
Candidate Kennedy and Quemoy Quentin Spannagel

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Running for president in 1960, John F. Kennedy promised to explore a "New Frontier." -- a hybrid of challenges and opportunities that promised progress in both domestic and foreign affairs.⁵⁸ In essence, Kennedy advocated for a new America not chained down by the traditional approaches of the Republican administration before him. In many way, Kennedy achieved what he desired: a new, more open-minded way of approaching international issues. Though Kennedy struggled to develop a new diplomatic approach to China, he did show a willingness to compromise with the Chinese in regards to the islands of Quemoy and Matsu.⁵⁹ Kennedy remained a "cold warrior" throughout his presidency but he did begin to cautiously portray himself to the communist Chinese as more open to negotiation than the Eisenhower administration. This is best reflected in Kennedy's stance on the islands of Quemoy and Matsu during the 1960 presidential debate.

The crisis between the Republic of China (ROC)⁶⁰ and the communist People's Republic of China (PRC) was one of the great political tinderboxes for American foreign policy in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1949, during the administration of President Harry S. Truman, Mao Zedong conquered mainland China, defeating the nationalist government of Jiang Jieshi.⁶¹ The Nationalists fled to the heavily fortified island of Formosa, but Jiang's forces managed to hold the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu in the Battle of Gunningtou (October 1949). Both islands are close enough to the mainland that they can easily be seen by the naked eye. The antagonists remained in a stalemate for over a decade: the PRC controlled the entire mainland and the ROC controlled Taiwan and the nearby islands of Quemoy and Matsu. On several instances though, tensions between the PRC and ROC flared up, requiring U.S. intervention to prevent the renewal of the Chinese Civil War.

In 1954-1955, the United States found itself being dragged into the first Taiwan Strait Crisis. The crisis began when President Dwight D. Eisenhower lifted the Seventh Fleet blockade in the Taiwan Strait on February 2, 1953, less than two weeks after succeeding Truman as president. This resulted from American domestic pressure to allow Jiang to attack the mainland, even though the ROC had no chance of victory. This pressure primarily came from Republicans and the Kuomintang government which sought reclaiming the mainland from communism. As the ROC and American military establishments began stationing thousands of troops on Quemoy and Matsu, an invasion of the mainland appeared likely to the PRC.⁶² The communists then responded by directing their heavy artillery straight at Quemoy and Matsu. A few more militant-minded Americans in the military called for nuclear weapons to stop Chinese aggression against Taiwan. Eisenhower was reluctant to use nuclear weapons to resolve the crisis, and opted to respond to the

⁵⁸ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1965), 64.

⁵⁹ For the purposes of this paper, the islands now known as Kinmen and Matsu will be referred to as "Quemoy and Matsu," reflecting the popular American usage during the 1960 presidential campaign.

⁶⁰ Also widely known as "Taiwan." The government of the ROC is often referred to as "Nationalists." This paper will use "ROC," "Taiwan," and "Formosa" interchangeably.

⁶¹ Also referred to as Chiang Kai-shek.

⁶² Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Dangerous Strait: The U.S.-Taiwan-China Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 188-189.

PRC's act of aggression by signing the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty of 1954. The pact stipulated that if Taiwan was attacked by the PRC, the United States would militarily intervene and bring U.S. troops to the aid of Taiwan.⁶³ However, this treaty did not guarantee American assistance in the case of aggression against all islands that Taiwan controlled and claimed to be vital to their national security.

The ROC had been an American ally since WWII, and American public opinion deemed unacceptable the idea of abandoning the ROC to conquest by the communist PRC. Bowing to public opinion, America committed itself to defending the ROC from a communist takeover. From the perspective of the PRC, Taiwan was a vital province in a state of open rebellion. Thus the PRC viewed Taiwan as an internal issue; in this light, threats of U.S. involvement challenged PRC sovereignty. The PRC demanded America abandon all commitments to Taiwan before it would open up formal relations. This the United States refused to do, unwilling to be seen as allowing more territory to fall to communism. For this reason, Sino-American relations would not drastically improve until the 1970s.

Kennedy's Anti-Communism Credentials

Though the ROC looked at the Democrat Kennedy with apprehension, he made it apparent during his House and Senate terms that he was a staunch anti-communist. Kennedy expressed his anti-communist sentiment particularly strongly in political debates and speeches. However, in private, Kennedy occasionally signaled openness to improving relations with the PRC if it halted its anti-American rhetoric, accepted the American commitment to Taiwan, and pursued a less aggressive policy in Southeast Asia.

