

On the 50th Anniversary of President John F. Kennedy's Visit to San Diego State College

By Seth Mallios

Introduction¹

U.S. President John F. Kennedy's appearance and commencement address at San Diego State College on June 6, 1963, was the most important event in the institution's history.² JFK was the first and only sitting U.S. president to set foot on the collegiate campus at Montezuma Mesa. His visit came at a seminal moment for the nation: the United States was only months removed from the Cuban Missile Crisis, President Kennedy would introduce landmark civil rights legislation to Congress only days after his return to Washington, D.C., and JFK's assassination would occur less than six months after this appearance. Furthermore, the content of the president's address, reproduced here in its entirety, was one of his most memorable. In his speech, President



President Kennedy gives the 1963 San Diego State College commencement address. Courtesy of SDSU Archives (acu-vip-jfk018).

Seth Mallios is Professor and Chair of the Anthropology Department and Director of the South Coastal Information Center at San Diego State University. He has led archaeological excavations in San Diego County atop Palomar Mountain at the Nate Harrison Site and in Old Town at the Whaley House and has written two books on San Diego cemeteries. He recently published *Hail Montezuma!: The Hidden Treasures of San Diego State* (2012).

Kennedy left no doubt as to the supreme importance of education, insisting that every subsequent issue in his address—racial equality, economic strength, and even national security—could be realized only through a systemic and comprehensive enlightenment of a nation and its people. In fact, it was at the San Diego State commencement that President Kennedy first poignantly and memorably declared, “No country can possibly move ahead, no free society can possibly be sustained, unless it has an educated citizenry....” These are arguably the region’s most legendary spoken words.

The impact of JFK’s appearance at San Diego State was profound. It thrust the college into the national spotlight and was the pinnacle in a series of visits by high-profile political dignitaries during the 1960s, including Eleanor Roosevelt (1962), Barry Goldwater (1964), Ronald Reagan (1966), and Robert Kennedy (1968). The most transformative effect, however, was on the institution’s research agenda. At the 1963 commencement ceremony, San Diego State granted President Kennedy its first-ever honorary doctorate and the inaugural doctorate of the newly formed California State College system.³ While this ceremonial degree may have seemed largely superficial, it greatly enhanced and facilitated San Diego State’s ability to award non-honorary doctorates. The presidential visit proved to be a significant tipping point for the research capacities of the institution, starting with its first research doctorate in 1967 and culminating with SDSU being feted as the nation’s top small research university from 2006-10.⁴ It is worth emphasizing that the research consequences of the Kennedy visit were not coincidental; the doctoral-granting issue inspired the presidential invitation in the first place.⁵

This article offers an overview of the landmark Kennedy event in San Diego, tracing the motives and actions of various key individuals who made the presidential visit a reality. It also documents a wide variety of attempts over the past half century to commemorate the 1963 JFK San Diego State commencement. In uniting a discussion of historical details with a survey of consequent memorialization, this article endeavors to define the legacies of the Kennedy visit on its impending 50th anniversary.

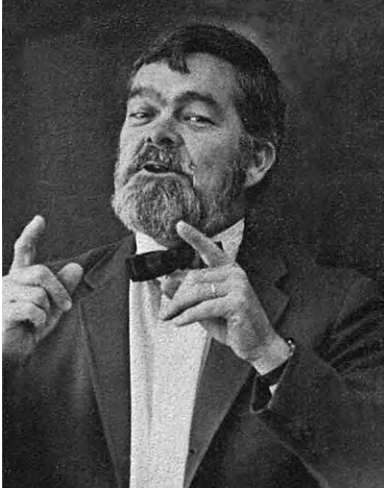
Background

The 1960 Donohoe Act established the education master plan for the State of California. In the century leading up to this legislation, much of California post-secondary education had evolved organically within individual institutions, and there was little standardization in entrance requirements, curricula, or degree-granting capabilities. This changed in December 1959 when the Regents of the University of California and the State Board of Education approved a

new master plan that placed the extant University of California (UC), California State College (CSC), and California Community College (CCC) systems in an explicitly tiered framework for post-secondary education. The plan declared that the UC institutions were reserved for the top eighth of graduating high-school seniors, the CSCs were for the top third, and the CCC system was for any other Californians interested in post-secondary higher education.⁶ In addition, the guidelines stipulated that California State Colleges were not allowed to grant doctorates on their own; they could only offer *joint* PhDs with other universities. In early 1960, California State Senator George Miller crafted Senate Bill 33 to incorporate many of the provisions from the recently approved master plan. Governor Edmund "Pat" Brown signed the bill into law on April 27, 1960. State Assemblywoman Dorothy Donohoe, who had created the initial resolution that called for a master plan and chaired the State Assembly Education Committee, died on April 4, 1960, just weeks before Senate Bill 33 was signed. In her honor, the State Legislature renamed the master plan legislation "The Donohoe Higher Education Act."

The Donohoe Act was vexing for San Diego State and especially its administrative head, President Malcolm A. Love. On the one hand, President Love was thrilled that San Diego State College could then offer doctoral degrees, even if it was required to find partner institutions. SDSC had an extended history of active research—longer than many of the UCs had even been in existence—and would finally be able to award its students with the highest graduate degree for their independent and noteworthy scholarship. On the other hand, President Love was frustrated that his college was officially being designated as second-tier. San Diego State officials took immediate actions to answer the mixed ramifications of the Donohoe Act. The faculty began proposing specific joint doctoral programs and simultaneously adopted a Faculty Senate statement emphasizing that while "the basic function of San Diego State College is to educate the minds of young people, ...faculty research is second in importance only to academic freedom."⁷ President Love echoed this balanced teacher/scholar dichotomy, embracing the aspects of the Donohoe Act that opened the door to doctoral-level research but resisting any notion that his institution was only a teacher's college.⁸

