John Fitzgerald Kennedy’s election to the presidency in 1960 capped a multigenerational American family saga. Beginning with JFK’s great-grandparents’ immigration to Boston in the middle of the nineteenth century, the Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys vividly enacted the major themes in a quintessential narrative of American identity: flight from privation and oppression; urban hardship, discrimination, and community formation; street-level business and political entrepreneurship; upward mobility, assimilation, and ascendance. Theirs was the “nation of immigrants” story that entered the national creation mythology. “Kennedy’s dazzling rise to power,” wrote Doris Kearns Goodwin in her biography of the two families, “was a recognition that the great immigrant revolution was finally complete.” Overcoming anti-Catholic prejudice in his presidential campaign cemented Kennedy’s historical reputation as the catalyst of a new American settlement around identity.

But the Kennedy backstory may have as much to tell us about structural changes taking place in American institutions as it does about immigrant perseverance or the redemption of constitutional democracy from one form of bigotry. Beyond his family, the formative sites of Kennedy’s early years were educational, military, and political. At prep school and at college, Kennedy’s seemingly minor social victories illuminate the ways America’s highest elite was both broadening its membership and consolidating its power at midcentury. Kennedy’s heroism in the Pacific, when capitalized by his father’s public relations machine, turned the socially unifying effect of World War II into the postwar currencies of celebrity and patriotism. And by combining this war story with the revival of the family’s tribal legacy in Boston, the 1946 congressional campaign that launched Kennedy’s political career provided an early model for how a liberalized white identity could obscure class and racial conflict in American politics. If Kennedy’s great-grandparents worked to “become white,” the president himself helped remake American whiteness.
National though these forces were, it was the cultural landscape of Boston that enabled Kennedy’s unique influence on the performance and meaning of white ethnicity. Contrasts within the city’s political and educational realms turned family ambitions and personal successes into striking new images of identity. From his grandfathers’ era through Kennedy’s own early life, Boston had the most ethnically conscious Protestant elite and the most politically dominant Irish immigrants of any major city in America. Harvard, meanwhile – which Kennedy was the third generation in his family to attend – was the most WASPish of all universities, yet it advanced the theory and practice of meritocracy that still governs status discourse in American power centers. During John F. Kennedy’s formative years, his father rejected Boston in favor of first New York and then London, chafing under the extraordinary parochialism of Boston’s elites and the sheer smallness of its global stature. But as the future president came of age, the family returned to Harvard and then to Boston, ultimately attaching JFK’s career and identity permanently to the city. The primary pull was a political legacy that was too valuable to ignore. The outcome of this relationship was also cultural: Boston’s contrasts provided fields for the future president’s ambitions to stand out decisively and become iconic.

The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys are most closely associated with the role of politics in the rise of the Irish, especially through the image of Boston as a site of intense conflict between Yankee elites and Irish newcomers. The president’s grandfathers were John Francis “Honey Fitz” Fitzgerald, a former newsboy from the North End who became a charismatic congressman (1895–1901) and mayor (1906–8, 1910–14), and Patrick Joseph “PJ” Kennedy, a prosperous tavern keeper and influential ward boss and state legislator from East Boston. Both men were leading figures in the Irish political ascendancy in turn-of-the-century Boston – but less because of showdowns with Anglo-nativist “Brahmins” than owing to their skill in backroom intrigues and campaign street battles among their own kind. In their time, while Protestant elites continued to exclude Irish Catholics from positions of influence in finance and culture, the politics of ethnic resentment was a strategic and ritualistic language that arose as a consequence, rather than served as a cause, of Irish electoral dominance.  

The field of education, which in Boston more than elsewhere shaped economic and cultural leadership, remained a more daunting territory for the Irish than did politics. Accordingly, schooling became increasingly essential to the Fitzgerald and Kennedy families’ stations at the vanguard of immigrant progress. The children of the famine-era arrivals had faced discrimination in Boston’s openly Protestant public school system, and they aroused deep suspicion in their subsequent efforts to create an alternative
system of Catholic schools. Harvard College, meanwhile, led the elite turn to Anglo-Saxon racial identity in response to mass Irish immigration and later to political nativism in response to subsequent Eastern and Southern European arrivals.4

Still, it was Harvard and Boston Latin School, two of Boston’s oldest and most venerable institutions, that facilitated the Fitzgeralnds’ and the Kennedys’ rise from neighborhood leaders to citywide, statewide, and ultimately national power players. The different experiences of Fitzgerald and his son-in-law Joseph P. Kennedy at these two schools highlight both the transformative effects of educational access and the frustratingly personal nature of the very short distances they had yet to travel.

