

***Profiles in Courage*** is a 1956 volume of short biographies describing acts of bravery and integrity by eight [United States Senators](#), written by then-Senator John F. Kennedy, extensively helped by [Ted Sorensen](#). Kennedy is widely listed as the sole author and won the [Pulitzer Prize](#) for the work. The book profiles senators who defied the opinions of their [party](#) and constituents to do what they felt was right and suffered severe criticism and losses in popularity because of their actions. It begins with a [quote](#) from [Edmund Burke](#) on the courage of the English statesman [Charles James Fox](#), in his 1783 attack upon the tyranny of the [East India Company](#) in the House of Commons.

**“He well knows what snares are spread about his path, from personal animosity...and possibly from popular delusion. But he has put to hazard his ease, his security, his interest, his power, even his...popularity. He is traduced and abused for his supposed motives. He will remember that obloquy\* is a necessary ingredient in the composition of all true glory: he will remember...that calumny and abuse are essential parts of triumph. He may live long, he may do much. But here is the summit. He never can exceed what he does this day.**

**\*OB-LA-KWEE: strong public criticism or verbal abuse.**

The book focuses intensely on mid-19th-century antebellum America and the efforts of senators to delay the [American Civil War](#). *Profiles* was widely celebrated and became a bestseller. It includes a foreword by [Allan Nevins](#).

In 1990, Kennedy's family created the [Profile in Courage Award](#) to honor individuals who have acted with courage in the same vein as those profiled in the book.

In his 2008 autobiography, Kennedy speechwriter [Ted Sorensen](#), who was presumed as early as 1958 to be the book's [ghostwriter](#), acknowledged that he actually wrote most of the book.



## Contents

### History and background

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Kennedy was elected to the House of Representatives in 1946, 1948, and 1950 for the state of Massachusetts. In 1952 and 1958, he was elected a [senator from Massachusetts](#), and served in the Senate until resigning after he was elected president in 1960. It was a passage from [Herbert Agar](#)'s book *The Price of Union* about an act of courage by an earlier senator from Massachusetts, [John Quincy Adams](#), that gave Kennedy the idea of writing about senatorial [courage](#). He showed the passage to [Ted Sorensen](#) and asked him to see if he could find some more examples. This Sorensen did, and eventually they had enough not just for an article, as Kennedy had originally envisaged, but a book. With help from research assistants and the [Library of Congress](#), Kennedy wrote the book while bedridden during 1954 and 1955, recovering from back surgery.

Interaction between the [White House](#) and [broadcast television](#) was expanded considerably by the Kennedy administration. The television adaptation of his book *Profiles in Courage* is a significant example of Kennedy's noted use of television to promote himself and his political positions as part of what was called the [New Frontier](#).

## Summary of senators profiled

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- [John Quincy Adams](#), from Massachusetts, for breaking away from the [Federalist Party](#).
- [Daniel Webster](#), also from Massachusetts, for speaking in favor of the [Compromise of 1850](#).
- [Thomas Hart Benton](#), from [Missouri](#), for staying in the [Democratic Party](#) despite his opposition to the extension of slavery in the territories.
- [Sam Houston](#), from [Texas](#), for speaking against the [Kansas–Nebraska Act](#) of 1854, which would have allowed those two states to decide on the slavery question. Houston wanted to uphold the [Missouri Compromise](#). His and Benton's votes against Kansas–Nebraska did just that. This was his most unpopular vote, and he was defeated when running for re-election. Two years later he'd regained enough popularity to be elected Governor of Texas. However, when the state convened in special session and joined the [Confederacy](#), Sam Houston refused to be inaugurated as governor, holding true to his ideal of preserving the Union.
- [Edmund G. Ross](#), from [Kansas](#), for voting for acquittal in the [Andrew Johnson impeachment trial](#). As a result of Ross's vote, along with those of six other [Republicans](#), Democrat Johnson's presidency was saved, and the stature of the office was preserved.
- [Lucius Lamar](#), from [Mississippi](#), for eulogizing [Charles Sumner](#) on the Senate floor and other efforts to mend ties between the North and South during [Reconstruction](#), and for his principled opposition to the [Bland–Allison Act](#) to permit free coinage of [silver](#). Lamar returned to Mississippi and gave rousing speeches that eventually led to public approval of his decisions and cemented a legacy of courageousness.
- [George Norris](#), from [Nebraska](#), for opposing [Joseph Gurney Cannon](#)'s autocratic power as Speaker of the House, for speaking out against arming U.S. merchant ships during the United States' neutral period in [World War I](#), and for supporting the presidential campaign of Democrat [Al Smith](#).
- [Robert A. Taft](#), from [Ohio](#), for criticizing the [Nuremberg Trials](#) for trying [Nazi war criminals](#) under *ex post facto* laws. Counter-criticism against Taft's statements was vital to his failure to [secure the Republican nomination for president](#) in 1948.

## Reception

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After its release on January 1, 1956, *Profiles in Courage* became a best seller. The book won the [Pulitzer Prize for Biography](#) in 1957, even though it was not one of the finalists forwarded to the [Pulitzer Prize](#) board from the selection committee. Kennedy's father [Joseph](#) asked columnist [Arthur Krock](#), his political adviser and a longtime member of the prize board, to persuade others to vote for it.

The book returned to the bestseller lists in 1961 after Kennedy became president and again in 1963 after he was assassinated.

*Profiles in Courage* was made into a [television series](#) of the same name that aired on the [NBC](#) network during the 1964–1965 [television season](#).