Despite the opportunities that the Donohoe Act provided for joint doctoral programs, no institutions agreed to partner with San Diego State in the early 1960s precisely because of this teacher's-college second-tier stigma.⁹ The situation greatly frustrated San Diego State College administrators and faculty, who hotly debated how to overcome this barrier to granting doctorates. It was not until the early spring of 1963 that Henry Janssen, an intrepid political science professor, came up with a viable solution. His apotheosized story has grown in stature



Dr. Henry Janssen lectures at San Diego State College in 1969. 1969 Del Sudoeste.

to become university legend.¹⁰ During one particular breakfast at his Lemon Grove home, Dr. Janssen listened to the radio and heard that U.S. President John F. Kennedy was scheduled to visit San Diego during the first week in June of that year to observe military maneuvers. The professor went about his usual morning routine and then hopped on his bicycle for the daily commute to San Diego State. As he pedaled to campus, Janssen had an epiphany—the college should give JFK an honorary doctorate. Janssen knew that SDSC’s commencement was also scheduled for early June and reasoned correctly that the same rules, permissions, and protocol governed honorary and non-honorary doctorates. Simply

put, the ceremonial degree could facilitate future research doctorates, especially when other institutions witnessed San Diego State giving President Kennedy a degree *on its own*. On arrival at the college, the ebullient Janssen immediately shared his brainstorm with office mate and fellow political science professor Ned Joy.¹¹ Janssen finished his impassioned plea to Joy with the proclamation, “By God Ned, we’ll just give one away, and that’ll break the dam!” and then left for his 8:00 a.m. class.

Dr. Joy, who was also Chair of the SDSC Faculty Senate, was thrilled by the idea and immediately telephoned SDSC President Love. An inspired Love promptly called California Governor Pat Brown, who was equally excited about the prospects of bringing JFK to the Golden State for a high-profile event. By the time Dr. Janssen’s class had ended and he returned to his office at 9:00 a.m., his plan had gained three levels of approval and was picking up even more momentum. Soon after, Governor Brown joined President Kennedy in the nation’s capital as a guest for Opening Day of the 1963 Major League Baseball season. After JFK threw out the ceremonial first pitch of the April 8 Washington Senators/Baltimore



Dr. Ned Joy, chair of the San Diego State College Faculty Senate. ©SDHC #UT85: 1166.

Orioles game, Brown made the request to the president that he speak at SDSC's upcoming commencement. President Kennedy was intrigued by the offer but expressed concern that he had a scheduling conflict.¹² Ten days later, Governor Brown would send the formal invitation to President Kennedy. On May 2, presidential special assistant Kenneth O'Donnell sent a letter to Malcolm Love lamenting that JFK would not have the time to speak at the SDSC graduation. Two weeks later, however, President Kennedy changed his mind when he was presented with alternative itineraries for his western trip. On May 16, O'Donnell confirmed that JFK would attend the commencement, prompting San Diego State's college newspaper, *The Daily Aztec*, to proclaim the next day: "It's Official! Commencement Speaker is President Kennedy."¹³

At the same time that President Kennedy's assistants worked diligently to coordinate his San Diego State visit, the College Senate took the necessary institutional steps to approve JFK's honorary degree.¹⁴ President Love, who created SDSC's Senate and long championed shared governance at the college, blended dedication to official protocol with an appreciation for symbolic acts. In this particular case, moments before the Senate considered the JFK honorary-degree measure, Love insisted that it be Professor Janssen who made the official motion to award President Kennedy the Doctorate of Laws.

Weeks before Dr. Janssen, Dr. Joy, President Love, and Governor Brown were pressing for JFK to come to State, 1963 SDSC senior class president Robert L. Weir was charged with finding a speaker for commencement. When his wife, Anna Lou, told him that she had seen in the newspaper that President Kennedy was scheduled to visit San Diego in early June, Weir immediately wrote two letters to Washington, D.C.—one to White House Press Secretary Pierre Salinger and the other to President Kennedy himself—to ask if JFK would deliver the Aztecs' 1963 commencement address.¹⁵ Weir's request was independent of Professor Janssen's research-based agenda, and his letter was the first communication that put the event on Kennedy's radar. Furthermore, the senior class president was actively involved in the ceremony and the events leading up to it.

June 6, 1963

President Kennedy's visit to San Diego lasted only about 24 hours, yet was packed full of numerous public and private events. He arrived on Air Force One at Lindbergh Field from El Paso, Texas, and immediately embarked on a 12-car eight-mile motorcade up Washington Street to Park Boulevard and then down the center of El Cajon Boulevard that was attended by more than 220,000 San Diegans.¹⁶ The sight of JFK waving to the crowd while traveling in a convertible



JFK shaking hands while traveling by car on El Cajon Boulevard. Left to right: Hugo Fisher, Senator Clair Engle, President John Kennedy, and Governor Pat Brown. Photo courtesy editors' collection.

across San Diego eerily foreshadowed the tragic events in Dallas, Texas, less than six months later.¹⁷ For Professor Arthur Wimer's SDSC journalism class, students were stationed along the motorcade route and instructed to use pay phones to give periodic reports for live coverage on KEBS, the college's radio station and the forerunner of today's KPBS. This innovative coverage won the Sigma Delta Chi Award for student radio journalism. Once the presidential caravan arrived at Montezuma Mesa, JFK was assisted into his cap and gown by SDSC student Jeanne Powell and members of the Aztec Angels. He was then led to the specially constructed stage at Aztec Bowl.¹⁸

President Kennedy's historic hooding at the institution's 65th commencement was not just a landmark San Diego State event; it was an important California State College milestone as well. This nuance was not lost on CSC Chancellor Glenn Dumke, who insisted that the carefully constructed backdrop list "California State Colleges" first and "San Diego State" second, in addition to having the CSC seal placed above its SDSC counterpart. For the hooding ritual, Governor Brown spoke while President Love and Chancellor Dumke carefully placed the doctoral hood around President Kennedy's neck and on his shoulders.¹⁹ After being hooded and granted the honorary degree, JFK gave the commencement address to the 30,000+ people in attendance, including the

over 1,700 students who made up the San Diego State College Class of 1963.²⁰

The overflow crowd at Aztec Bowl more than doubled the venue's previous attendance mark. There may have been even more individuals on site than officially tallied as people squeezed into every available space around the stadium—even along the dirt hillside. Despite the overabundance of people in the crowd, San Diego State managed to keep seating at the event somewhat organized. They issued small, individually numbered, seat-reservation tickets that had to be used at least 45 minutes before the 11:45 A.M. ceremony starting time. In addition, nearly every spectator was aware of the armed Secret Servicemen stationed atop many of the adjacent buildings, including nearby Social Sciences West and East (today's Storm and Nasatir Halls).

