

CHAPTER ONE

JANUARY 20, 1961

Washington, D.C. 12:51 P.M.

THE MAN WITH FEWER THAN THREE YEARS to live places his left hand on the Bible.

Earl Warren, chief justice of the United States Supreme Court, stands before him reciting the Presidential Oath of Office. “You, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, do solemnly swear . . .”

“I, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, do solemnly swear,” the new president repeats in his Boston accent.

John Kennedy was born into wealth and has a refined manner of speaking that would seem to distance him from many people. But he is an enthusiastic and easily likable man. He won the popular vote over Richard Nixon by a razor-thin margin, getting just 49 percent of the total votes. So not everyone loves JFK, but this is an exciting moment for the country.

“ . . . that you will faithfully execute the office of president of the United States . . .”

“... that I will faithfully execute the office of president of the United States. . . .”

Eighty million Americans are watching the inauguration on television. Twenty thousand more are there in person. Eight inches of thick, wet snow have fallen on Washington, D.C., overnight. Spectators wrap their bodies in sleeping bags, blankets, thick sweaters, and winter coats—anything to stay warm.



The Marine Band stands in front of the Capitol during the inauguration ceremonies. [JFK Presidential Library and Museum]

But John Kennedy ignores the cold. He has even removed his overcoat. At age 43, JFK exudes fearlessness and vigor. His lack of coat, top hat, scarf, or gloves is intentional—this helps to confirm his athletic image. He is trim and just a shade over six feet tall, with greenish-gray eyes, a dazzling smile, and a deep tan, thanks to a recent vacation in Florida.

“ . . . and will to the best of your ability . . . ”

“ . . . and will to the best of my ability . . . ”

In the sea of dignitaries and friends all around him, there are three people vital to Kennedy. The first is his younger brother Bobby, soon to be appointed U.S. attorney general. The president values him for his honesty and knows that Bobby will always tell him the truth, no matter how brutal it may be.

Behind the president is the new vice president, Lyndon Baines Johnson, who is often called LBJ. It can be said, and Johnson himself believes, that Kennedy won the presidency because Johnson was on the ticket, which allowed them to win the most votes in Johnson’s home state of Texas.

Finally, the new president glances toward his young wife, standing behind Justice Warren. Jackie’s eyes sparkle. Despite her happy face today, Jackie Kennedy has already known tragedy during their seven years of marriage. She miscarried their first child, and the second was a stillborn baby girl. But she has also enjoyed the birth of two healthy children, Caroline and John Jr., and the stunning rise of her dashing young husband from a Massachusetts politician to president of the United States.



John F. Kennedy takes the oath of office, administered by Chief Justice Earl Warren. [© Bettmann/Corbis]

“ . . . preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States.”

“ . . . preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States.”

Kennedy’s predecessor, Dwight Eisenhower, stands near Jackie. Behind Kennedy stand Richard Nixon, Eisenhower’s vice president and Kennedy’s adversary in the presidential campaign, and Harry Truman, the Democratic president who held office before Eisenhower.

Normally, having just one of these dignitaries at an event means heightened security. Having all of them at the inaugural, sitting together, is a security nightmare.

The Secret Service is on high alert. Its job is to protect the president. The leader of the service, Chief U. E. Baughman, has been in charge since Truman was president. His agents scan the crowd, nervous about the proximity of the huge audience. One well-trained fanatic with a pistol could kill the new president, two former presidents, and a pair of vice presidents with five crisp shots.

“... So help you, God.”

“... So help me, God.”

The oath complete, Kennedy shakes Chief Justice Warren’s hand, then those of Johnson and Nixon and finally Eisenhower.

Kennedy is the youngest president ever elected. Eisenhower is one of the oldest. The great divide in their ages also represents two very different generations of Americans—and two very different views of America. Those watching in person and those watching on TV agree: The future looks limitless and bright.



Now the 35th president of the United States turns toward the crowd. At the podium bearing the presidential seal, Kennedy looks down at his speech.

Kennedy is a Pulitzer Prize–winning historian, having received the award for his book *Profiles in Courage*. He knows the value of a great inaugural address. For months, he has worked over the words

he is about to recite. That morning, he rose after just four hours of sleep and, pencil in hand, reviewed his speech again and again and again.