In 1947, while serving in the House of Representatives, Kennedy called for the indictment of Harold Christoffel, a United Auto Workers member who in 1941 called for a strike against the Allis-Chalmers Company, on charges of perjury.⁶⁴ Kennedy suspected Christoffel of being a communist and the Allis-Chalmers Company was vital to the national defense effort. Wisconsin Congressman Charles J. Kersten called Kennedy's early bold action against communism one of "[T]he first shots fired against American communism in this country."⁶⁵ Then in 1948, Kennedy broke from the Democratic Party and voted for the Mundt-Nixon Bill, which required domestic communists and their members to register with the federal government.

In 1949, Representative Kennedy even accused President Truman, the leader of his own party, and his administration of being soft on communism. He placed exclusive blame on the White House and the State Department for "losing" China — a position normally associated with Republicans.⁶⁶ Probably the most interesting display of Kennedy's anti-communist background was his friendship with Joseph McCarthy. McCarthy was the face and heart of the Red Scare of the 1950s and was a family friend of the Kennedys dating back to a friendship with Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.⁶⁷ This family friendship is particularly apparent in the fact that Representative Kennedy's younger brother Robert got his start in politics working for McCarthy.⁶⁸ McCarthy was serving as the Chair of the Senate Committee, and Robert worked within the Committee.

During a House session on May 9th, 1951, Representative Kennedy criticized Great Britain and other countries for providing the PRC with rubber and other war materials. As Kennedy lambasted other nations for their material support of the PRC, American soldiers were fighting and

⁶³ Ibid, 189.

⁶⁴ Thomas J. Whalen, *Kennedy versus Lodge: The 1952 Massachusetts Senate Race* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 112-113.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 113.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 113-114.

⁶⁷ United States Ambassador to the Court of St. James' (United Kingdom) from 1938 to 1940 and President Kennedy's father.

⁶⁸ Marc J. Selverstone, *A Companion to John F. Kennedy* (United Kingdom: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 99-100.

sustaining heavy losses against PRC troops in Korea. Kennedy wanted the legislature to disrupt the PRC's ability to wage war. "The Congress of the United States must in conscience take action that will condemn and forbid any further shipment of materials, useful in war, to Communist China directly, or indirectly through Hong Kong," declared the young congressman.⁶⁹

In 1952 when running for election to the United States Senate against the incumbent Republican Henry Cabot Lodge, Kennedy accused his opponent of being the number one supporter of the Truman foreign policy that appeased the communists. Kennedy also accused Lodge of failing as a senator because he refused to support legislation that would have halted the trading of war materials to communist nations.⁷⁰ Kennedy's campaign secretary William Sutton went as far as to call Kennedy "ultraconservative" and that many of his speeches when running for the House of Representatives in 1946 stressed anticommunism.⁷¹

Kennedy Displays Some Flexibility

Though Kennedy seemed to be constantly positioning himself as a leading anti-communist, he believed that relations with communist China could slowly be improved without hurting the American relationship with Taiwan. He took a pragmatic approach to a gradual rapprochement. Kennedy's intense anti-colonialism, for instance, actually echoed the communist line, and he was especially vocal against continued colonialism in French Indochina. In Kennedy's own words in his book *The Strategy of Peace*, "to pour money, materi[a]l, and men into the jungles of Indo-China without at least a remote prospect of victory would be dangerous, futile, and self-destructive."⁷²

Kennedy also preached the importance of India and the PRC to the development of the world, and how they would be models of development in Asia, calling them "poles of power."⁷³ Unlike many in the United States government, Kennedy doubted the possibility of Jiang Jieshi regaining the mainland and accepted the fact that America would have to learn to live alongside the People's Republic of China.⁷⁴ As pleased as Americans would have been if the ROC nationalists regained the mainland, it would have been a futile and dangerous policy to encourage Jiang to engage in aggressive behavior.

In 1957, three years before he announced his candidacy for the presidency, Kennedy admitted that "United States policy was 'probably too rigid' and ran the risk of missing opportunities to improve relations with China."⁷⁵ On June 14th, 1960, Kennedy suggested in a speech that the next administration should try to bring the PRC more into the global community. In particular, Kennedy asserted that,

Perhaps a way could be found to bring the Chinese into the nuclear ban talks at Geneva-so that the Soviets could not continue their atomic tests on the mainland of China without inspection-and because Chinese possession of atomic weapons could drastically alter the balance of power.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ John F. Kennedy, *A Compilation of Statements and Speeches Made During His Service in the United States Senate and House of Representatives* (Washington: The Library of Congress, 1964), 78.

⁷⁰ Whalen, 111.

