



Joseph Patrick Kennedy - father of President John F. Kennedy - came from an Irish family who left their homeland during the disastrous potato famine. Arriving in the Boston area without any money, they - like so many other immigrants - did their best to make ends meet.

The Irish population of Boston jumped from about 30,000 to 100,000 after the mass exodus from Ireland, but the Irish weren't exactly welcomed into Boston society. The "elite" of the city considered Irish people to be servants. Before long, 70% of the servants in Boston were of Irish descent.

Joe Kennedy's parents - particularly his mother - were determined that their children would not be considered (or treated like) second-class people. Instead of giving her son his father's distinctively Irish first name - Patrick - she called him Joseph.

Educated at Harvard, Joe Kennedy had a knack for business. He was involved with various companies and was able to increase his wealth - unlike so many others - during the years of (and following) the market crash.

In 1938, he was appointed Ambassador to Great Britain - a position for which he'd heavily lobbied. He took his wife, and five of their nine children, with him to London.

As war with Germany appeared increasingly likely, Joe Kennedy thought appeasement with Hitler was a reasonable approach. King George VI disagreed.

Soon after Germany invaded Poland, in September of 1939, the King met with Kennedy. The meeting did not go well. On the 9th of September, the King wrote this in his diary:

*I paid a visit to the Central War Room to hear of the latest news on all fronts. Not much to report. The US Ambassador Mr. Kennedy came to tea...*

*He looked at the war very much from the financial & material viewpoint. He wondered why we did not let Hitler have SE Europe, as it was no good to us from a monetary standpoint. He did not seem to realise that this country was a part of Europe, that it was essential for us to act as policemen, & to uphold the rights of small nations & that the Balkan countries had a national spirit. However, I wrote him a letter pointing out these things & he answered it very friendly-like. I was surprised as I had never seen him rattled before. (King George VI's diary entry, 9 September 1939, quoted by Robert Rhodes James in *A Spirit Undaunted*, page 173.)*

It was not the first time that Kennedy had exasperated the King:

*This was not the first indication that the King had had of Kennedy's defeatism and total incomprehension of what the war was about, which infuriated and exasperated him. He knew that Kennedy had been a fervent supporter of Chamberlain and appeasement and American non-involvement in a European war, but he had expected that the American ambassador might have some understanding of the new situation and be sympathetic to the Allied cause. The revelation that he had neither caused an explosion. (A Spirit Undaunted, page 173.)*

The King decided to write a letter to the Ambassador. The original draft, which was not sent, was apparently very pointed:

*Although the King could, and often did, express himself strongly - even violently - in person, he was cautious about doing so on paper, either in his diaries or in letters. But the original letter he wrote to Kennedy after this meeting - described later by Lascelles [the King's secretary] as 'a stinker' - was shown to Chamberlain and Churchill, who advised a milder rebuke; even so, the softened-down version was exceptionally sharp.*

*The original, unfortunately, does not seem to have survived. The Foreign Office jibe that 'I always thought my daffodils were yellow until I met Joe Kennedy,' was described by Halifax as 'unkind but deserved.'* (A Spirit Undaunted, pages 173-74.)

President Roosevelt, and members of his administration, also grew weary of Joe's public statements.

On the 10th of November, 1940 - during the Battle of Britain - the *Boston Globe* published an [interview with the Ambassador](#). Kennedy - who was opposed to providing the United Kingdom with military and economic aid - had apparently told two reporters (Louis M. Lyons, of the *Globe*, and Ralph Coghlan, of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*) that:

*Democracy is finished in England. It may be here [in the US].*

The *Globe* also attributed these words to the Ambassador:

*It's all a question of what we do with the next six months. The whole reason for aiding England is to give us time ... As long as she is in there, we have time to prepare. It isn't that [Britain is] fighting for democracy. That's the bunk. She's fighting for self-preservation, just as we will if it comes to us ... I know more about the European situation than anybody else, and it's up to me to see that the country gets it...*

FDR was not amused and accepted [Kennedy's resignation](#) as ambassador. He had already decided to work around him, dealing with Churchill directly. Robert Rhodes James describes that back story:

*Before this meeting [in September of 1939] the King and Queen had accepted an invitation from Lady [Nancy] Astor for a farewell lunch at Cliveden for Mrs. Kennedy and her children, who were returning to the United States. The Astors, of course, had no knowledge of the King's views on Kennedy, and were puzzled that while he conversed happily with Lady Astor's daughter-in-law he virtually ignored the Kennedys, who had been deliberately placed at the end of the table, well away from the King. It was some time before the younger Astors discovered the reason for the King's coldness towards the American.*

*Although the King did not know this at the time, Churchill's evaluation of Kennedy had been exactly the same, and he had begun his famous direct correspondence with Roosevelt, a course also followed by the King.* (A Spirit Undaunted, page 174.)

See the Kennedy Library's web site for photos of the Kennedys during the relevant time frame, including:

**[Joe Kennedy, in 1914](#)**

**[The Kennedy children in Hyannis Port - 1928](#)**

**[The Kennedys at their family home in Hyannis Port - 1931](#)**

**[Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy in London - 1939](#)**

**[Kathleen \("Kick"\) Kennedy in London - 1943](#)** - she was [killed in an airplane crash](#), over France, in 1948

**[Joe Kennedy, in 1946](#)**, with his father-in-law (Boston mayor, John F. "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald) and his second son (John F. Kennedy)

To learn more about Joe Kennedy, who was born in 1888, visit the [American Studies program at the University of Virginia](#) and the [Kennedy Library and Museum](#).

Credits:

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Quoted passages, as noted above.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

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## Media Stream



### Joseph P. Kennedy - Relationship with George VI

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