

When John F. Kennedy visited Berlin at the height of the Cold War, he was given a very special timepiece – one that represented the peace and unity so valued by the U.S. president, says John Reardon



It was June 26, 1963. John F. Kennedy, not quite two and a half years in office, had arrived in West Berlin for a state visit. Charismatic and debonair, he had the looks, energy, and liberal idealism of a young man, and the gravitas and sensitivity of a mature diplomat. After Harvard he'd joined the navy, serving as a lieutenant during World War II, before beginning his political career. At 43, he became the youngest elected U.S. president. Looking back, it's astonishing how much he achieved in his painfully brief three years in office.

In 1963, the world was a turbulent place. A year before, it had stood on the brink of war as the Soviet Union attempted to install nuclear missiles in Cuba and Kennedy imposed a blockade. The Soviets backed down; the crucible of tension now, for many, was Berlin. After the war, Hitler's capital had been divided, like Germany, between the communist East and the democratic West. Soviet Union leader Nikita Khrushchev called West Berlin, isolated deep in the East German landmass, "a bone in my throat." When the East German government, with Soviet support, built a wall of barbed wire through Berlin in August 1961, tensions were heightened. By the time of Kennedy's visit, the wall was reinforced with concrete – a barrier cutting the cosmopolitan West from the bleak and austere East, dividing families and friends.

Kennedy's speechwriters had given him a diplomatic text, as tentative steps were being taken to de-escalate the arms race. Says Tom Putnam, former director of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, "Kennedy's reception in Germany had been overwhelming, but never more

than when he entered West Berlin. He was deeply moved by the people's courage and what they stood for – self-determination and freedom. And that morning he decided: I can't give this speech. It's too weak and doesn't match the spirit of the crowds." J.F.K. began to draft his own. Moments before taking the stage, he recalled that the proudest boast was once "I am a citizen of Rome." Now he jotted down the German version, phonetically: "Ish bin ein Bearleener."

The speech would be among his most significant. "Freedom has many difficulties," Kennedy admitted, "and democracy is not perfect, but we have never had to put a wall up to keep our people in." The next day, Mayor Willy Brandt presented a remarkable desk clock to the president on behalf of the people of West Berlin. What mattered most to Kennedy was world peace, and the clock – featuring time displays for Washington, Moscow, and Berlin – symbolized that hope. Heinz Wipperfeld, a Berlin jeweler and Patek Philippe retailer, had suggested that the Geneva firm build an electronic quartz clock with multiple time zones. What Patek Philippe delivered was masterful. There's a beautiful geometric symmetry to the design, not just physically but ideologically: it embraces the capitals of two world powers and the city that would be a fulcrum of the future. The gift was almost prescient: an agreement had been signed just days before to set up a hotline, the famous "red telephone," between the Pentagon and the Kremlin. A clock like this would guarantee that Kennedy wouldn't be waking Khrushchev from his slumbers.

Wipperfeld sent a touching letter to the president, addressing him as a "fellow Berliner" and explaining the clock's workings. He planned to send replacement batteries in May 1964. By then Kennedy was dead, yet his belief that there would be a day "when this city will be joined as one" would, eventually, come true. ♣

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John F. Kennedy (above) was presented with the Kennedy Clock (right) during his visit to West Berlin in 1963. The clock's construction resembles a nautical instrument, recalling Kennedy's naval career, and its three dials simultaneously display the time in Moscow, Washington, D.C., and Berlin. The original is held at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston. A prototype can be seen at the Patek Philippe Museum, Geneva