⁷¹ Ibid, 112.

⁷² John F. Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960): 59.

⁷³ Ibid, 141.

⁷⁴ Jean S. Kang, "Firmness and Flexibility: Initiations for Change in U.S. Policy Toward Communist China, 1961-1963," *American Asian Review* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 111.

⁷⁵ Thomas Paterson ed. "Clinging to Containment: China Policy," *Kennedy's Quest for Victory: 1961-1963* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989): 180.

⁷⁶ Russell Bakers, "Kennedy Favors Peiping Contacts: In Major Foreign Policy Talk, He Suggests Red China Join Atom-Ban Parley", *New York Times*, June 15, 1960.

Kennedy went even further than including the Chinese in the Geneva accords. He went on to say that “if that contact proves fruitful, further cultural and economic contact should be tried.”⁷⁷ In 1960 at least, Kennedy envisioned a China that would back off from the anti-American rhetoric and informal relations could begin to develop in the country. He was aware that normal diplomatic relations would not develop overnight and that progress would be miniscule at first. Kennedy knew opening the front door for China would be impossible but cracking a window might be achievable. If a window was cracked between the two countries, it could be slowly opened until normal diplomatic relations became feasible.

Factors that Hindered Rapprochement with China

One of Kennedy’s biggest obstacles when it came to improving relations with China was his political party. Though an intense “cold warrior,” Kennedy was still a Democrat, and any Democrat’s anti-communism credentials were thought by Republicans to be suspect. Republicans still attacked Democrats, in particular, former President Truman, for being “soft on Communism,” and for having “lost” China in the first place, despite Truman’s role in helping Jiang Jieshi establish his hold on Taiwan.⁷⁸ For this reason, candidate Kennedy would have to be very careful in reevaluating Chinese foreign policy; if he strayed too far from the status quo, he could easily catch Republican censure for encouraging communism. “Losing” another Asian country to communism would be a political disaster for any American president, but particularly a Democratic president. The stakes were high for Kennedy as he sought the presidency.

Election of 1960 and the Presidential Debates

Though Kennedy made his anti-communism credentials clear long before claiming the presidency, he also showed he would be open to bringing China into the international community if they would abide by American standards. Kennedy himself advocated for an “Open Door” where the U.S. would be willing to negotiate with the PRC if it showed it was willing to negotiate in good faith. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 1957, Kennedy said, “We should indicate our willingness to talk to them when they so desire to do so and to set forth conditions of recognition which seem responsible to the watching world.”⁷⁹

Later, in 1960, Chester Bowles, a Kennedy campaign advisor and future Undersecretary of State, echoed this flexibility, asserting that “Sen. John F. Kennedy has time and again warned of the dangers of the inadequate, insensitive and inept policies with which we have attempted to deal with the vital questions of foreign policy.”⁸⁰ Bowles continued that Kennedy realized that international dilemmas could not always be solved by having the biggest bombs. Instead, the key was to find areas of agreement with the Soviets and Chinese, whether it was through nuclear testing controls, arms limitation, or space exploration.⁸¹ As Bowles cites Kennedy as saying, “The problem is to find a beginning.”⁸²

By fall 1960, Senator Kennedy and Republican Vice President Richard Nixon were in the midst of a heated presidential campaign. For the first time, the two major party presidential nominees met to debate the issues of the campaign, and the confrontations were televised nationally. Much of the American population tuned in to watch the two face off. On October 7, 1960, Kennedy and Nixon engaged in the second presidential debate in Washington, D.C. Near the end

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 178-179.

⁷⁹ Kang, 114-115.

⁸⁰ Chester Bowles, “The Foreign Policy of Senator Kennedy,” *America* 104, no. 3 (1960): 69.

⁸¹ Ibid, 73.

⁸² Ibid.

of the debate, the topic turned to Quemoy and Kennedy took a pragmatic approach, arguing that the islands were “indefensible” and not of vital interest to the United States. If the PRC seized the islands, the United States should not consider it a reason to go to war. In Kennedy’s own words: “These islands are a few miles - five or six miles -off the coast of Red China, within a general harbor area and more than a hundred miles from Formosa. We have never said flatly that we will defend Quemoy and Matsu if it's attacked. We say we will defend it if it's part of a general attack on Formosa.”⁸³ Nixon immediately attacked Kennedy’s position, saying the islands lay in the zone of freedom. More importantly, Nixon argued, the communist PRC did not want these islands in and of themselves, but sought them as a precursor to invading Taiwan itself. The PRC would not be satisfied till it conquered Taiwan. Nixon further asserted that the Democratic nominee incorrectly viewed the islands as little more than “indefensible rocks,” instead of the highly fortified protective islands that they actually were.⁸⁴