After excelling in his public grammar school in the North End, John F. Fitzgerald entered the prestigious Boston Latin as one of those bright children of immigrants for whom the magnet school, long a paragon of intra-Protestant egalitarianism, was becoming a conduit for upward mobility. On the strength of his performance on the school’s rigorous final examinations, in 1884 Fitzgerald was accepted without a college degree to Harvard Medical School, where he commenced his studies with the support of his family while living in their North End home. Just before the end of his first year of study, however, his father died, and Fitzgerald withdrew from school so he could go to work to help support his younger siblings. He was a brilliant student and had received technically fair treatment in a meritocratic system, but still his education availed him little by way of a career or a social network to lift him out of potential poverty. Instead he entered politics, apprenticed to the North End ward boss and bolstered by citywide connections he had made as a newsboy and athlete.5

By contrast, at the turn of the century Joe Kennedy entered Boston Latin at the behest of his upper-middle-class mother, who was drawn to its prestige. Although a mediocre student, he excelled socially and sought extra-curricular leadership, captaining the baseball team and winning the class presidency. When he applied these same talents as a member of Harvard’s class of 1912, however, he discovered – despite some success – an impregnable barrier. Although he befriended and impressed the sons of wealthy Protestant families, they would not allow him entrance into their private ranks, and he was blackballed from the most exclusive clubs. This was a fate shared by the majority of Harvard students, who nevertheless were or would become members of a high-ranking and well-networked elite. But for Kennedy, who was very ambitious and placed much stock in the social route to success, it was a scarring and intensely motivating experience. He knew that exclusion from these clubs meant exclusion from affiliated men’s clubs, from old-line brokerage houses, and from the highest circles of power.
Instead, he went to work for the small neighborhood bank that his father had cofounded, where he applied his business savvy, social charm, and political connections to become the first Catholic appointed as a bank examiner in Massachusetts.  

The contrast in educations between the future mayor and the future mogul tells not only of a generation of progress but also of the paradoxically sharpened sense of exclusion that could accompany such advances. Fitzgerald rose through ward politics, where social division was a given and tribal conflict was more an electoral strategy than a personal crisis. Kennedy, by contrast, hitched his future to the burgeoning system by which ambitious members of the middle class could ride the social benefits of educational prestige into higher realms of wealth and power. After discovering the limits of that system, however, for him the resentment was more deeply personal, and it shaped the way he directed his children’s education.

Joe Kennedy’s experience also differed markedly from that of his future wife, Rose Fitzgerald. The mayor’s daughter and future president’s mother was an accomplished and charismatic high school student. Perhaps because he had let go of his own educational dream so decisively, Fitzgerald was willing to discard his daughter’s, too. Succumbing to religious pressure, he denied his daughter her highest wish – to attend Wellesley College at a time when it was producing national leaders in social reform. He did so in a cruelly drawn-out fashion, moreover, insisting first on a post-high-school year at the Sacred Heart Convent in Boston, and then a year of effective imprisonment at a sister convent in Holland. In Europe Rose came of age by mastering and internalizing a system of pervasive social and religious scrutiny, before completing her studies at that same order’s Manhattanville College in New York in 1910.

Rose attributed her transformative year in Holland to the elite fashion of sending children abroad for their final level of schooling; biographers say it is obvious that Fitzgerald wanted to shield his daughter from the explosive corruption trials that were engulfing him in Boston. But it was clearly a matter of gender, too. In Rose’s generation, men like Joe Kennedy could choose Harvard over Boston College without much loss of tribal face, and indeed in either college they could be expected to lay the groundwork for a career of high achievements. For Catholic women considering higher education, however, the preservation of the religiously defined family was at stake; in any case, it was a rare set of parents who saw college as anything more than a finishing school for their daughters. Although later in life Rose occasionally bemoaned the exclusion of her family from the highest social circles, the wound that she carried most deeply – losing the chance Wellesley offered...
her to become not only an exemplary Catholic mother but also a leading woman of her generation – was inflicted by her own kind.