Many of the individuals who witnessed the Kennedy address marveled at his speaking ability. Senior Class President Robert Weir emphasized that JFK seemed to have a photographic memory, checking his notes only once before the ceremony began and then speaking without a single hitch. Others noted how the U.S. President seemed to be genuinely enjoying himself during the ceremony. He warmed the crowd up with an opening joke regarding his gratitude for the immediacy of his recently awarded degree—a comedic line he used after receiving honorary doctorates at multiple commencements during his three-year presidency—and then proceeded to mix his passionate political messages with occasional light-hearted humor. G. Timothy Gross, who attended the ceremony as a youth, noted how JFK appeared to deliberately use the word “vigor” in his



SDSC President Malcolm Love and CSC Chancellor Glenn Dumke hood JFK. Courtesy of SDSU Archives (acu-vip-jfk022).



The overflow crowd on June 6, 1963 filled every nook of Aztec Bowl. Courtesy of SDSU Archives (acu-vip-jfk054).

speech as a playful nod to many contemporary political comedians, impersonators, and satirists, like Vaughn Meador, who exaggerated the president's New England accent on words (e.g., "vigah") in their routines.

Once the ceremony finished, President Kennedy strolled through the crowd for a final chance to engage with those assembled, returned his regalia to Powell, waved goodbye to the people still assembled in Aztec Bowl, boarded his helicopter (after bumping his head on the vehicle's lowered doorway), and took off to the west. He and his coterie flew to the Marine Corps Recruit Depot (MCRD) for an honorary inspection of the troops. Following JFK's address to over 5,000 marines and sailors, the president dined with the commanding officer of the MCRD, visited the *U.S.S. Oriskany* and the *U.S.S. Kitty Hawk*, and then flew to Point Magu the next morning. During this short visit to San Diego, more than a quarter of a million people saw the U.S. President.

Material Legacies

President Kennedy's 1963 appearance at San Diego State has a mixed legacy on

the Montezuma Mesa campus, evinced over the past half century in a convoluted saga of memorials, intended memorials, misplaced memorials, and stolen memorials. Like many hidden treasures and archaeological palimpsests across the local university landscape, the above-ground clues of former events detail both the historical past and the attitudes of the continually evolving present. For every permanent memorial to JFK and his landmark visit, there are seemingly an equal number of aborted material tributes, stolen markers, and misplaced mementos.

The Kennedy commencement gown

In the year following the 1963 commencement, memories of President Kennedy loomed largely in the consciousness of San Diego State faculty, staff, and students. SDSC President Malcolm Love kept the graduation gown JFK had worn and prominently displayed it in his office. Honoring the CSC Chancellor's request, he later sent it to the central office of the California State Colleges. At some point over the next four decades, individuals working in the Chancellor's Office lost the gown.



JFK engages the capacity crowd after his speech. Courtesy of SDSU Archives (acu-vip-jfk008).

The 1964 yearbook

The San Diego State yearbook staff dedicated the college's 1964 annual, *Del Sudoeste*, to JFK. It stated:

"The 1964 DEL SUDOESTE is dedicated to the memory of JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY, the 35th President of the United States of America, May 29, 1917—November 22, 1963.

Every emotion has been touched.

Every word has been spoken.

He lies in history;

Now is the time for reflection."

Although the dedication conveyed a strong sense of solemnity and reverence, it was not displayed prominently in the yearbook. The dedication appeared on page 259 of the 304-page annual.

JFK Memorial Pool

Almost immediately following JFK's assassination, officials at San Diego State began to discuss ways to memorialize the fallen president on campus. By the mid-1960s, college administrators had approved a plan for a John F. Kennedy Memorial Pool just south of the original Administration Building (today's Hepner



The JFK Memorial Pool that never came to be. Courtesy of SDSU Archives (cam-sc-cpw-001).

Hall) on Campanile Walkway; its construction was tied to the building of a new campus library (Love Library). When funding issues surfaced in 1969, college officials decided to remove the memorial pool from the campus master plan. As a result, it was never built.

The Spurs and the Kennedy Library

In 1961, JFK first discussed the establishment of his presidential library—akin to those set up for President Herbert Hoover, President Franklin Roosevelt, and others—in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Less than a month before his assassination in 1963, President Kennedy had decided on a specific locale adjacent to Harvard University. By 1975, the Kennedy Library Corporation had changed the site of the JFK Presidential Library to Dorchester, Massachusetts because of residential congestion concerns and expected construction delays. One of the first groups to raise money to build the Kennedy Library was a women's service organization at San Diego State named "The Spurs." Fittingly, JFK's honorary doctorate from San Diego State is now housed in the presidential library that SDSU helped to found.

