



John F. Kennedy: Commander in Chief

Pierre Salinger

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John F. Kennedy's presidency has been well examined, but a frequently overlooked yet crucial component of it was his leadership of the United States armed forces. His relationship with the military was forged by personal combat experience and the many lessons learned during his presidential administration. A staunch supporter of the lower ranks, President Kennedy quickly became disillusioned with the upper echelon of the military, preferring ultimately to rely on his own wisdom and that of a close circle of trusted advisers. As a result, it can be argued that John F. Kennedy was more involved in his role as commander in chief than any other president of modern vintage. His was a unique challenge. The world was changing; military actions were no longer large-scale troop movements but small localized and diplomatic crises with frequent guerrilla activity.

President Kennedy, typically, quickly immersed himself in his role. Almost immediately following his election he was confronted with the formidable challenge of the Bay of Pigs. Relying on the advice of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Kennedy was humiliated by the results of that action, and yet he accepted complete responsibility for it. It was a mistake that would not be repeated. Thereafter, Kennedy questioned everything and came to his own decisions. He began to involve himself in details of the services, reviewing his "new" army, navy, and air force, even spending time thinking about what the individual soldier was wearing and carrying.

In *John F. Kennedy: Commander in Chief*, Pierre Salinger, press secretary and confidant to the president, provides an insightful view of this side of John F. Kennedy. He shares his unique understanding of all the major events of the Kennedy administration that had a military component. He draws a fascinating and clear depiction of the Kennedy learning curve--illuminating the brilliance of the man. Kennedy learned his lessons quickly. One can only speculate what may have resulted had Kennedy lived and been elected to a second term, especially when one reads Kennedy's commencement address speech at American University included in this volume. This speech, considered by many to be his finest, is remarkable in showing the maturity that President Kennedy had attained. Today it is easy to see the beginning of a new statesmanship in his speech, a new global consciousness, a larger and longer view for peace. Pierre Salinger, tantalizingly and profoundly, traces the maturation of Kennedy in his role as commander in chief and brings us to wonder what might have been.

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