

# Promises Kept

JOHN F. KENNEDY'S

NEW FRONTIER

*Irving Bernstein*

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# PROMISES KEPT

IRVING BERNSTEIN

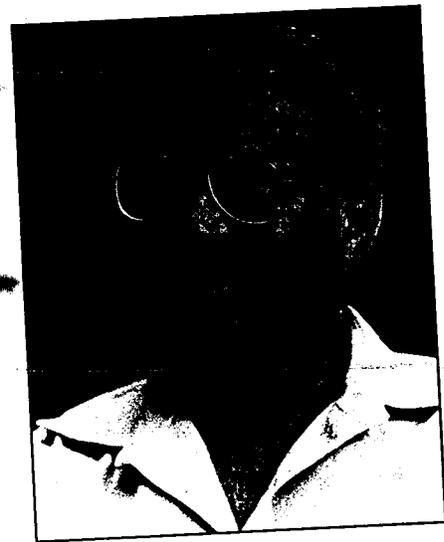
Since the death of John F. Kennedy, the early hagiography has given way to a sharply critical, revisionist portrait that depicts a mediocre president whose domestic program was a dismal failure. Kennedy was a man of words, not of deeds, one critic wrote, and his achievements "were less significant than James K. Polk." But in *Promises Kept*, eminent historian Irving Bernstein argues that "the revisionists are dead wrong." By 1963, Kennedy had become a very effective leader and, if he had not been assassinated, there is no doubt that his whole program would have been enacted by 1965.

In this brilliant reassessment of the Kennedy years based on primary sources, Bernstein vividly recreates many of the major political and social confrontations of the early '60s, especially the burgeoning struggle for civil rights. He describes the 1961 Freedom Ride bus trip that headed south to defy Jim Crow (James Farmer and six other blacks were horribly beaten when the bus arrived in Birmingham) and the violent riot on the campus of Ole Miss where a young James Meredith, with the backing of Kennedy's Justice Department, the National Guard, and the U.S. Army, became the first black ever to register at that bastion of the Deep South. Bernstein also examines Kennedy's determined fight to push through education aid bills, raise the minimum wage, establish Medicare and revitalize the American economy and create full employment. Kennedy survived the early stumbles of inexperience, Bernstein con-

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cludes, to become a master of legislative politics. By November of 1963, he had forged a working relationship with a hostile Congress and made the breakthroughs that would lead to the tax cut, the Civil Rights Act, federal aid for education, and Medicare in 1964 and 1965.

A provocative new account of Kennedy's domestic achievements, *Promises Kept* is the first of a two-volume study of the social and economic reform programs of the 1960s. When complete, it will be a signal contribution to our understanding of recent American history.



David Pond-Smith

*About the Author*

**Irving Bernstein** is Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Los Angeles. His works include *The Lean Years*, *Turbulent Years*, and *A Caring Society*—an acclaimed trilogy on the American worker in the era of the Great Depression.

*Cover photograph: Kennedy's inauguration speech; courtesy of UPI/Bettman Newsphotos.*

*Jacket design by David Gatti*

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### EXCERPT

"On Capitol Hill they like to say that politics is the art of the possible. Kennedy, with his penchant for history, preferred to quote Jefferson: 'Great innovations should not be forced on slender majorities.' Kennedy confronted a reluctant and sometimes hostile Congress. . . . In his first two years he needed to grow into his job. He sometimes seemed unsure of himself and made mistakes. But he settled in during 1963. He now knew how to handle himself, was surrounded with competent advisers, and was very popular. This manifested itself in significant legislative breakthroughs in Congress. When he predicted on November 14, 1963, that his entire program would be enacted within eighteen months, he was right; if anything, perhaps a bit on the conservative side. He was emerging as a President of great stature when, eight days later, a mindless assassin in Dallas cut his life short."



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