The granite marker and California Registered Historical Landmark designation

In 1983, twenty years after the historic commencement address, San Diego State University commemorated the JFK visit with a large granite marker; the rock marked the spot where the president's helicopter landed. Affixed to the sizeable commemorative stone is the official large metal California Registered Historical Landmark plaque, which reads:

"SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY. In 1960 the state legislature authorized the California State Colleges to grant honorary doctoral degrees to individuals who have made unusual contributions toward learning and civilization. On June 6, 1963 San Diego State College was the first of the California State Colleges to award the doctorate when it conferred a Doctorate of Laws degree on John F. Kennedy, President of the United States. CALIFORNIA REGISTERED HISTORICAL LANDMARK NO. 798. Plaque placed by the State Department of Parks and Recreation in cooperation with San Diego State University and Squibob Chapter E. Clampus Vitus, May 22, 1983."



The granite marker commemorating JFK's visit with both metal plaques. Courtesy of SDSU Archives (cam-sc-ken-m004).

The sponsors for the plaque—the State of California Department of Parks and Recreation, San Diego State University, and Squibob Chapter, *E Clampus Vitus*—are an odd trio. The State of California and SDSU are obvious stakeholders in commemorating this event. The third partner, the Squibob Chapter of the *E Clampus Vitus* fraternal organization, is often characterized by actions of a much more irreverent nature. This plaque reveals honor-bound aspects of the organization that are rarely publicized. The members of *E Clampus Vitus* are dedicated to preserving Western heritage and history, especially if it is in anyway humorous, impudent, or insolent. They have previously raised money for a variety of historical plaques, but many of these markers commemorate

bordellos, saloons, and other bawdy establishments from the past two centuries. The nonsensical *E Clampus Vitus* name of the group mocks haughty uses of Latin, their motto "*Credo Quia Absurdum*" translates to "I believe it because it is absurd," and the local chapter has chosen San Diego's foremost satirist, John P. Squibob, as their namesake. Squibob was the pseudonym of nineteenth-century U.S. Army Lieutenant George Horatio Derby, one of America's first great published humorists and a forerunner to Mark Twain. It is the cheeky tales of "Clampers"—the nickname of the members of the *E Clampus Vitus*—that are often publicized. Many of their self-descriptions are zingy one-liners, like, "this fraternity is not sure if it is a historical drinking society or a drinking historical society."²¹ Close scrutiny of some of their community service, like the JFK marker at State however, reveals that they also engage, on occasion, in serious matters to preserve important local heritage.

A second plaque at the base of the large granite marker included the legendary passage from JFK's San Diego State address: "No country can possibly move ahead, no free society can possibly be sustained, unless it has an educated citizenry..." This brass marker was stolen in October 2008. Funds are currently being raised

to replace the plaque in honor of the impending 50th anniversary of Kennedy's visit and speech (June 6, 2013).

When former First Lady, democratic presidential candidate, and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a campaign stop at SDSU on February 1, 2008, then San Diego State President Steven Weber intended to introduce her to the large crowd assembled at SDSU's Cox Arena (today's Viejas Arena) with the profound Kennedy quote. He wanted to emphasize both the White House connection to the host institution and the seminal role of education in modern society. At the last second, however, the Clinton campaign changed Weber's remarks because three days earlier, on January 28, 2008, Senator Ted Kennedy (JFK's brother) had just surprisingly endorsed then-Senator Barack Obama, instead of Senator Hillary Clinton, for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. As a result, the Clinton campaign did not want any mention of JFK or the Kennedy legacy at this event. In an e-mail from President Weber to Jim Herrick, Executive Director of the SDSU Alumni Association, sent on the morning of the Clinton rally, Weber wrote, "Alas, change in plans. Evidently, Kennedy references are out of favor at the moment."²²

Aztec Bowl and the nomination of the San Diego State College Historic District to the National Register of Historic Places

Today's "Viejas Arena at Aztec Bowl" resembles virtually no other venue in the nation. It began as a horseshoe-shaped football stadium, built in 1936 as a mammoth multi-phased Depression-Era project.²³ Over the decades it would host a variety of events, including football games, rock concerts, dignitary birthdays, and even a few memorials. In 1997, construction crews erected a 12,000-seat arena that was built inside of the now-defunct bowl. The arena-inside-the-bowl look was neither the initial architectural design nor the planning ideal; it resulted from contentious litigation. The multiple lawsuits that led to this bizarre-looking architectural mitigation, however, are also part of the Kennedy legacy at San Diego State University.

From 1936 through the mid-1960s, Aztec Bowl hosted dozens of football games and was the athletic epicenter of the Montezuma Mesa campus.²⁴ When San Diego State began playing its football games at San Diego Stadium (today's Qualcomm Stadium) in the late 1960s in order to comply with NCAA Division 1-A venue-size rules, the college started to consider alternative uses for the space in and around Aztec Bowl. After two decades of intense study on the matter, university officials proposed a referendum in 1988 to replace the stadium with an on-campus arena and student activity center. San Diego State students voted overwhelmingly in

favor of the plan and approved the \$47/semester fee increase to pay for the new facilities. In 1989, the CSU trustees formally approved plans to demolish Aztec Bowl.

Just as it seemed that Aztec Bowl would forever disappear from the campus landscape, a series of lawsuits stalled the impending construction. In 1989, multiple university neighborhood groups brought concerns to the university regarding negative impacts the new arena would likely have on the immediate area. San Diego State officials did little to comfort the local residents, dismissing their worries of increased traffic, noise, and intrusiveness from the many events to be held at the proposed site. As a result, the neighborhood groups sued SDSU by challenging the project's Environmental Impact Report (EIR). To make matters worse for university administrators, San Diego State students Anne Rizzo and Thomas Thai then filed suit against SDSU, the Associated Students of SDSU (AS), SDSU President Thomas B. Day, CSU Chancellor Barry Munitz, and the CSU Trustees, asserting that the "exorbitant" cost of the proposed facilities violated state education codes.²⁵

The final challenge to the project resulted from work that was undertaken to celebrate the historical legacy of the institution. In 1994, Dr. Lynne Newell Christenson, Director of the SDSU Anthropology Department Collections Management Program, and two graduate students, Sue Wade and Alex Bevil, successfully nominated the historic core of San Diego State University to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP).²⁶ The 1930s core included twelve buildings, famed sculptor Donal Hord's *Aztec* statue in diorite, and Aztec Bowl.²⁷ As a result, these iconic structures and artwork were deemed nationally significant, worthy of preservation at a federal level, and protected from development. On the extensive NRHP nomination, one of the primary factors that led Christenson, Wade, and Bevil to include Aztec Bowl with the other buildings in the historic center of campus was the additional significance of President Kennedy's 1963 visit and commencement address. At the time, much of the university was eagerly preparing for the institution's centennial (1897-1997), and the ramifications of federal preservation law—specifically the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986—seemed to have been temporarily lost on SDSU officials.

