

**Volume 3**

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**Presidential Humor - John Fitzgerald  
Kennedy I**

**Lead: Faced with an image problem, politicians often use humor to win over the electorate. Few public servants were as adept at diffusing their critics with humor as John Fitzgerald Kennedy.**

**Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.**

**Content: “Humor is a form of voter seduction that is more insidious than dirty tricks and much more amusing.”  
Clever politicians wield humor as a weapon to make fun of their opponents**

**or as a means of giving themselves a more sympathetic and down-to-earth image. Since the 1960s when television first began to dominate the political arena, qualities such as wit and charm began to play a much more important role in the electoral process. No longer could a successful politician rely on political contacts, personal character and executive skill, he or she had to possess at least a measure of telegenic charisma.**

**Jack Kennedy had an image problem. He was perceived as a political lightweight, a poor little rich boy who would never have made it to first base were it not for his Daddy's money. This image was not helped by a lackluster legislative career in the**

**House and Senate. Even his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Profiles in Courage*, was erroneously assumed to have been ghostwritten. Nevertheless, by his death in 1963, Kennedy was one of the most popular Presidents of the twentieth century. One of the means by which he overcame his huge image deficit was through the use of humor.**

**As a candidate for President he had to deal with accusations that his father was buying the election. He said, "I just received a telegram from my father. He says, 'Don't buy one more vote than you need. I'll be damned if I'll pay for a landslide.'" On another occasion he declared, "The Secretary of Commerce has announced a major new plan for restricting the outflow of**

**gold to France - by keeping my father at home this year." Another one of Kennedy serious problems was his religion. He was a Catholic running for President in an overwhelmingly Protestant country. He used humor to diffuse the issue at a meeting of the Houston Ministerial Association. "I have asked Cardinal Spellman how to deal with the question of the Pope's infallibility." And Cardinal Spellman said, "I don't know what to tell you, Senator. All I can say is, he keeps calling me Spillman." In many ways Kennedy's self-deprecating humor disarmed his critics and won over the electorate. Next time: laughter comes to Camelot. At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.**

## Resources

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