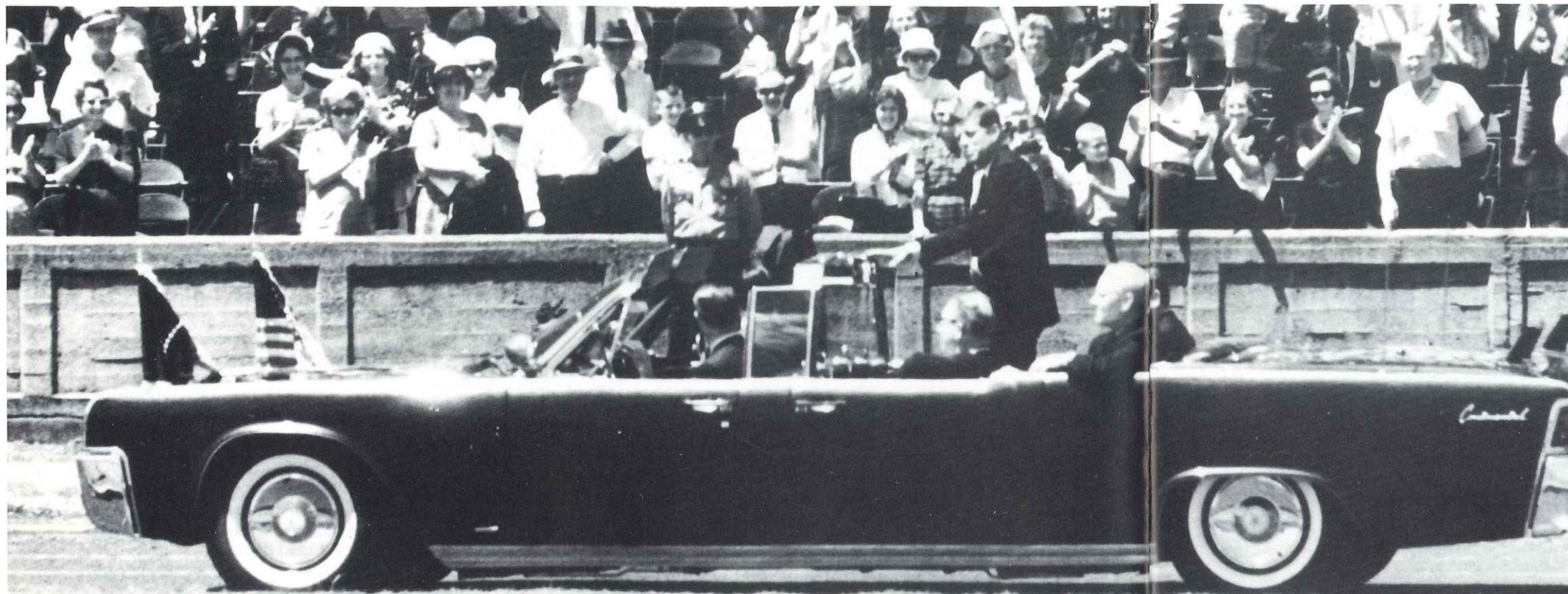


# JFK AT VANDERBILT

*Thirty years ago, President John F. Kennedy spoke on Founder's Day*



by Robert M. Hammond

Thirty years ago President John F. Kennedy came to Vanderbilt. Speaking at Vanderbilt Stadium on May 18, 1963, the ninetieth anniversary of the University's founding, he issued a call to public service on the part of the educated citizen.

"You have responsibility," he challenged Vanderbilt students and alumni, "to use your talent for the benefit of the society which helped to develop those talents. You must decide, as Goethe put it, whether you will be an anvil or a

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hammer, whether you will give to the world in which you are reared and educated the broadest possible benefits of that education."

Speaking at a time of racial tensions at home and Cold War crises abroad, the President declared, "...everything changes but change itself. We live in an age of movement and change, both evolutionary and revolutionary, both good and evil—and in such an age a university has a special obligation to hold fast to the best of the past and move fast to the best of the future." On that bright May morning in 1963, it would have been hard to imagine that the United States would be wrenched by sudden and tragic change in November—the assassination of President Kennedy that began an incredible chain of events that constantly tested the American people and their society for nearly two decades.

President Kennedy spoke at Vanderbilt seven months after the United

States and the Soviet Union had risked nuclear confrontation when the U.S. learned that the Soviets had placed offensive missiles in Cuba that were capable of striking targets in the eastern United States with nuclear warheads. Challenged by Kennedy, the Soviets withdrew the missiles from Cuba.