In 1956, Kennedy gave a copy of the book to [Richard Nixon](#), who responded that he was looking forward to reading it. After being defeated by Kennedy in the [1960 United States presidential election](#), Nixon was advised by [Mamie Eisenhower](#) to write a book himself. Nixon

visited the White House in April 1961 and got the same advice from Kennedy: writing a book would raise the public image of any public man. Nixon wrote his book *Six Crises* (1962) in response to *Profiles in Courage*.

## Authorship

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Questions have been raised about how much of the book was truly written by Kennedy and how much by his research assistants. On December 7, 1957, journalist [Drew Pearson](#) appeared as a guest on *The Mike Wallace Interview* and made the following claim live on air: "John F. Kennedy is the only man in history that I know who won a Pulitzer Prize for a book that was [ghostwritten](#) for him." Wallace replied: "You know for a fact, Drew, that the book *Profiles in Courage* was written for Senator Kennedy ... by someone else?" Pearson responded that he did and that Kennedy speechwriter [Ted Sorensen](#) wrote the book. Wallace responded: "And Kennedy accepted a Pulitzer Prize for it? And he never acknowledged the fact?" Pearson replied: "No, he has not. You know, there's a little wisecrack around the Senate about Jack ... some of his colleagues say, 'Jack, I wish you had a little less profile and more courage.'"

It was later reported that the statement "I wish that Kennedy had a little less profile and more courage" was actually made by former First Lady [Eleanor Roosevelt](#).<sup>[14]</sup>

[Joseph P. Kennedy](#) saw the broadcast, then called his lawyer, [Clark Clifford](#), yelling: "Sue the bastards for fifty million dollars!" Soon Clifford and [Robert Kennedy](#) showed up at ABC and told executives that the Kennedys would sue unless the network issued a full [retraction](#) and apology. Mike Wallace and Drew Pearson insisted that the story was true and refused to back off. Nevertheless, ABC made the retraction and apology, which made Wallace furious.

According to "[The Straight Dope](#)", Herbert Parmet later analyzed the text of *Profiles in Courage* and wrote in his book *Jack: The Struggles of John F. Kennedy* (1980) that although Kennedy did oversee the production and provided for the direction and message of the book, it was clearly Sorensen who provided most of the work that went into the end product. The thematic essays that comprise the first and last chapters "may be viewed largely as [Kennedy's] own work", however.

In addition to Kennedy's speechwriter Sorensen, Jacqueline Kennedy recruited her history instructor from [Georgetown University](#), [Jules Davids](#), to work on the project. Davids told a Kennedy biographer that he and Sorensen had researched and written drafts of most of the book. Kennedy's handwritten notes, which Senator Kennedy showed to reporters to prove his authorship, are now in the [Kennedy Library](#), but are mostly preliminary notes about John Quincy Adams, a particular interest of Kennedy's, and are not a readable draft of the chapter on Adams. During the six-month period when the book was being written, Sorensen worked full-time on the project, sometimes twelve-hour days; Kennedy spent most of the same period travelling, campaigning, or hospitalized. Kennedy's preserved notes show that he kept up with the book's progress, but historian [Garry Wills](#) remarked that Kennedy's notes contain no draft of any stage of the manuscript, or of any substantial part of it.

In Sorensen's autobiography, *Counselor: A Life at the Edge of History*, he said he wrote "a first draft of most of the chapters" of *Profiles in Courage* and "helped choose the words of many of its sentences". Sorensen also wrote: "While in Washington, I received from Florida almost daily instructions and requests by letter and telephone – books to send, memoranda to draft, sources to check, materials to assemble, and Dictaphone drafts or revisions of early chapters." (Sorensen, p. 146) Sorensen wrote that Kennedy "worked particularly hard and long on the first and last chapters, setting the tone and philosophy of the book". Kennedy "publicly acknowledged in his introduction to the book my extensive role in its composition". (p. 147) Sorensen claimed that in May 1957, Kennedy "unexpectedly and generously offered, and I

happily accepted, a sum to be spread over several years, that I regarded as more than fair" for his work on the book. Indeed, this supported a long-standing recognition of the collaborative effort that Kennedy and Sorensen had developed since 1953.

## Accuracy

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Author [David O. Stewart](#) has questioned the accuracy of the book's chapter on the [impeachment of Andrew Johnson](#). Of Johnson's defenders in the Senate, *Profiles in Courage* stated that "Not a single one of them escaped the terrible torture of vicious criticism engendered by their vote to acquit." However, Stewart described the supposed persecution as a "myth" and continued, "None was a victim of post-impeachment retribution. Indeed, their careers were not wildly different from those of the thirty-five senators who voted to convict Andrew Johnson." However, Ross lost his bid for re-election two years after casting a vote acquitting Johnson. There is also evidence that Edmund Ross was bribed to vote for Johnson's acquittal, which is not mentioned in *Profiles in Courage*.

Kennedy also praised Lucius Lamar, who, while working in the public eye towards reconciliation, privately was an instigator, according to the claim of author [Nicholas Lemann](#), of growing racial agitation. In the profile of Lamar, Kennedy had also included a single paragraph condemning [Adelbert Ames](#), the Maine-born [governor of Mississippi](#) from 1873 to 1876, as an opportunistic [carpetbagger](#) whose administration was "sustained and nourished by Federal bayonets." Ames' daughter, [Blanche Ames Ames](#), was outraged, and regularly wrote to Kennedy for years afterward in protest, demanding a retraction of the "defamatory insinuations" and accused him of pandering to Southern readers. The letter-writing continued even after Kennedy had been elected to the presidency. This prompted Kennedy to turn to [George Plimpton](#), Ames' grandson and a classmate of [Robert F. Kennedy](#) at Harvard, asking him if he could get his grandmother to cease, claiming her letters were interfering with government business. Blanche Ames Ames would eventually publish her own biography of her father in 1964.