Joseph P. Kennedy and Rose Fitzgerald married in Boston in 1914, soon moving to the near suburb of Brookline, where their second child, John Fitzgerald ("Jack"), was born in 1917. Defying the limits he had perceived at Harvard, Joe Kennedy rose quickly in finance, proving a fierce corporate competitor and then a canny and notoriously unethical speculator, even by the loose standards of the 1920s. But after being blackballed from suburban country clubs in Brookline and Cohasset, Kennedy came to feel that elite anti-Irish exclusion was endemic to Boston and would hold his children back as he felt it had him. In 1927, he abandoned the city, taking Rose and their growing family to suburban New York, adding summer and winter homes in Hyannis Port and Palm Beach, respectively, and sending his sons to school at Choate, a relatively young but fairly elite Episcopalian boarding school in Connecticut. Instead of giving up his belief in the importance of social success at school as a route to power, Kennedy doubled down on this conviction. In this bet he was prescient.

In the first half of the twentieth century, education became increasingly important as a means of achieving, conserving, and enhancing socioeconomic status. Progressive reformers saw access to effective schooling as a right for individuals and a necessity for national welfare. University leaders, in turn, recognized the important social role this elevated function conferred on their institutions. By linking status to ability in its selective credentialing of the upper half, the role of higher education became nothing less than “legitimating the American social order.”

James B. Conant, Harvard’s president from 1933 to 1953 (and a class of 1913 fraternity brother of Joe Kennedy), was the most influential theorist of what became known as “meritocracy” in admissions and financial aid. In essays and speeches authored while John F. Kennedy was an undergraduate at Harvard, Conant argued that in an age of political unrest, educational reform was needed to preserve “the American ideal.” Schooling could forge a “Jeffersonian” middle path between capitalist oligarchy and radical leveling, by distributing personal development and social status according to talent and need.

For Conant’s Harvard and similarly elite private universities to claim leadership roles in such a system, they had to negotiate deep tensions in their own identities. In an expanded and industrialized nation, their historic role as private institutions of the northeastern social elite diminished both their influence and their meritocratic credibility. At the same time, they relied on the legacy of this role for maintaining and capitalizing the prestige that was essential to retaining influential benefactors and attracting ambitious newcomers. Harvard and others had opened their doors to accomplished
second- and third-generation immigrants since the late nineteenth century. But soon afterward, they began instituting policies and practices that allowed them to manage their demographics (primarily to restrict Jewish enrollment) and maintain their definitive relationship with the old guard.

In the 1930s, led by Conant, college administrations brought greater focus to academic qualifications with tools such as standardized tests and nationwide scholarship competitions, while increasing the emphasis on “well-rounded” and “well-adjusted” personality traits that were keyed to the culture of the prep school and its social sphere. In their emphasis on meritocratic measures – despite defining “merit” so as to benefit the upper classes – colleges and then prep schools provided apparent proof that social status reflected innate ability. While after World War II, many white men took advantage of the GI Bill and the expansion of state universities to enter the middle class, elite schools worked on producing what they called a “leadership stratum.” At this level, what Conant described as a “continuous process by which power and privilege may be automatically redistributed at the end of each generation” in reality did much to produce results that Pierre Bourdieu (in discussing the French educational system) called “infinitely closer” to “hereditary transfer” than to any re-sorting of status among the populace.

At this upper end of the system, the relatively minor differences of social acceptance that had frustrated Joe Kennedy continued to be important as lifelong passkeys to power. In 1956, the year the fourth and final Kennedy son graduated from Harvard, C. Wright Mills wrote in The Power Elite, “The one deep experience that distinguishes the social rich from the merely rich and those below is their schooling, and with it, all the associations, the sense and sensibility, to which this educational routine leads throughout their lives.” This process begins in prep school, Mills pointed out, with the result that those who entered Harvard and Yale by other routes never actually crossed the barrier into the highest elite, where access to corporate boardrooms and senate offices was assured. African Americans and others with no plausible claim to whiteness remained, of course, largely excluded from both the technocratic and leadership levels.

