

JFK on the containment of Communism, 1952

Introduction

In August 1952, as he was campaigning for the US Senate, John F. Kennedy addressed the Massachusetts Chapter of the American Federation of Labor. This manuscript is a draft of the speech Kennedy delivered before the influential labor union. Kennedy focused on the expansion of Communism and the priority of containment. Kennedy referred to the Communist threat as “an enemy, power[full], unrelenting and implacable who seeks to dominate the world by subversion and conspiracy.” He asserted that “All problems are dwarfed by the necessity of the West to maintain against the Communists a balance of power.” He also pointed out that containment was necessary not only for United States military safety, but also because of the threat Communism posed in “political & economic” spheres.

Excerpt

But In our efforts to contain the tide of Communist expansion, it would be a mistake to judge the Communist threat as primarily military, although it is Russian military prestige that has force & gives ~~persua~~ persuasion to her [illegible] to the beliefs of its political & economic doctrines.

[illegible]

Certainly we must ~~stand~~ devote all our available energies to the task of rebuilding our military strength and we should use every means at our disposal to persuade our friends in the West to do likewise.

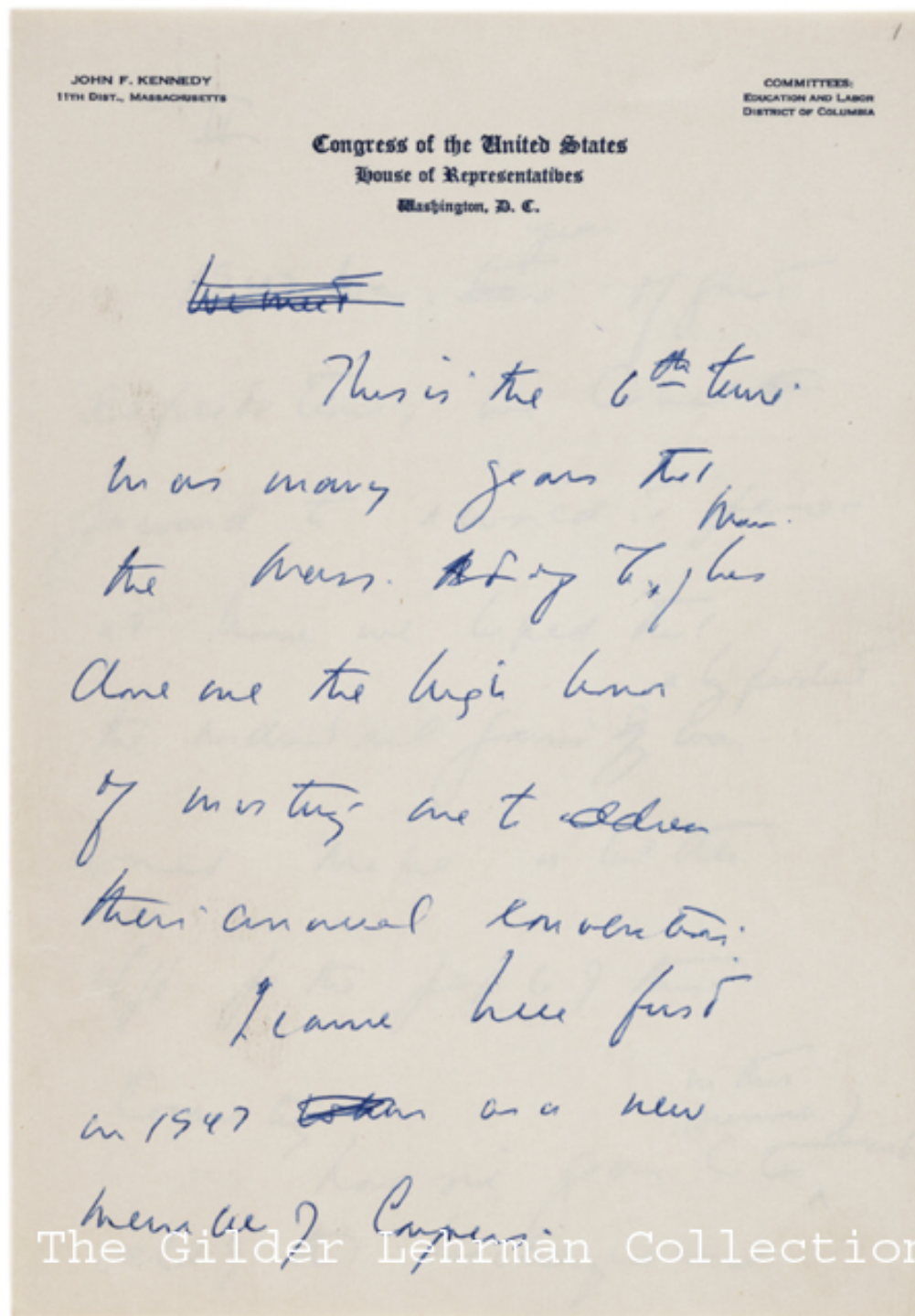
Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction, the excerpt, and the transcript. Then apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. Explain the terms “containment” and “balance of power.”
2. Connect the content of this speech to events at the time of its presentation, August 1952.
3. According to the speech, which people are most susceptible to the activities of the Communists? Provide evidence from Kennedy’s speech.