Nixon declared that if Kennedy was elected, the PRC would invade Quemoy and Matsu knowing the United States would not respond.⁸⁵ For Nixon, land that had been secured by the nationalists for ten years would fall to communism due to an inexperienced and inept new president fumbling the aggressive communist threat. If China was able to conquer Quemoy and Matsu without a struggle, then they would naturally invade Taiwan and drag the United States into another war. Nixon argued that, “The last Democratic administration left the nation with one of the bloodiest and costliest wars in its history, and another Democratic regime would plunge it into another.”⁸⁶

The Vice President insisted that, as a matter of principle, Quemoy and Matsu could not be abandoned to the communists. Republican Senator Hugh Scott (R-PA) echoed Nixon’s attack, criticizing Kennedy’s declaration as “fuzzy” on the issue and condescendingly adding that Kennedy “would be better qualified to speak on relations between the United States and Communist China after he had a little more maturity and experience.”⁸⁷

Jiang Jieshi also angrily renounced Kennedy’s assertion on the nationalist islands. The ROC Foreign Ministry said that Nationalist China had not required any American soldiers to defend these islands over the past ten years and it refused to surrender any more land to the communists.⁸⁸ The islands, the Foreign Ministry maintained, were quite important to Taiwan because they were positions that kept the PRC from staging further attacks across the strait into Taiwan. According to Admiral Liu Yuzhang of the Nationalist Navy, “The Communists cannot fully use the nearby ports of Amoy and Foochow for invading Formosa as long as Quemoy and Matsu are under Nationalist control.”⁸⁹ If Kennedy allowed these islands to be abandoned, Liu asserted, the American president would open an alley for the invasion of Taiwan. The Republicans and the China Lobby refused to allow this to happen.

Kennedy stuck by his guns and refused to apologize or change his position. Kennedy accused Nixon of wanting war and of being willing to fight the Chinese over a small matter. At a Democratic party dinner speech on October 12, 1960, one day before the third presidential debate, Kennedy said: “I will not risk American lives and a nuclear war by permitting any other nation to drag us into the wrong war at the wrong place at the wrong time through an unwise commitment

⁸³ “October 7, 1960 Debate Transcript: the Second Kennedy-Nixon Presidential Debate,” Commission on Presidential Debates, accessed May 2, 2015, www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-7-1960-debate-transcript

⁸⁴ Willard Edwards, “Nixon Blasts ‘Retreat’ on Chinese Isles: Warns Kennedy Would Blunder Into War,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October, 12th, 1960.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ “Scott Says Kennedy is Fuzzy on Taiwan,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1960.

⁸⁸ “Formosa to Kennedy: We Won’t Yield Inch to Reds,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 15, 1960.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

that is unsound militarily, unnecessary to our security, and unsupported by our allies.”⁹⁰ By taking a public stand of pragmatism on the islands, Kennedy tried to channel some flexibility to the PRC.

On October 13, 1960, Kennedy and Nixon engaged in the third debate. This debate was unique, since Nixon was in Los Angeles and Kennedy was in New York, the candidates debated via satellite and appeared on television in split screen. Due to identical sets, the candidates appeared to be debating in the same room when in reality they were across the country from each other. A large portion of this debate was a continuation from the second debate on what to do in regards to Quemoy. When asked if he would defend the islands of Quemoy from Chinese attack, Nixon deflected slightly. He said the Chinese would not be attacking the islands solely for the islands but as an effort to conquer Formosa. Since this would be the case, Nixon said, “in the event that their attack then were a prelude to an attack on Formosa, there isn't any question but that the United States would then again, as in the case of Berlin, honor our treaty obligations and stand by our ally of Formosa.”⁹¹

Kennedy also stuck by his earlier statement during the debate, saying “Now, that is the issue. I believe we must meet our commitment to...Formosa. I support it and the Pescadores Island. That is the present American position. The treaty does not include these two islands.”⁹² Kennedy also talked about the proximity of Quemoy to the mainland and is not within the border of the treaty area. Kennedy also cited Admiral Harry E. Yarnell, former commander of the Asiatic fleet, as saying “These islands [Quemoy and nearby islands] are not worth the bones of a single American.”⁹³ Kennedy wanted to send a clear message that he was not going to let Republican pressure push him into changing his Quemoy stance.

