We will devote the entire class today to this pivotal election, which in many ways laid the foundation for the red-blue division that has characterized American electoral politics ever since. This will require an intensive study of the bitter fight at the Democratic Convention, as well as Nixon’s path to the Republican nomination. We will spend time at the famous Nixon/Kennedy debates (and look at some images of the debates to learn how Nixon’s furtive glances and 5:00 o’clock shadow cost him dearly). We will discuss the (non-existent) “Missile Gap”, which showed that Kennedy was not above torturing the facts to better serve his interests. Of critical importance was the contestants’ position on Cuba; JFK taking a position that would ultimately cost him dearly just three months into his administration. We will outline the candidates’ respective positions on civil rights, and examine the steps leading to Kennedy’s famous—and crucially important—phone call to Mrs. Martin Luther King on the eve of the election. Our analysis will take us to the possibility of organized crime’s influence in the election, and the suspicions of corruption in tallying the final vote count, particularly in Illinois and Texas. We will see how the campaign ended the friendship between the now-hostile enemies.

This lecture will conclude with an analysis of Kennedy’s stirring Inauguration Speech, and the launching of the “New Frontier.” We will examine how his greatest speech developed and attempt to determine who actually wrote it—J.F.K. or Ted Sorensen, or both. (Ever since the controversy over his authorship of Profiles in Courage, Kennedy was highly sensitive about the legitimacy of his literary creations.) We must also inquire into the decision-making process Kennedy used to select his cabinet. Of particular interest will be the choice of his brother Bobby for Attorney General. (Neither Jack or Robert wanted the
appointment—that was entirely Joseph Kennedy’s decision.) Finally, we will take note of the defeated Nixon’s bitter and growing hatred of the press/media, (which he blamed for his loss at the polls,) his pained reflections on the campaign, and his increasing gall at his brash, handsome, and charming foe.

Quotes of the Week on the 1960 election

Ronald Reagan—still nominally a Democrat in 1960—supported Nixon and had this to say of JFK: “Under the tousled boyish hair cut, it is still old Karl Marx first launched a century ago. There is nothing new in the idea of a government being Big Brother to us all. The American people do not want the government paid services at ‘any price’ and if we collectively can’t affort ‘free this and that’ they’d like to know it before they buy.” (The Red-hating Kennedy a Marxist???)

John Wayne also endorsed Richard Nixon: “Very soon the two great political parties will nominate their candidates. One of these men will be assigned the awesome duties of the White House. In this moment when eternity could be closer than ever before, is there a statesman who for the sake of a vote is not all things to all men; a man who will put America back on the high road of security and accomplishment; without fear of favor or compromise; a man who wants to do the job that must be done and to hell with friend or foe who would have it otherwise; a man who knows that the American softness must be hardened; a man who knows that when our house is in order no man will ever dare to trespass. There were no ghostwriters at the Alamo. Only Men.”

Mobster Mickey Cohen had this to say of the Democratic candidate: “I know that certain people in the Chicago [Mafia] organization knew that they had to get John Kennedy in. There was no thought that they were going to get the best of it with John Kennedy. The choice becomes the best of what you’ve got going. John Kennedy was the best selection. But nobody in my line of work had an idea that he was going to name Bobby Kennedy attorney general. That was the last thing anyone thought.”

In a 1994 interview, Evelyn Lincoln, JFK’s secretary, explained how the Kennedys won the West Virginia Primary: “I know they bought the election.”