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Image



John F. Kennedy, [Portion of an address on the containment of Communism], c. August 12, 1952. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC02313)

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Transcript

John F. Kennedy, [Portion of an address on the containment of Communism], c. August 12, 1952. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC02313)

[*strikeout*]

This is the 6th time in as many years that the Mass. A F of L. [*inserted: have*] has done me the high honor of inviting me to address their annual convention.

I came here first in 1947 [*struck: when*] as a new member of Congress. [2]

II

1947 was a [*struck: time*] [*inserted: year*] of great expectations; We looked [*struck: to*] forward to a world at peace – at home we hoped that the industrial gains of war [*inserted: a by product*] would make a better life for the people of this Country.

Now six years later [*inserted: in this summer [discount].*] all of that has changed and [3] many of our glittering hopes [*inserted: of other years*] have turned to ashes [*inserted: around us*] [*struck: and we continue to pay heavily for the years til I was to*]

And the dread problems that march across our horizons in one endless column try our ingenuity and [*inserted: tax our*] imaginations.

[4] Abroad, we are faced by an enemy, [*struck: relentless*] power less, unrelenting and implacable who seeks to dominate the world by subversion and conspiracy and when all else fails to military force – of which he now possesses [5] through productively far poorer a substantial superiority. In 1952 or 1953 while that superiority lasts he may [*struck: also*] choose to plunge the world into the most destructive [*strikeout*] [*struck: a war*] [*inserted: war*] in the human race's long history. Or he [6] may, believing [*inserted: that*] time is a friend, [*inserted: illegible*] continue his efforts to seize control by [*struck: the*] more subtle methods [*struck: wh*] which have proved so successful in the past.

All problems [*struck: still*] are dwarfed by the necessity of the West to maintain against the Communists a balance [7] of power – and we note with concern the crumbling away of our defenses [*struck: in*] [*inserted: in many areas of*] the Middle & Far East.

[*strikeout*]

[*struck: I sometimes*]

But In our efforts to contain the tide of Communist expansion, it would [8] be a mistake

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to judge the Communist threat as primarily military, although it is Russian military prestige that [*struck: has*] gives [*struck: persua*] [*inserted: force &*] persuasion [*struck: to her*] [*struck: [attraction]*] to [*struck: the beliefs of*] its political & economic [9] doctrines. Certainly we must [*struck: stand*] devote all our available energies [*strikeout*] to the task of rebuilding our military strength and we should use every means at our disposal to persuade our friends in the West to do likewise.

[10] But the Communists also [*struck: seek to*] move a head by exploiting by [*struck: more subtle*] means – more subtle but equally dangerous – they exploit the resentment of those [*strikeout*] [*struck: and*] [*strikeout*] people too long [*struck: held dominate*] deprived of their fair share of a nation's income – of those who [11] [*strikeout*] desiring to work – but who cannot find it – by those [*struck: too long held*] who live on the marginal edge of starvation – who see little hope for their children – by those who seek [rules] [*inserted: to see their nation*] [*struck: to the*] free & independent – and [*inserted: yet*] are dominated by an ancient master –

Notes: The word “powerless” on page four was probably meant to be “powerful.” Written on stationary of the House of Representatives.