University and CSU administrators, then engaged in three sets of litigation, petitioned the National Park Service (NPS) to reject the historic nomination and remove Aztec Bowl from the National Register. Arguing against the historical significance of the original 1936 stadium, the CSU Preservation Officer prepared a supplement to the EIR, stating that Aztec Bowl made no relevant contributions to San Diego history.²⁸ He attacked many of the specific points that Christenson and her team made to justify the importance of the venue, even disregarding JFK's visit on the grounds that numerous institutions feted Kennedy during his



Homecoming football game at Aztec Bowl November 1963. Photo from 1964 Del Sudoeste, p. 154.

presidency. The stunning irony of top university officials arguing so vehemently against the significance of their own campus was evinced in President Day's public declaration that Aztec Bowl was nothing more than "a 50-year-old pile of stones."²⁹

The NPS dismissed the university's attempt to remove Aztec Bowl from the National Register, forcing San Diego State officials to mitigate the construction and find a compromise that both honored the past and satisfied the needs of the present and future. As a result, the university developed a new plan that incorporated parts of the original Aztec Bowl bleachers and cobblestone walls into the design of the new arena.³⁰ The commemorative JFK rock and plaques were saved as well. In a more conciliatory spirit, San Diego State administrators also appeased local residential groups by restricting the total number of events at the new venue and financing the redesign of various neighborhoods by paying for a gated entrance in one community and a street extension in another. In addition, the California State Supreme Court ruled against Rizzo and Thai, determining that the student fee did not violate any educational codes. With all of these matters settled, construction began with a ceremonious groundbreaking on Monday, March 27, 1995, and the arena was opened a little over two years later in the summer of 1997.

A Conceptual Legacy

What can be missed in this discussion of high-profile anniversaries, continually evolving campus landscapes, transitory memorials, and self-condemning litigation is the insight and significance of the ideas in President Kennedy's actual speech. The content of the address that JFK gave was somewhat of a surprise to San Diego State officials. Although the president's staff had distributed a copy of the speech to college administrators in anticipation of the event, Kennedy strayed from the script; his 15-minute speech differed significantly from the pre-approved text and from his usual stump speeches.³¹ At multiple points he embraced historical perspectives and insisted that the supreme importance of education traced its roots back not only to the founding of the United States, but to the start of Ancient Greece and Western thought as well. In emphasizing that education was integral to both the creation and defense of democracy, he repeatedly complimented the State of California for its attention and resources toward education but lamented that schools in economically disadvantaged areas, especially in the American South, were critically underfunded. JFK then emphasized that this economic disenfranchisement was also a racial issue as educational opportunities were abundant for whites but often severely limited for non-whites.³² President Kennedy linked these educational barriers to a call for service; he immediately transitioned to the need for more teachers at all levels. JFK's seamless conceptual ties between democratic freedom, economic and racial equality, and community service were at the core of his 1963 address, and they were each fueled by an unwavering investment in education.

This article concludes unequivocally that the most important legacy of the 1963 JFK visit is the primary idea he championed—that all societal progress is based on education. At a time in the twenty-first century when governmental support for public education has dwindled to record lows, this message is especially salient; on this 50th anniversary of Kennedy's historic address, his statement that "Education comes at the top of the responsibilities of any government, at whatever level," has never been more profound or relevant.

June 6, 1963, San Diego State College Address

by President John F. Kennedy

President Love, Governor Brown, Chairman Heilbron, trustees, fellow graduates, ladies and gentlemen:

I want to express a very warm sense of appreciation for the honor that you have given to me today, to be an instant graduate of this distinguished college. It is greatly appreciated and I am delighted to participate in what is a most important ceremony in the lives of us all.

One of the most impressive, if not the most impressive accomplishment of this great Golden State has been the recognition by the citizens of this state of the importance of education as the basis for the maintenance of an effective, free society. This fact was recognized in our earliest beginnings at the Massachusetts Bay Colony, but I do not believe that any state in the union has given more attention in recent years to educating its citizens to the highest level, doctorate level, in the state colleges, the junior colleges, the high schools, the grade schools.

You recognize that a free society places burdens upon any free citizens. To govern is to choose and the ability to make those choices wisely and responsibly and prudently implies the best of all of us.

No country can possibly move ahead, no free society can possibly be sustained, unless it has an educated citizenry whose quality of mind and heart permit it to take part in the complicated and sophisticated decisions that pour not only upon the President and upon the Congress, but upon all the citizens who service the ultimate power.

I am sure that the graduates of this college recognize that the effort of the people of California that govern the Legislature, the local communities, the faculty, that this concentrated effort of mind and scholarship to educate the young citizens of this state has not been done merely to give this school's graduates an economic advantage in the life struggle. Quite obviously, there is a higher purpose, and that is the hope that you will turn to the service of the state, the scholarship, the education, the qualities which society has helped develop in you; that you will render on the community level or on the state level or on the national level or the international level a contribution to the maintenance of freedom and peace and the security of our country and those associated with it in a most critical time.

