

Child's Letter to President John F. Kennedy about Physical Fitness

Missy McNatt

On March 3, 1963, nine-year-old Jack Chase of Torrance, California, wrote a letter to President John F. Kennedy. In his single-page note, featured in this article, Jack described his plans for staying physically fit. He said he would walk to school, the store, and the library “because I know a strong boy makes a strong man and a strong man makes a strong country.” His statements echoed many of the ideas contained in Executive Order 11074, signed two months earlier by President Kennedy.

The Executive Order of January 8, 1963, established the President's Council on Physical Fitness and clearly stated the purpose of the Council:

WHEREAS recent studies, both private and public, have revealed disturbing deficiencies in the physical fitness of American youth; and

WHEREAS since the youth of our Nation is one of our greatest assets, it is imperative that the physical fitness of our youth be improved and promoted to the greatest possible extent; and

WHEREAS there is a close relationship between physical fitness and intellectual vigor and moral strength; and

WHEREAS the physical fitness of its citizens is a concern of the government at all levels, as well as a responsibility of the family, the school, the community, and other groups and organizations; and

WHEREAS it is necessary that the activities of the Federal Government in this area be coordinated and administered so as to assure their maximum effectiveness and to provide guidance and stimulation.

Executive Order 11074 continued with five sections that identified who would serve on the Council, described the function of the Council, listed the federal agencies involved, explained the Council as a continuance of the President's Council on Youth Fitness, and created a new seal for the Council.

The secretary of health, education, and welfare was the chairman of the Council, and the Council included secretaries from several other executive departments. Perhaps the best known member of the Council was Charles Burnham “Bud” Wilkinson, who was appointed as the special consultant to the president on youth fitness in September of 1961 and continued to serve the Kennedy administration in that capacity until Kennedy's death in November 1963.

Bud Wilkinson was known as the most successful college football coach during the 1950s. Under his leadership, the University of Oklahoma “Sooners” had five undefeated seasons, three national championships, and a national record of 47 consecutive games without a defeat from 1953 through 1957. Wilkinson's name and fame brought instant recognition to Kennedy's effort to improve the physical condition of America's youth.

Government concerns about the physical fitness of Americans preceded the Kennedy administration. President Eisenhower, the former commander of Allied forces in Europe during World War II, was aware of the issue of physical fitness. Officers of the Armed Forces complained that draftees during World War II and the Korean War were physically unprepared for the demands of service. During Eisenhower's first administration, Dr. Hans Kraus and Ruth P. Hirschland published a report titled “Muscular Fitness and Health” in the *Journal of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation* in December 1953. The report gave the results of the Kraus-Weber test that measured strength and flexibility of trunk and leg muscles, and was given to American and European children. The study found American children deficient in fitness compared to European children. As a result of this report and the information he received as commander of

the Allied forces, President Eisenhower established the President's Council on Youth Fitness with Executive Order 10673, issued on July 16, 1956.

The Council encountered a number of difficulties during the Eisenhower administration, including personality conflicts and organizational difficulties as well as an overall purpose that was imprecise. Although President Eisenhower's original executive order was inspired by concerns about physical fitness, the Council promoted a concept of total fitness that included intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and social fitness. Original Council members were also uncertain about what actions they could take to implement the program. The organization was forbidden from setting up a national fitness program. The Eisenhower administration did not want any program that might be reminiscent of the youth programs in fascist Germany and in the Soviet Union. In spite of all the challenges, the Council did manage to keep the issue of fitness before the nation.

President Kennedy was clearly aware of the efforts to improve the fitness of American youth under the Eisenhower administration. His physical fitness initiative began even before he was inaugurated in January 1961. As president-elect, Kennedy published "The Soft American" in *Sports Illustrated* (December 26, 1960). In it, he outlined four points as the basis of his physical fitness program: a White House Committee on Health and Fitness; direct oversight of the initiative by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare; an annual Youth Fitness Conference to be attended by state governors; and the assertion that physical fitness was the business of the federal government.

Six months into his administration, Kennedy held a news conference asking all Americans to support his physical fitness initiative. His message clearly stated the connection between a strong democracy and healthy youth: "The strength of our democracy is no greater than the collective well-being of our people." He

then pointed out that the youth of 1962 were healthier than any previous generation, but the majority had not developed strong, agile bodies.