“Sense and sensibility” were the terms on which young Jack Kennedy outshone his predecessors and almost all of his classmates at prep school and in college. At Choate from 1931 to 1935, Kennedy struggled with his health and his academic focus, failing to follow in his brother’s footsteps as a high-achieving campus leader. But he ultimately proved more adept than either his aggressive father or his straitlaced brother at the subtler social talents required to crack the inner realms of privilege. Although seeming “casual and disorderly” to a degree that infuriated some of his teachers,
Kennedy’s louche charm won him acolytes among his peers and, eventually, a tight circle of friends drawn from the sons of the school’s wealthiest benefactors. Biographers have interpreted Kennedy’s style as a “wry Irishness” that contrasted with his older brother’s “heavy” personality and by-the-book newcomer’s approach to social acceptance. If we set aside this retrospectively ethnic frame and instead look at his social peers, his privilege, and his bawdy letters to friends, young Jack Kennedy appears as much like the dissolute son of an old Yankee family as he does a charming young Irishman.

By his senior year, Kennedy found fields of action for his winning but quietly anarchic personality. He organized his circle into a rebellious club that showed up the administration, produced a successful yearbook, and hoarded the “superlatives,” headed by Kennedy as “Most Likely to Succeed.” Headmaster George St. John, solicitous of the wealthy and famous Kennedy parents but rumored to be anti-Irish, saw Kennedy’s circle as dangerously cynical and disruptive. St. John denounced them before the assembled school community as “muckers,” an old Ivy League term for troublesome working-class locals that had evolved to include young gentlemen who seemed to lack the honorable traits of their class. In defiance, Kennedy led an even more audacious campaign of pranks and insubordinations, and he codified the name: he and his partners in crime had golden shovel pendants made with the inscription CMC for “Choate Muckers Club.” More than one biographer has noted the shrewd irony in Kennedy’s embrace of a term of abuse that WASPs had developed to describe Irish Americans. While the term might have held a real sting for Joe Kennedy at Harvard, Jack’s jovial flaunting of it only proved that his generation lived in no fear of the association and its potential effects on status.

The antics of the Muckers eventually brought a disciplinary crisis for Kennedy, but its outcome was to prove that he could act with the full impunity of a member of his social class. When St. John smoked out a scheme to disrupt an annual spring dance, he nominally expelled all thirteen conspirators. By the time the students’ parents arrived on campus for emergency meetings, though, the punishment had been lessened, and in the end there appear to have been no serious repercussions at all. When Joe Kennedy got his son alone, he laughed off the seriousness of the prank, even implicitly approving his son’s rebellious spirit. Biographers identify this moment as one in which Joe Kennedy first recognized qualities of independence and leadership in his second son, even as it also exhibited Jack’s youthful lack of purpose. But another point may be just as telling: as the headmaster of a gatekeeping institution for the highest elite, St. John ostensibly controlled Kennedy’s destiny. And even if he was rumored to harbor that very anti-Irish
sentiment that Joe Kennedy feared was his family’s glass ceiling, Kennedy’s wealth and public standing easily trumped this attitude. Jack Kennedy’s personality tested this power dynamic and publicly proved it. For the first time, a Kennedy was not just behaving acceptably at an elite educational institution but was inhabiting fully the role of the dominant class that these institutions existed to serve.

Kennedy’s subsequent progress into and through Harvard College was, in this respect, not a matter of an old-guard institution opening its doors more widely to the descendants of immigrants. Instead, it cemented the higher-than-elite social status that was required of future national leaders at such institutions. Harvard’s shifting admissions policies in the 1930s were indeed vitally concerned with drawing the top public high school graduates from around the country, to invigorate and nationalize what had been a parochial, academically mediocre undergraduate body. But as Jerome Karabel has shown, these policies were also crafted to reduce the numbers of Jewish students, who were heavily represented among these public school standouts. Kennedy’s admission was not affected by this strategy. There was no “Catholic problem” at Harvard, Catholics never having arrived in large numbers and by the 1940s no longer presenting the racial difference attributed to Jews. Kennedy applied as the son of a wealthy alumnus and as a promising but underachieving student from an elite prep school. At first, Kennedy had enrolled at Princeton with his closest friends, rather than at his father’s alma mater and the school where his older brother was a junior, as a display of independence. But after illness derailed his freshman year, Kennedy turned to Harvard after all. Harvard had already accepted him based on his June 1935 exams, in which he received honors (but not high honors) grades in two subjects, English and English History. Harvard’s communication of these two marks to Princeton was enough for the latter to admit him. To secure his transfer to Harvard the following year, Kennedy had only to write a brief letter to the Admissions Committee explaining that he had been convalescing since being admitted the year before.