He spoke at Vanderbilt only a month after Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference targeted Birmingham, Alabama, as a site for demonstrations to end discrimination in downtown stores and lunch counters, and Police Commissioner "Bull" Connor ordered the use of fire hoses, clubs, and police dogs against the demonstrators. The weekend before the President came to Vanderbilt, the Birmingham home of King's brother and the motel used by civil rights leaders were bombed. After the bombings there was rioting by blacks in Birmingham.

At Vanderbilt, President Kennedy said,

"This nation is now engaged in a continuing debate about the rights of a portion of its citizens. That will go on, and those rights will expand, until the standard first forged by the nation's founders has been reached, and all Americans enjoy equal opportunity under law....The nation—indeed the whole world—has watched recent events in the United States with alarm and dismay. No one can deny the complexity of the problem involved in assuring to all our citizens their full rights as Americans. But no one can gainsay the fact that the determination to secure these rights is in the highest tradition of American freedom."

May 18, 1963, was the thirtieth anniversary of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's signing of the bill that created the Tennessee Valley Authority. President Kennedy chose to recognize this anniversary with a speech at Vanderbilt on its ninetieth anniversary and a speech at Muscle Shoals, Alabama, as well as cer-

emonially launching excavation for construction of the Cordell Hull Dam near Carthage, Tennessee.

That he chose to come to Vanderbilt was probably a result of several fortuitous connections. Kennedy knew Chancellor Alexander Heard, who had chaired the nine-member President's Commission on Campaign Costs. He knew Harold S. Vanderbilt, president of the Vanderbilt University Board of Trust. Both the Kennedy and the Vanderbilt families had homes in Palm Beach, Florida, where they became acquainted. He also knew John Seigenthaler, editor of the Nashville *Tennessean*, who had been Attorney General Robert Kennedy's administrative assistant at the Justice Department.

Certainly, U.S. Senator Albert Gore, of Tennessee, played a key role in influencing the President to choose to speak at Vanderbilt.

Heard recalls, "The first intimation that I had that President Kennedy would come came from Senator Gore in a telephone call from him to me. The date is uncertain, but I assume early in March 1963." In a letter dated March 26, 1963, Chancellor Heard formally invited President Kennedy to speak on Founder's Day. Senator Gore, "very much the negotiator," according to Heard, conveyed the President's acceptance by phone. In a letter dated April 3, 1963, Kenneth O'Donnell, appointments secretary, confirmed the President's acceptance.

Preparations for the President's visit began immediately at Vanderbilt. The job of planning and coordinating for Vanderbilt's first presidential visit was assigned to Robert A. McGaw, director of information and publications. He worked closely with Chancellor Heard and with the White House advance man, Jerry Bruno, who wanted to ensure that the visit would be politically helpful to President Kennedy.

The details were endless. McGaw and his staff put in many, many extra hours. Arrangements were made for seating on

the platform. These seats were in demand, and the task of assigning them had to be done with great diplomacy. Special invitation lists were drawn up, and the invitations were printed and mailed. Seats were reserved for special guests, and arrangements were made for the general public and the bands that would be present. Parking permits were issued, and a shuttle bus system was set up from points around Nashville to the stadium.

There were blueprints for the platform being erected on Dudley Field. Seigenthaler pointed out that the steps leading up to the platform were too steep for the President, who did not want to draw attention to his chronically bad back. The original steps had to be rebuilt with a lower degree of incline so that the President could negotiate them without pain.

Another of McGaw's responsibilities was to provide for the press. Press credentials were issued and press guides sent out. Arrangements were made to seat the press on the field in an area adjacent to the platform where there were tables and special telephone lines.

Security for the President's visit to Nashville and Vanderbilt was, of course, the responsibility of the Secret Service. Not long after the announcement of JFK's visit, the Secret Service set up headquarters at the Andrew Jackson Hotel in downtown Nashville. The Secret Service coordinated security with state and Metro officials and the armed services. The day before the President was to arrive, his 1962 Lincoln limousine (the car in which he would be riding when he was assassinated in Dallas) and the Queen Mary, the 1956 Cadillac that was the Secret Service back-up car, were flown to Nashville for the motorcade.

The night before the President's arrival there was a meeting at 11 P.M. in John Seigenthaler's office at the *Tennessean* at which final details of the visit were confirmed.

Air Force One touched down at Nashville's Berry Field at 10:28 A.M. on Saturday, May 18. It was a beautiful spring day with temperatures expected in the 70s. President Kennedy, eleven days before his forty-sixth birthday, emerged from the rear door of the aircraft looking tanned and fit. He was

wearing a dark blue suit, white shirt, and, in honor of the visit to Vanderbilt, a black tie with gold stripes.