The physical fitness program continued to be a key component of the Kennedy administration. Kennedy issued a "Progress Report by the President on Physical Fitness" in August 1963. The report examined the causes of the decline in physical fitness. He began with a reference to a recent trip to Europe and his visit to the American troops. Kennedy noted that modern science and technology had developed "weapons of a complexity and power hitherto unknown to fighting men ... (but) it was clear to me that the capacity of our Army to withstand aggression will depend in the future, as always, on the hardihood and endurance, the physical fitness of the American GI."

Kennedy's report continued with an explanation of why contemporary life in the United States failed to promote the physical hardiness of earlier times, and he included several examples of how people once lived. Lincoln had to walk miles to borrow and return a book, whereas in (what was then) modern times a bookmobile brought a book to one's door. And children of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries thought nothing of walking miles to school, but by the 1960s a bus picked them up at their front doors. No longer was it necessary for children to chop firewood for heating and cooking purposes. In the modern world, an oil truck delivers the needed fuel.

Also, in the progress report, President Kennedy acknowledged the thousands of letters he and the Council had received. "This increased national awareness is reflected in the White House mail, where fitness is one of the main subjects of correspondence by young and old alike."

The letters dealt with a variety of issues. The writers wanted to know what could be considered physical activity. A few of the sports mentioned were swimming, skiing, ice skating, golf, touch football, bowling, badminton, social dancing, ballet, sailing, equitation, archery, trap

shooting, fencing, canoeing, table tennis, and croquet along with the traditional sports such as track and field, football, baseball, basketball, tennis, and volleyball.

Letters from children described poor school gym facilities and equipment, programs in which physical education teachers only came to the school once a week or once a month, and schools with no physical education teachers at all. Many students complained that they had unfair teachers who punished them by keeping them in the classroom during recess or took away their gym classes as a result of poor grades or poor behavior. Jimmy Cannon, a third-grade student in Bakersfield, California, reported his frustration: "We are not having enough physical education in our room at school. If one person jumps out of line, the whole class does not get P.E. Since this happens almost every day, we do not have P.E." Some students questioned why they had to focus on physical fitness when their teachers were overweight and not fit.

In some of the letters, girls pointed out that the boys had all of the sports programs. One young woman from Oklahoma noted,

It is a state law for all shools [*sic*] to have a Physical Fitness Program. We have a very fine gym but we girls are not about to use it for that purpose. The boys have have many activites [*sic*] such as football, basketball, and etc. But we girls run around flaby! [*sic*] If we say anything to the Principle [*sic*] about the girls having a Program of any sort, he tells [us] to go home and do our own exercises. But Mr. President it is not fair to us girls because we want to do it as a group, not as individuals. The boys use the gym and we girls want to use it to [*sic*].

One 14-year-old girl protested against riding the bus. She and her friends had been walking to school as recommended by the President's Council on Physical Fitness. Her teachers and principal told

the girls they had to ride the bus. In her letter she wrote: “One of my teachers even told me it was unladylike to walk to school and that the girls in our school shouldn’t do it because we will give our school a bad name.”

One of Kennedy’s best-known initiatives involving physical fitness was the 50-mile hike. In 1962, Kennedy discovered an executive order from President Theodore Roosevelt challenging U.S. Marine officers to finish 50 miles in 20 hours. Kennedy passed the document to Gen. David M. Shoup with the proposal that modern-day marines should duplicate the feat. The public learned of the proposal and took it as a personal request. Numerous letters dealt with the 50-mile hike initiative, including one from Andy McGill, a sportswriter for the *Hollywood-Sun Tattler*, a newspaper in Hollywood, Florida. He wrote about the amazing feat of two boys on the high school track and cross-country team who ran the 50 miles in a little over 10 hours. In his letter, McGill noted:

After reading the enclosed article from today’s [*sic*] paper I am sure you will agree they deserve much credit. This is why I notified you, I figured if you could get Wade and Jumper [the two boys who ran the 50 miles] some type of commendation or award it would help them greatly. Jumper is the state champion in cross-country however Wade has a different situation. He was a delinquent who cared about nothing until McArthur Coach Bill Gilmartin straightened the sophomore out.

Not every letter to President Kennedy or the Council unequivocally supported the fitness program. One woman from West Virginia wrote that children in her town were malnourished and the nation should address proper nutrition before physical exercise. There were several letters from adults who pointed out the evils of liquor and cigarettes, noting they caused more health problems than the lack of physical exercise. Mrs. B. B. McAnally of Vesta, California, asked:

Why not stress the eating of lots of *unsprayed* fruits and vegetables, and discourage false advertising by candy manufacturers who greedily push their tooth-rotting tid bits on the gullible children, with the false idea that candy will give a boost of energy?