His words resonate like a psalm. “Let the word go forth from this time and place, from friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this



Kennedy's inaugural address is one of the shortest in history: thirteen minutes, fifty-nine seconds. [© Associated Press]



After the inauguration, the new president watches the parade pass. The press corps capture every moment. Seated next to Jackie Kennedy is the new president's father. Vice President Lyndon Johnson stands next to President Kennedy. [JFK Presidential Library and Museum]

century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage. . . .”

This is no ordinary inaugural address. This is a promise. America’s best days are still to come, Kennedy is saying, but only if we all pitch in to do our part. “Ask not what your country can do for you,” he commands, his voice rising to deliver the defining sentence, “ask what you can do for your country.”

The address will be hailed as an instant classic. In fewer than 1,400 words, John Fitzgerald Kennedy defines his vision for the nation. He now sets the speech aside, knowing that the time has come to fulfill the great promise he has made to the American people. He must manage the issue with Cuba and its pro-Soviet leader, Fidel Castro. He must tackle problems in a faraway land known as Vietnam, where a small band of U.S. military advisers is struggling to bring stability to a region long rocked by war. And here at home, the civil rights movement requires immediate attention. Tempers in the South are flaring as more and more people demand equal treatment under the law for all races.

JFK surveys the adoring crowd, knowing that he has much work to do.

What he does not know is that he is on a collision course with evil—a course that will cut short the time he has to fulfill the promises he just made.



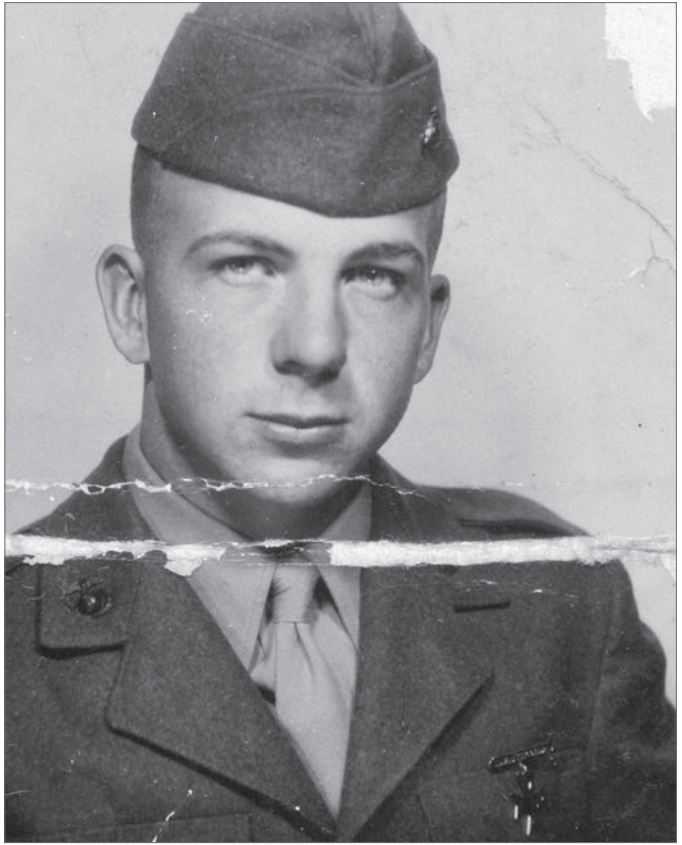
About 4,500 miles away, in the Soviet city of Minsk, an American who did not vote for John F. Kennedy is fed up. Lee Harvey Oswald,

a former U.S. Marine Corps sharpshooter, has had enough of life in this communist nation.

Oswald is a defector. In 1959, at age 19, the slightly built, somewhat handsome drifter decided to leave the United States of America, convinced that his political beliefs would make him welcome in the Soviet Union. But things haven't gone according to plan. Oswald had hoped to attend Moscow University, even though he never graduated from high school. In-

stead, the Soviet government shipped him to Minsk, where he has been working in an electronics factory. Oswald left the United States because he believes in workers' rights and thinks that workers in the United States are treated like slaves, but these endless days in the factory don't make him feel that he has any rights at all.