In so doing, you will follow a great and laudable tradition which combined American scholarship and American leadership in political affairs. It is an extraordinary fact of history, I think, unmatched since the days of early Greece, that this country should have produced during its founding days in a population of a handful of men such an extraordinary range of scholars and creative thinkers who helped build this country—Jefferson, Franklin, Morris, Wilson, and all the rest. This is a great tradition which we must maintain in our time with increasing strength and increasing vigor.

Those of you who are educated, those of us who recognize the responsibilities of an educated citizen, should now concern ourselves with whether we are providing an adequate education for all Americans, will all Americans have an equal chance to develop their intellectual qualities and whether we are preparing ourselves today for the educational challenges which are going to come before this decade is out.

The first question, and the most important—does every American boy and girl have an opportunity to develop whatever talents they have? All of us do not have equal talent, but all of us should have an equal opportunity to develop those talents. Let me cite a few facts to show that they do not.

In this fortunate state of California, the average current expenditure for a boy and girl in the public schools is \$515. But in the state of Mississippi it is \$230. The average salary for classroom teachers in California is \$7,000, while in Mississippi it is \$3,600.

Nearly three-quarters of the young, white population of the United States have graduated from high school, but only about two-fifths of our non-white population has done the same. In some states, almost 40 per cent of the non-white population has completed less than five years of school. Contrast it with 7 per cent of the white population. In one American state, over 36 per cent of the public school buildings are over 40 years of age. In another, only 4 per cent are that old.

Such facts, and one could prolong the recital indefinitely, make it clear that American children today do not yet enjoy equal educational opportunities for two primary reasons: One is economic and the other is racial.

If our nation is to meet the goal of giving every American child a fair chance, because an uneducated child makes an uneducated parent who in another day produces another uneducated child, we must move ahead swiftly in both areas, and we must recognize that segregation and education, and I mean de facto segregation in the North as well as the proclaimed segregation in the South, brings with it serious handicaps to a large proportion of the population.

It does no good, as you in California know better than any, to say that that is the business of another state. It is the business of our country, and in addition, these young, uneducated boys and girls know no state boundaries and they come West as well as North and East, and they are your citizens as well as citizens of this country.

The second question relates to the quality of our education. Today one out of every three students in the fifth grade will drop out of high school, and only two out of ten will graduate from college. In the meantime, we need more educated men and women, and we need less and less unskilled labor. There are millions of jobs that will be available in the next seven years for educated young men and women. The demand will be overwhelming, and there will be millions of people out of work who are unskilled because with new machines and technology there is less need for them.

This combination of a tremendously increasing population among our young people, of less need for unskilled labor, of increasingly unskilled labor available, combines to form one of the most serious domestic problems that this country will face in the next 10 years. Of Americans 18 years of age or older, more than 23 million have less than eight years of schooling, and over eight million have less than five years.

What kind of judgment, what kind of response can we expect of a citizen who has been to school less than five years, and we have in this country eight million who have been to school less than five years?

As a result, they can't read or write or do simple arithmetic. They are illiterate in this rich country of ours, and they constitute the hard core of our unemployed. They can't write a letter to get a job, and they can't read, in many cases, a help-wanted sign. One out of every 10 workers who failed to finish elementary school are unemployed, as compared to one out of 50 [college graduates].

In short, our current educational programs, much as they represent a burden upon the taxpayers of this country, do not meet the responsibility. The fact of the matter is that this is a problem which faces us all, no matter where we live, no matter what our political views must be.

"Knowledge is power," as Francis Bacon said 500 years ago, and today it is truer than it ever was. What are we going to do by the end of this decade? There are four million boys and girls born each year in the United States. Our population is growing each decade by a figure equal to the total population of this country at the time of Abraham Lincoln, just 100 years ago.

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Our educational system is not expanding fast enough. By 1970 the number of students in our public, elementary and secondary schools will have increased 25 per cent over 1960. Nearly three-quarters of a million new classrooms will be needed, and we are not building them at that rate.

By 1970 we will have seven million students in our colleges and universities, three million more than we do today. We are going to double the population of our colleges and universities in 10 years. We are going to have to build as many school and college classrooms and buildings in 10 years as we did in 150 years.

By 1970 we will need 7,500 Ph.D.'s in the physical sciences, mathematics, and engineering. In 1960 we graduated 3,000. Such facts make it clear that we have a major responsibility and a major opportunity, one that we should welcome, because there is no greater asset in this country than an educated man or woman.

Education, quite rightly, is the responsibility of the State and the local community, but from the beginning of our country's history, from the time of the Northwest Ordinance, as John Adams and Thomas Jefferson recognized, from the time of the Morrill Act at the height of the Civil War, when the Land Grant College system was set up under the Administration of President Lincoln, from the beginning it has been recognized that there must be a national commitment and that the national government must play its role in stimulating a system of excellence which can serve the great national purpose of a free society, and it is for that reason that we have sent to the Congress of the United States legislation to help meet the needs of higher education, by assisting in the construction of college academic facilities, and junior colleges and graduate centers, and technical institutes, and by stepping up existing programs for student loans and graduate fellowships and other student assistance programs.

We have to improve, and we have so recommended, the quality of our teachers by expanding teacher training institutes by improving teacher preparation programs, by broadening educational research and by authorizing—and this is one of our greatest needs--increased training for teachers for the handicapped—the deaf, and those who can't speak, and those who are otherwise handicapped. And it is designed to strengthen public elementary and secondary education through grants to the states for better teachers' salaries, to relieve critical classroom shortages, to meet the special education problems of depressed areas, and the continuing expansion of vocational education and counsel.

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And finally, we must make a massive attack upon illiteracy in the year 1963 in the United States by an expansion of university extension courses and by a major effort to improve our libraries in every community of our country.

I recognize that this represents a difficult assignment for us all, but I don't think it is an assignment from which we should shrink. I believe that education comes at the top of the responsibilities of any government, at whatever level. It is essential to our survival as a nation in a dangerous and hazardous world, and it is essential to the maintenance of freedom at a time when freedom is under attack.