Winning the Presidency: Realizing Rapprochement Must Wait

We observe a very different Kennedy in August 1961, less than a year into his presidency. Sailing with colleagues on his boat off Hyannis Port, Kennedy groaned at the mere mention of foreign policy talk about China: “Jackie, we need the Bloody Marys now.”⁹⁴ At this point in his presidency, Kennedy realized that the New Frontier would not as easily be applied to China as it was to other global issues. It became apparent that China was unwilling to budge on the topic of Taiwan and their continued aggression towards India was a serious problem for America. Americans were especially concerned over Chinese progress towards nuclear weapons since they were showing more aggressive tendencies than the Soviets. On August 2, 1961, Kennedy reaffirmed U.S. opposition to the admission of the PRC into the United Nations. Even more antagonizing to the PRC, Kennedy promised to continue military and economic aid to Taiwan.⁹⁵

John F. Kennedy won the 1960 presidential election against Richard Nixon by a slim margin. He beat Nixon in the electoral vote 303 to 219; had Illinois and Texas gone the other way, Vice President Nixon would have prevailed. The national popular vote was even narrower: Kennedy got 49.7% of the votes compared to Nixon's 49.6%.⁹⁶ As this election illustrated, Kennedy did not have a lot of wiggle room and could not do anything that would alienate a large number of voters. Congress agreed. In July 1961, the Senate passed a resolution that would ban the admission of China

⁹⁰ Peter Kihss, “Kennedy Charges Nixon Risks War: Opponent ‘Trigger-Happy’ on Quemoy,” *New York Times*, October 13, 1960.

⁹¹ “October 13, 1960 Debate Transcript: The Third Kennedy-Nixon Presidential Debate,” Commission on Presidential Debates, Accessed May 2, 2015, www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-13-1960-debate-transcript

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Paterson, 178.

⁹⁵ Tom Wicker, “Kennedy Renews Pledge to Taiwan,” *New York Times*, August 3, 1961.

⁹⁶ Selverstone, 69.

into the U.N. and would continue to not formally recognize the PRC. This resolution passed the Senate 76-0, and the House also passed it 395-0.⁹⁷

The legislative branch had sent a clear message to Kennedy that it was not interested in improving relations with China. Congress wanted to maintain the status quo as far as admitting the PRC to the U.N., and was firmly against opening diplomatic relations with the PRC. The American people agreed in opinion polls. In 1959, 61% of Americans agreed with keeping China out of the U.N., but the percentage rose to 71% in 1964, largely due to their aggressive policies in India and continual rhetoric against America.⁹⁸

Like all good politicians, Kennedy tried to gauge the domestic ramifications for any diplomatic positions that he took abroad.⁹⁹ Aware that trying to improve relations with China would destroy almost any hope of reelection, Kennedy accepted the need to maintain the status quo in regards to China and Taiwan. It became clear that formal relations would not develop during the Kennedy administration; instead the focus would be on informal diplomacy, a state of affairs which would persist until 1972. Kennedy wanted to be flexible with Communist China while preserving his commitment to Taiwan. He saw the ability to do this through developing informal relations with China.¹⁰⁰

President Kennedy wanted to apply the “New Frontier” to China. He energetically sought a pragmatic and progressive relationship with the PRC. However, the chains of the 1950s Cold War could not be broken immediately by the young and ambitious president. Kennedy tried to move too quickly to open relations with the Chinese and felt an immediate backlash from the Republican Party, the China Lobby, and Taiwan itself. When this was combined with increased Chinese aggression in the early 1960s, persistent anti-American rhetoric, and a closing in on nuclear weapons, China was deemed too aggressive still for Kennedy to reach out to.

However, Kennedy did lay a groundwork by stressing the need to find common ground and move slowly. Kennedy was right that rapprochement would begin over a common issue, or in his own words, “The problem is to find a beginning.”¹⁰¹ Interesting enough, it is Republican Richard Nixon, one of Kennedy’s biggest critics for not being hard enough on the communists, who visits China in 1972. This visit greatly improved Sino-American relations and led to official recognition in 1979.

⁹⁷ Kang, 115.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ It is important to note here the possible impact of the political career of Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr., John F. Kennedy’s father. Kennedy, Sr. resigned in 1940 because he believed Britain was doomed to be conquered by Nazi Germany and America’s only chance for survival was to remain isolated from Europe. Roosevelt attacked Joseph as a defeatist and ruined ambitions Joe had of running for the Presidency himself. This was certainly on his son’s mind when he was discerning if he should take an unpopular stand on China or not. How significant of a role the ruin of his father’s political career played is impossible to gauge.

¹⁰⁰ Kang, 111.

¹⁰¹ This same quote is cited on page 7 of paper.