He was officially greeted by Governor Frank Clement and Metropolitan Nashville Mayor Beverly Briley. Characteristically, the President ignored his waiting limousine and walked to a fence separating him from a crowd of approximately five thousand people. It was obvious that he enjoyed shaking hands and greeting people up and down the fence. The Secret Service agents coaxed him back to the presidential convertible where he was joined by Governor Clement and Senators Gore and Estes Kefauver for the motorcade to Vanderbilt Stadium.

The six-car motorcade traveled down Murfreesboro Road to Eighth Avenue North, to Broadway, onto West End Avenue, and finally turned south on Natchez Trace to Vanderbilt Stadium. The parade route was decorated with

the west stands, the President stood in his car, acknowledging his welcome. He was greeted at the platform by Chancellor Heard and other platform guests.

In addition to the President there were forty-nine platform guests. Representing the University were Chancellor Heard, Chancellor Emeritus Harvie Branscomb; Tom Abernathy, president of the Vanderbilt Student Association; Linda Armstrong, president of the Women's Student Government Association; William C. Finch, dean of the Vanderbilt Divinity School; Garner Petrie, president of the Vanderbilt Alumni Association; and Professor Robert T. Lagemann, secretary of the Vanderbilt Senate. Because of illness, Harold S. Vanderbilt could not be present. Representing the Vanderbilt family on the platform were William H. Vanderbilt, a former governor of Rhode Island, and his son William H. Vanderbilt, Jr.

Chancellor Heard, in a friendly ges-

the invocation. Then the Chancellor welcomed the crowd to the celebration of the ninetieth anniversary of Vanderbilt's founding. He went on to say, "Vanderbilt is a private university in the public service. We are pleased that our guest chose to visit this state on the thirtieth anniversary of the signing of the Congressional Act creating the Tennessee Valley Authority." He introduced the platform guests and then continued, saying:

"Ninety years ago Vanderbilt University was born. It was born of a need, deeply felt; of a vision, clearly held; and of the essential means, wisely provided. The educational poverty of a section was a liability of the nation. To help meet this need, a far-sighted bishop projected a university, as he said, 'of the highest order.' To build and endow such a university, Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt made a well-informed donation. Our country, rent by civil war, needed des-

together were clear, concise, reasoned, and sequential. The speech at Vanderbilt was no exception. *Time* magazine called the Vanderbilt address "spirited and eloquent."

The President began by expressing thanks for the welcome he had received. He praised TVA and its accomplishments and announced the construction of two dams in Middle Tennessee. One was to be named in honor of Cordell Hull, the Tennessean who served as Secretary of State under FDR, and the other in honor of former Congressman J. Percy Priest.

Perhaps what is most remarkable about JFK's visit to Vanderbilt is that, during a time of intense racial tension in Birmingham and other places, he came to the South and spoke for the civil rights of all Americans. From Vanderbilt he went on to Alabama to make a speech at Muscle Shoals marking TVA's thirtieth anniversary and to visit Red-

and strongest men who are crowned, but they who enter the lists—for out of these the prizemen are selected. So too, in life, of the honorable and the good, it is they who act who rightly win the prizes." Kennedy urged "...all of you today, especially those who are students, to act, to enter the lists of public service and rightly win—or lose—the prize."

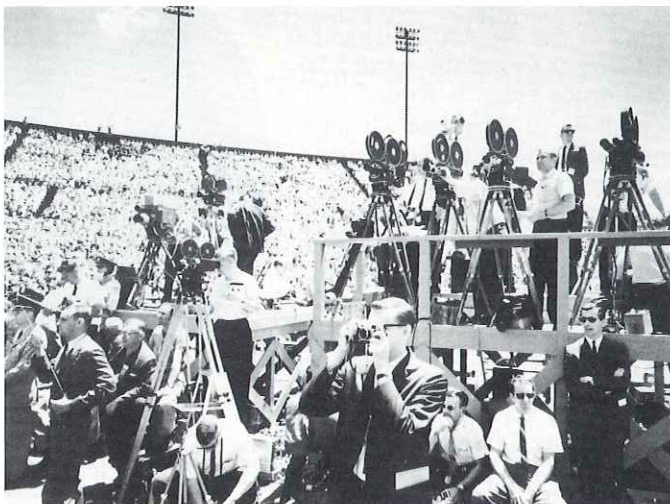
He also warned that upon entering public service, "You will find the pressures greater than the pay. You may endure more public attack than support. But you will have the unequalled satisfaction of knowing that your character and talent are contributing to the direction and success of this free society."

The President closed by telling the story of the founding of Vanderbilt. He quoted Cornelius Vanderbilt's response to Bishop McTyeire's plea for money to endow a university to help the South overcome its educational poverty caused by the Civil War. "I want to unite this

keep us free."