I have traveled in the last 24 hours from Washington to Colorado to Texas to here, and on every street I see mothers standing with two or three or four children. They are going to pour into our schools and our colleges in the next 10 or 20 years and I want this generation of Americans to be as prepared to meet this challenge as our forefathers did in making it possible for all of us to be here today.

We are the privileged, and it should be the ambition of every citizen to express and expand that privilege so that all of our countrymen and women share it.

Thank you.



JFK rides in his final parade in Dallas on November 21, 1963. Photo courtesy editors' collection.

NOTES

1. This article is an expansion of the ideas put forth in Seth Mallios, *Hail Montezuma!: The Hidden Treasures of San Diego State* (San Diego: Montezuma Publishing, 2012), chaps. 5-6.
2. While other moments in SDSU's history are of critical importance—like the 1897 founding of the institution, the 1931 move to Montezuma Mesa, etc.—they are more singular in scope and do not match the compound significance of the JFK visit. The argument presented here regarding the magnitude of the Kennedy visit centers on the cumulative effect of four factors: 1) JFK was the only U.S. president to visit San Diego State while in office, 2) he visited during one of the most volatile times (foreign and domestically) in American history, 3) Kennedy's commencement speech was one of his most profound, and 4) the honorary doctorate that San Diego State gave to JFK at the 1963 ceremony greatly enhanced its ability to grant research PhDs, a cornerstone of the institution's enduring research legacy. Since JFK's doctorate, San Diego State has gone on to award 35 additional honorary degrees. In chronological order, the institution's honorees include: John F. Kennedy (1963), Glenn Theodore Seaborg (1966), Edwin O. Reischauer (1968), Bernard Lipinsky (1996), Alvena Storm (1996), D. Bruce Johnstone (1997), Shimon Peres (1997), Arthur Barron (1998), Arthur G. Linkletter (1998), Vahac Mardirosian (1998), Shirley Chisholm (1999), James Sinegal (1999), Miguel León-Portilla (2002), George Walker Smith (2002), Dwight E. Stanford (2002), Claire Van Vliet (2002), John Baldassari (2003), Charles F. Bolden (2003), Sol Price (2003), Kathleen Kennedy (2004), Norman Brinker (2005), Andreas Brown (2005), Ron L. Fowler (2005), Irwin Jacobs (2006), Craig R. Noel (2006), Martha Longenecker (2007), Deborah Szekely (2007), Leon Williams (2007), Darlene Shiley (2008), Malin Burnham (2009), Pete Wilson (2009), Don Coryell (2010), Charles W. Hostler (2010), Kazuo Inamori (2011), Leonard H. Lavin (2012), and L. Robert Payne (2012). For a list of all CSU honorary degrees, see: <http://www.calstate.edu/honorarydegrees/> (accessed February 18, 2013). San Diego State did not grant any honorary degrees between 1968 and 1996. President Tom Day, who served from 1978-1996, was initially opposed to these sorts of ceremonial honors. At the end of his tenure, however, he changed his mind in an effort "to celebrate those [like Lipinsky and Storm] who had done so much for the university and to provide fund-raising opportunities" for his successor, President Stephen Weber (Personal communication, Thomas Day, December 11, 2012). Weber had had much success awarding ceremonial degrees as President at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Oswego, noting that honorary degrees "are very important statements of university values" (Personal communication, Stephen Weber, November 19, 2012). Weber granted 29 honorary degrees at SDSU in 15 years as university president.
3. San Diego State University's ranking was based on Academic Analytics' Faculty Scholarly Productivity Index; its designation as a "small research university" was determined on the basis of its having fewer than 15 doctoral programs. While many individuals at the university celebrated this ranking, some faculty disputed the designation with regard to how the scholarly criteria were chosen and employed in the calculations.
4. San Diego State College officials had invited then-Senator John F. Kennedy to visit their campus on previous occasions in 1955 and 1956, but the requests did not include the promise of an honorary doctorate. In 1955, JFK declined because of his recent spinal surgery; in 1956, the senator passed on the invitation due to his impending trip to the Far East.
5. "Access Provisions of the California Master Plan for Higher Education," *Master Plan for Higher Education in California* (1960); Teri Yamada, "Restructuring the California State University: A Call to Action," *Thought and Action* 26 (Fall 2010): 91-107.
6. San Diego State College Senate, "The Functions and Purposes of SDSC" (1962).
7. San Diego State had been a State Teacher's College from 1921 to 1935, but President Love was adamant that his institution's teaching history—both in terms of quality instruction and the education of those individuals entering the teaching profession—not overshadow or diminish its equally significant research legacy.