Kennedy’s entrance to Harvard was thus uncontested. The real question lay in how high he could rise in its social scale. He followed in his older brother’s footsteps as a member of the freshman football team, as chairman of the Freshman Smoker Committee (a respected post for the ambitious), as a resident of Winthrop House, and as a member of the Hasty Pudding theatrical club. And where his brother had been elected to the Student Council, John Kennedy served on the editorial board of the Crimson newspaper. These distinctions placed him in the top tier of his class, but they did not guarantee access to the highest social realms, the “final” clubs through which elite upperclassmen separated themselves into privately owned residences and
Kennedy, Boston, and Harvard

established lifelong networks. This was the realm that had eluded Kennedy’s father and brother.

What Mills came to call “The Two Harvards” is plainly in evidence in a survey produced by one of Kennedy’s classmates and published in the 1940 yearbook. This unflinching (and at the time, controversial) document assembled by Donald Thurber revealed that approximately one-fifth of the class belonged to “social clubs,” and that these men drank more than their classmates did. Further divisions focused on family income and type of high school attended. For example, graduates of public high schools said they valued academic enrichment as the greatest gift Harvard had given them, while graduates of private schools placed greater value on the social bonds they had formed in Cambridge. In addition, the majority of the prep schoolers opposed the New Deal and the union movement, while most public school men supported both. Although they would follow their father into Democratic Party politics, and ultimately far outdo him in their concern for the vulnerable, the social group that the Kennedy sons aspired to join was not only Protestant but, by the late 1930s, politically reactionary.

And join them John Kennedy did. The story goes that the clubs’ alumni, many from the oldest social circles in Boston, wanted no part of the Fitzgerald or Kennedy names, associated as they were with an Irish political grifter and a stock-swinding parvenu, respectively. But Kennedy’s friends thought his personal qualities were worthy of a clubman and so, after excluding another talented Irish Catholic friend from their plans for being too much the “rough diamond,” aimed their lobbying efforts at the Spee Club, whose alumni base was by that time more firmly planted in New York than in Boston. Kennedy was accepted and spent his final two years at Harvard living, dining, and studying in the gracious, insular confines of this private club. He concluded his college career by being named a member of the nine-man Permanent Class Committee, guaranteeing him lifelong influence in Harvard’s affairs and association with its most powerful graduates. As a senator in 1957 he was elected to the university’s Board of Overseers, for which he hosted a meeting in the White House in 1963.

As with the presidency, the “arrival” of Irish Catholics in these most exclusive of Ivy League alumni circles has been attributed to the way Jack Kennedy’s personal qualities activated the support of liberal-minded, personally loyal, and well-placed friends. Entrance into the Spee was “his first personal triumph,” a prize that his father’s wealth and his brother’s talents had never been able to buy. But, of course, the family’s wealth and power constituted the platform on which he was able to display these qualities. The same week Kennedy was being initiated into the Spee, he revealed to friends that journalists on his father’s payroll were leaking premature “news” of
the financier’s appointment as ambassador to the United Kingdom, thereby forcing the hand of President Roosevelt, who had hoped to make him accept the humbler position of secretary of commerce.24

Harvard’s institutional and alumni networks may have preferred older, quieter alternatives to this kind of aggressive power grabbing, but as the beneficiaries of unearned privilege they had no basic principles with which they could oppose it. And if the power elite could not hold down Joe Kennedy, neither could its preparatory clubs any longer exclude his son. The Harvard final clubs adapted to this new social and political reality by considering John F. Kennedy’s winning personality, a courtesy they had not extended to his father. But the future president’s personal charm would have availed him nothing had, for example, he been living at home, as most Catholic Boston boys at Harvard did. When Kennedy was not ensconced at the Spee, his father’s ambassadorship allowed him to travel widely in Europe and to research the senior thesis that would later become the book (Why England Slept) that attested to his seriousness in foreign policy.