He was briefly important when his defection was reported by American newspapers. It was extremely unusual for a U.S. Marine to violate the *Semper Fi* (Always Faithful) oath and go over to

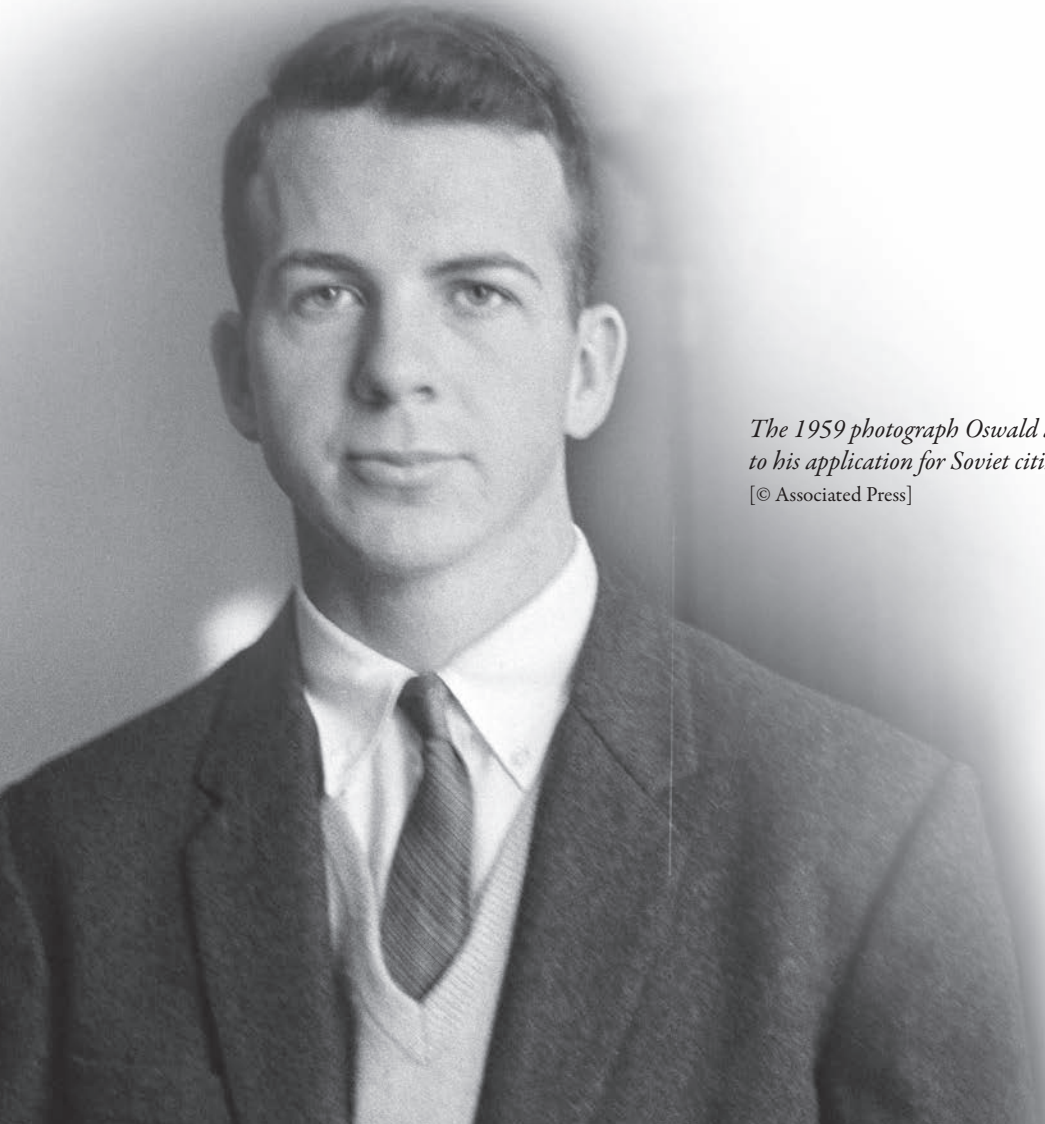


Lee Harvey Oswald in a U.S. Marine uniform, in 1956. [© Corbis]

the enemy. But now, here in Russia, he is anonymous, which he finds unacceptable. Lee Harvey Oswald needs to be noticed and appreciated.

Defection doesn't seem like such a good idea anymore, Oswald confides to his journal.

As America celebrates Kennedy's inauguration, he writes to the U.S. embassy in Moscow. His note is short and to the point: Lee Harvey Oswald wants to come home.



The 1959 photograph Oswald attached to his application for Soviet citizenship.

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