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8. "Professor Henry Janssen," interview transcript, San Diego State University Oral Histories (1992), <http://library.sdsu.edu/scua/sdsu-oral-histories/janssen> (accessed February 18, 2013).
9. Ibid.
10. Ned Joy had spearheaded a previous attempt at getting JFK to speak at San Diego State in 1956. He was unsuccessful and never shared this failure with officemate Henry Janssen.
11. California was an elusive prize for Democrats during this time and a stronghold for Republican presidential candidates during the 1950s, '60s, '70s, and '80s. In fact, JFK did not even carry the state when he won the White House in 1960. Nevertheless, in the early 1960s, President Kennedy was eager to make political inroads in California, especially in the more conservative areas in the southern region of the state. Even though he would not live to see it, JFK's attention to the Golden State was successful, as the 1964 national election (won by President Lyndon Johnson) marked the only victory for a democratic presidential candidate in California from 1952 to 1988.
12. *Daily Aztec*, May 17, 1963, p. 1.
13. In addition to bureaucratic matters, administrators, faculty, staff, and students at San Diego State had numerous practical matters to attend to as well. For example, new water pipes had to be completed to increase water pressure for the event, student finals were moved from June 6 to June 1, Arts and Sciences Dean Sidney Gulick designed JFK's honorary doctorate of laws hood, and Dr. Gerald Person, Chairman of the Commencement Committee, had a seemingly endless list of details to oversee.
14. "Robert L. Weir," interview transcript, San Diego State University Oral Histories (2003).
15. Although earlier itineraries of the visit planned for JFK to begin his San Diego tour with a speech at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot (MCRD), his schedule was ultimately modified to have his trip start with the motorcade across San Diego. *Hail Montezuma!: The Hidden Treasures of San Diego State* errantly reported that Kennedy's MCRD address occurred before the San Diego State College commencement on June 6.
16. Weir asserts in his oral history that JFK's San Diego limousine was the "same limousine that he was assassinated in." "Robert L. Weir," interview transcript.
17. SDSC senior electrician Tommy Bradeen oversaw the building of both the presidential platform and a separate dais for the media. The event was covered by 14 radio and television stations and included over 350 news people. Bradeen recalled that White House Secret Servicemen required that their construction specifications be followed to the letter, and that the two stages were "incredibly overbuilt." There was great attention to detail; Robert Weir recalled that the president's staff even "flew out a special chair that was on the dais [and a] special water for him [President Kennedy]" as well (2003 SDSU Oral History, Robert L. Weir).
18. JFK had already taken off his mortarboard by the time of the hooding as the President "did not like to wear anything on his head." "Robert L. Weir," interview transcript.
19. Exercises at the 1963 San Diego State College commencement began with the San Diego State symphonic band's performance of "Ruffles and Flourishes" and "Hail to the Chief" to announce JFK's arrival and was followed by the national anthem. Dr. Frank M. Lowe, Past President of the San Diego Council of Churches and Member of the San Diego Board of Education, then gave the invocation. President Love presided over the conferring of degrees, and was followed by official remarks from Governor Brown and an honorary citation by Louis H. Heilbron, Chairman of the Trustees of the California State Colleges. Following JFK's hooding and address, the alma mater was sung, and then the Reverend Patrick J. Keane, principal at nearby St. Augustine High School, gave the benediction.
20. See: <http://www.squibob.org/> for more details (accessed February 18, 2013).
21. February 1, 2008, e-mail correspondence from Stephen Weber to Jim Herrick.
22. Work on Aztec Bowl started immediately after the college moved from University Heights

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- to Mission Palisades (today's Montezuma Mesa) in 1931. The \$260,000 initial phase of the project, which included excavation, fill, leveling, and rock removal, was funded by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) under the auspices of the State Emergency Relief Association (SERA). The \$216,863 second phase entailed building of the stadium's structural materials and was paid for by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). See Pamela Hart Branton, "The Works Progress Administration in San Diego County, 1935-1943," M.A. thesis, San Diego State University (Spring 1991).
23. See Lewis B. Lesley, *San Diego State College: The First Fifty Years, 1897-1947* (San Diego: San Diego State College: 1947) and Raymond Starr, *San Diego State University: A History in Word and Image* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1995).
 24. Anne Rizzo, a City Planning major, was especially active in the fight to save Aztec Bowl. She authored multiple Op-Ed articles (*Daily Aztec*, December 17, 1992, 7; *Daily Aztec*, March 1, 1994, 21; and *Daily Aztec*, March 3, 1994, 13) and spoke at the State Historical Resources Commission in favor of a National Register of Historic Places nomination for Aztec Bowl. For her tireless preservationist efforts, she received a "People in the Trenches Award" from San Diego's Save Our Heritage Organization in 1995.
 25. Lynne E. Christianson, Alexander D. Bevil, and Sue Wade, "San Diego State College Historic District: The Mediterranean Monastery as a College Campus," *The San Diego State University Occasional Archaeological Papers* 1 (1994), <http://soap.sdsu.edu/Volume1/SDSCollege/college.htm> (accessed February 18, 2013).
 26. Alexander Bevil, "From Grecian Columns to Spanish Towers: The Development of San Diego State College, 1922-1935," *The Journal of San Diego History* 41, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 38-57.
 27. San Diego State University, Facilities Planning and Management for the California State University System, "San Diego State University Student Activity Center Draft Supplement to Final Supplement Environmental Impact Report and Final Environmental Impact Report," vols 1-2 (November 1994).
 28. *Daily Aztec*, March 16, 1984, 5.
 29. Like many compromises, the resultant mitigation left both sides in this contentious debate frustrated. University officials lamented that the new Student Activity Center only marginally resembled their initial plans. Furthermore, many historic preservationists were disappointed in how little of the original stadium was saved and incorporated into the new design. In fact, the National Trust for Historic Preservation listed the Aztec Bowl case in its 1995 "Preservation Year in Review" as "Bad News." The Trust concluded, "The mitigation product was inadequate.... The HABS (Historic American Buildings Survey) recordation was poor, and the saving of a portion of the bleachers was incomplete." For many individuals, the arena still is a symbol of contention and angst; retired SDSU athletic director Fred Miller simultaneously called the project one of the "great frustrations and great highlights" of his career (*The Daily Aztec*. Vol. 78, No. 117; March 28, 1995; Pp1, 3.)
 30. Although JFK gave many public addresses during the summer of 1963, he tailored many of them to specific themes. For example, his remarks in Nashville, Tennessee at the 90th Anniversary Convocation of Vanderbilt University, on May 18, 1963, also emphasized the importance of education but were tied more directly to partnerships between government and community service—especially in light of the 30th anniversary of the Tennessee Valley Authority—than issues of racial equality. Likewise, his commencement address at American University, on June 10, 1963, discussed issues of societal progress and enlightened ideals but focused much more closely on peaceful solutions to the Cold War, a topic completely unmentioned in his San Diego State College speech.
 31. When former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt spoke at San Diego State College in 1962, she foreshadowed some of JFK's ideas on this topic, declaring that education was an inalienable right for all people regardless of race, gender, or wealth.