Compare this scope of action with that of the man whose picture sits next to Kennedy’s in the class of 1940 yearbook, Richard W. Kelley. Kelley, like Kennedy, was one of the approximately 10 percent of men in the class who were Roman Catholic (about 15 percent were Jewish, by comparison). Kelley was a graduate of nearby Somerville High School. The son of an insurance agent who had no college degree, he lived at home during his time at Harvard. Commuting students found it almost impossible to maintain the rich extracurricular schedules and social lives of their classmates in the houses, and club membership was out of the question. Kelley’s only extracurricular claim in his thin yearbook entry was membership in the Caisson Club for undergraduate officers of the ROTC. It is true that, had he not been killed in action in North Africa during World War II, Kelley would have had access to a life of upper-middle-class prosperity surpassing his parents’ modest attainments. But he would almost certainly not have had personal influence with his classmate John F. Kennedy, except as a voter. Had he survived to return home to Somerville, just a year later in 1946 he would have become one of his classmate’s congressional constituents.25

Kennedy too went to war, in service that cemented his coming-of-age and formed the basis of the public identity upon which he would build his political career. A navy lieutenant, Kennedy was in his fourth month as commander of PT-109, one of several dozen torpedo boats based in the Solomon Islands whose mission was to attack Japanese cargo and troop shipments. Cut off from communications with fellow patrol boats one night in August 1943, PT-109 was rammed by a much larger Japanese destroyer, killing...
two men instantly and leaving the remaining eleven clinging to the floating wreck and suffering various injuries. Under Kennedy’s direction, they spent the next day paddling several miles to a nearby island, Kennedy himself shouldering a badly burned crew member for the duration. For the next six days, Kennedy undertook dangerous exploratory swims at night and moved his men from beach to beach, until their rescue by native scouts and an allied coast watcher. Many accounts have exaggerated Kennedy’s role in the final rescue. But the twenty-six-year-old’s crew swore to his courage and leadership during the harrowing crisis, and their testimony has never been plausibly contested.  

The tale of PT-109 is a good example of the socially cohesive effect of World War II – and an even better one of the storytelling that accentuated and gave shape to that effect. Prominent newspaper coverage emphasized Kennedy’s heroism and his status as the son of the recent ambassador to the UK. But PT-109 was not transformed into a legend until John Hersey, who was writing on events in the Pacific for the *New Yorker*, met Kennedy in the Solomons. Kennedy agreed to give an interview, on the condition that the writer talk to crew members first. Hersey met three of them stateside and proceeded to write a piece called “Survival,” which appeared in the June 17, 1944, issue of the *New Yorker*. Hersey later said he was struck by Kennedy’s desire to ensure that the story was true to the memories of his crew. Personally impressed, Hersey framed his piece with an implicit statement of the social significance of this source base, which drew “Lieutenant John F. Kennedy, the ex-Ambassador’s son” together with “three enlisted men named Johnston, McMahon, and McGuire” (evoking the way an officer would have addressed them, Hersey never gives their first names). The piece reveals Kennedy occasionally stumbling in his judgment and authority when dealing with fellow officers, but accepting wholly the obligations of leadership in regard to his crew. That August, Joe Kennedy convinced *Reader’s Digest* to publish a condensed version of the essay that circulated more widely and became, in John Hellmann’s words, “the true beginning of the production of John F. Kennedy as a popular hero.” The PT-109 story paved the way for Kennedy’s entry into politics.  

