remarked one of his colleagues. “But I did see a change in his view of the world.”

Kennedy left the Justice Department a few months after his brother’s assassination. In 1964 he was elected as a U.S. senator from New York. From that base, he became a spokesman for the nation’s underprivileged minorities. In 1968 he sought the Democratic nomination for President. In his speeches calling for social justice, he often ended with this quote: “Some men see things as they are and say ‘Why?’ I dream of things that never were and say ‘Why not?’”

Robert Kennedy’s life was cut short by an assassin’s bullet in June 1968.

### Questions to Think About

1. What childhood difficulties did Robert F. Kennedy have to overcome?
2. Why was he so amazed by the poverty and injustice he encountered during the 1960 presidential campaign?
3. **Determining Relevance** How might Kennedy’s childhood struggles, deep religious faith, and education in poverty and injustice have influenced the development of his social idealism?