The crowd surged to its feet in a standing ovation. President Kennedy returned to his chair. But then Chancellor Heard reminded him that he had not pressed the key that would signal the start of excavation for the Cordell Hull Dam. Kennedy returned to the podium and pressed the key. Over the loud speakers the sound of an explosion was transmitted from the dam site about fifty miles away. Kennedy laughed and said, "Really, it shows how easy it is to be a President."

Those who were there on the day the President spoke have happy memories of the occasion. "It was an exciting and successful event," says McGaw. "Even the people who had not voted for Kennedy and would not vote for Kennedy liked the drama of the occasion," says Heard. "It was a very beautiful day, and there was a kind of a holiday mood. It was a great celebration."



President John F. Kennedy addressed a large crowd at Vanderbilt Stadium on May 18, 1963, as cameras clicked and rolled.

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE

more than 570 flags, bunting, and special gold and blue signs proclaiming "Welcome Mr. President—It's Metro Day for JFK." Tennesseans were excited over the first presidential visit since that of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936. Crowd estimates along the parade route were between 150,000 and 200,000. Forty bands from mid-state area high schools and colleges also lined the route. In his speech, the President expressed his warm appreciation for his generous welcome "particularly to all those young men and women who lined the streets and played music for us as we drove into the stadium. We are glad they are here with us, and we feel the musical future of this city and state is assured."

As the President's car entered the stadium, the crowd rose in a standing ovation, and the Vanderbilt-Peabody band struck up "Hail to the Chief." Passing

ture to the other thirteen institutions of higher learning in Nashville, invited the chief executive of each to sit on the platform.

Political officeholders on the platform that day were Mayor Briley, Governor Clement, Tennessee Congressmen Ross Bass, Robert A. Everett, Joe L. Evins, and Richard Fulton, Senators Kefauver and Gore of Tennessee and United States Senators from Alabama Lister Hill and John Sparkman. The three directors of the Tennessee Valley Authority and three officers from the Army Corps of Engineers were on the platform. Also present were five former governors of Tennessee and Mrs. J. Percy Priest, widow of former Congressman J. Percy Priest (the President was announcing a TVA dam to be built in his name).

To begin the proceedings, Chancellor Heard introduced Dean Finch, who gave

perately to be united. Commodore Vanderbilt, a northerner, suggested his purpose when he said, 'If Vanderbilt University shall through its influence contribute to strengthening the ties which should exist between all sections of our common country, I shall feel that it has accomplished one of the objects that led me to take an interest in it.'"

President Kennedy's address at Vanderbilt lasted about twenty minutes—a length that the President and his speech writer and special counsel, Theodore Sorensen, considered effective. When asked if he had written the speech at Vanderbilt, Sorensen replied that he "worked on, advised, and assisted" the President on the speech. As President and speech writer, Kennedy and Sorensen had a special chemistry and worked closely on all major presidential addresses. The speeches they produced

stone Arsenal at Huntsville. While on that leg of his journey he met briefly with Alabama Governor George Wallace who was adamantly fighting the civil rights movement.

In his Vanderbilt speech, however, Kennedy devoted most of his time to emphasizing the duties of an educated citizen. "Of the many special obligations incumbent upon an educated citizen," he cited three as outstanding: an obligation to the pursuit of learning; an obligation to serve the public; an obligation to uphold the law. He urged the educated citizen to be active in public affairs at all levels of government. "He may be a civil servant or a senator, a candidate or a campaign worker, a winner or a loser. But he must be a participant and not a spectator."

The President quoted Aristotle. "At the Olympic games it is not the finest

country, and all sections of it, so that all our people will be one."

Kennedy said that the Commodore's response to Bishop McTyeire "...gave Vanderbilt not only an endowment, but also a mission. Now, ninety years later, in a time of tension, it is more important than ever to unite this country and strengthen these ties so that all of our people will be one."

He concluded, "Ninety years from now, I have no doubt that Vanderbilt University will still be fulfilling this mission. It will still uphold learning, encourage public service, and teach respect for law. It will neither turn its back on truth and wisdom nor turn its face from newborn challenge. It will still pass on to the youth of our land the full meaning of their rights and their responsibilities. And it will still be teaching the truth—the truth that makes us free, and will

A plaque commemorating Kennedy's address at Vanderbilt was dedicated on the first anniversary of his visit, six months after his death. The plaque was originally on the wall on the east side of the stadium. During the last stadium renovation it was moved to the wall on the south concourse of the stadium. On game day it is partially hidden behind a Pepsi stand. It reads in part:

"The essence of Vanderbilt is still learning. The essence of its outlook is still liberty....Liberty without learning is always in peril, and learning without liberty is always in vain. This state, this city, this campus have stood long for both human rights and human enlightenment—and let that forever be true."

President John F. Kennedy  
May 18, 1963  
Vanderbilt University