In his first congressional campaign in 1946, Kennedy made strategic use of not only his war story, but also the family’s legacy in Boston’s Irish-dominated political culture. The Eleventh Congressional District, covering parts of Cambridge, Somerville, and Boston, was largely blue collar and heavily Irish. Kennedy was a stranger in this land, and everyone, most of all his opponents, knew it. As young adults, Kennedy and most of his siblings evinced little interest in being Irish or Catholic. Ethnic identity in the 1930s, when they came of age, had become a mode of working-class
consciousness encouraged by Marxist writers but alien to the Kennedys and their upwardly mobile approach to power. The family’s primary transatlantic social bond was with, ironically, the English aristocracy. At twenty-nine, Kennedy remained unfamiliar with the lived experience of Irish-descended Bostonians and disdainful of their self-conscious political identity.\textsuperscript{30}

Joe Kennedy, however, funded and directed his son’s successful campaign using two main assets: a nearly inexhaustible bank account and a still-formidable political influence that was rooted in the family’s prominence among Massachusetts’s Irish Democrats. Using this influence required not simply wielding power behind closed doors but publicly presenting young Jack Kennedy as the legitimate heir to the family’s legacy. In order to play his part, JFK had to overcome not only chronic illness but also an aversion to self-promotion, poor public speaking skills, and almost no experience socializing with people outside his own elite (and largely Protestant) social sphere.

Joe Kennedy’s overwhelming influence notwithstanding, the lasting imagery of the campaign is that of Jack Kennedy going door to door and function hall to function hall in working-class neighborhoods like Charlestown, winning voters over singly and in small groups with his earnest manner, his war veteran’s credibility, and his genuine empathy with their concerns. In stories by advisers like David Powers, and in photographs from the campaign trail, Kennedy appears out of place but game and receptive, as if studiously absorbing the heritage onto which his father was grafting his campaign behind the scenes. The campaign’s slogan, “The New Generation Offers a Leader,” quietly asserted the family’s parochial legacy while gesturing beyond it to the universal, youthful promise of Kennedy’s glamorous image. Rose Kennedy, meanwhile, helped to consolidate the women’s vote in formal teas that appealed to the postwar social aspirations of working- and middle-class families.\textsuperscript{31}

There was thus an intentional quality to the creation of Kennedy’s “Boston Irish” identity that illuminates the sometimes hidden politics of post–World War II white racial identity. JFK’s reattachment to his family’s immigrant legacy in 1946 – invoked even more openly in his 1952 campaign for the Senate – was a political strategy devised in order to overcome class difference and class consciousness among whites.\textsuperscript{32} Its success had deeply personal and broadly social implications. It sparked Kennedy’s own interest in his ancestry, while launching the career that led him to become the first Catholic occupant of the White House. It made him a spokesman for the last generation in the famine-era immigration narrative. And, ultimately, Kennedy’s “Boston” persona helped to initiate and consolidate an ascendant new mode of American whiteness.
Kennedy’s election as president marked not just the completion of the Irish mobility saga but also the beginning of a new kind of mainstream but hyphenated American identity, one that did not hide this history of struggle but instead asserted it with pride. Kennedy experienced this change personally. Beginning in 1947, he undertook a series of visits to Ireland in which he explored his family’s roots, eventually identifying an “emerald thread” that bound the Irish diaspora together at a nearly spiritual level, through a shared legacy of suffering. This pattern culminated in President Kennedy’s state visit to Ireland in 1963, where his articulation of an enduring bond with the ancestral homeland was a formative moment in the “white ethnic revival” of the 1960s and beyond.

JFK’s supposed self-invention as “the first Irish [Boston] Brahmin,” may have liberated many of his co-ancestral contemporaries from feelings of inferiority. But his embrace of an Irish identity at the moment of his American ascendency also, ultimately, helped liberate many white Americans from feelings of responsibility for a racial advantage that was now untrammeled. With an aggression more like Joe Kennedy’s backroom horse-trading than Jack Kennedy’s earnest speechifying, the white ethnic movement muted both class conflict and racial dominance. It claimed authenticity and denied privilege in ways that became ideologically useful to everyone from Tom Hayden to Ronald Reagan. And it has helped Boston, in which deep economic inequality has replaced ethnic rivalry as the governing contrast, to appear in popular culture as a blue-collar, Irish American city.

NOTES

6 Ibid., 124, 208–41.
7 Ibid., 130–44.
8 Ibid., 369–68.


16 Hamilton, *JFK*, 123.

17 Ibid., 121–27.


22 Hamilton, *JFK*, 207.