There were letters that addressed how strenuous the program was. A fifth-grader wrote that she did 50 sit-ups and 10 push-ups. “As a result I could hardly get out of bed this morning. My side and arms hurt so much I could hardly write this letter.” Alfred Campbell of Cape May, New Jersey, pointed out:

In many of your Public Advertisements it comes to my attention that you stress fitness in the nation’s youth. This is all well and good, but do you think it is ‘fitness’ if you end up feeling worse after you [*sic*] gym exercises, than you do before you

start? And do you think it is proper to set a national standard for boys in classes A, B, and C, and, in a manner of speaking, cram every boy into this average? Remembering everyone is built somewhat different [*sic*].

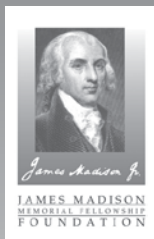
President’s Kennedy’s physical fitness program caught the imagination of Americans from across the nation and every walk of life. He and the Council supported a massive advertising campaign in newspapers, magazines, television, radio, brochures, and by soliciting the backing of well-known American fitness gurus such as Jack LaLanne. Even the president of the Ford Motor Corporation, Lee Iacocca, perhaps the most publicly visible corporate executive of the era, served as a spokesperson for the campaign. Peanuts creator Charles Schulz joined the campaign by promoting exercise in his cartoon strips.

President Kennedy’s assassination on November 22, 1963, did not end the program, but it no longer was at the forefront of national attention. The program has continued under the administration of every president since Kennedy. In 2006, a 50-year milestone celebration occurred as the President’s Council on Physical Fitness remembered its origins under President Dwight Eisenhower. 📖

Note about the Document

All of the letters mentioned in this article and the “Progress Report by the President on Physical Fitness” are preserved by the National Archives in Office of the Secretary, Correspondence and Reports (President’s Council on Physical Fitness) 1956–1968, Record Group 235, General Records of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

Teaching suggestions for this article are on page 14.



JAMES MADISON GRADUATE FELLOWSHIPS AVAILABLE UP TO **\$24,000**

Available to secondary school teachers of American history, American government or social studies to undertake a master’s degree program emphasizing the roots, principles, framing and development of the U.S. Constitution.

Fellowships pay the actual cost of tuition, fees, books, and room and board.

For information and to download an application, visit

www.jamesmadison.gov

General inquiries can be sent to madison@act.org, or call, 1-800-525-6928

James Madison Memorial Fellowship Foundation

11/11
Council on
Physical Education

3/12

21523 Dolores
Torrance, Calif.
Mar. 3, 1963

Pennsylvania Ave.
The White House
Washington, D. C.

Dear President Kennedy:

I know you are a very busy man but I wanted to tell you what a wonderful President I think you are.

My Teacher Mrs. Moneymaker, told us that you want all the children of America to be strong and healthy. You want us to do exercises every day to build up our bodies. Instead of riding in a car to school you want us to walk. We should walk to the store, to the library and any place that is not too near and yet not too far.

I am going to do all these things because I know that a strong boy makes a strong man and a strong man makes a strong country.

Yours, truly,
Jack Chase Age 9

Lee Ann Potter and Missy McNatt

1. Distribute copies of the featured document to students. After students have read the document, lead a class discussion by posing the following questions: What type of document is it? What is the date of the document? Who wrote it? For what purpose? Who was the intended recipient? What questions does it prompt?

2. Tell students that other members of the Council on Physical Fitness included the secretary of health, education, and welfare, the defense secretary, the attorney general, the secretary of the interior, the agriculture secretary, the commerce secretary, the labor secretary, and the housing and home finance administrator. Divide students into eight groups based on the executive departments represented in the Council. Assign groups to conduct research on the mission of each agency and ask the students to hypothesize what role each of the secretaries played on the Council. Suggest that student groups take on the role of a secretary and either write a response to Jack from the perspective of that agency or plan a meeting of the Council. At the meeting, invite each “secretary” to contribute one suggestion for the Physical Fitness program based on the perspective of the agency.

3. Along with Jack’s letter, inform students that the President’s Council on Physical Fitness received numerous letters requesting money from the Council for new or larger gyms, for new equipment, and to hire physical education teachers. Invite students to research what portion of funding for their school comes from the federal government and what programs federal funding pays for. Based on their findings, ask them to hypothesize the Council’s response to the letters. Inform students that the response to these requests was the same: it is not the role of the federal government to provide money for these programs. As an extension, ask students to consider the relationship this topic has to the topic of federalism or invite them to research the sources of funding for their school’s physical education program.

4. Tell students that other letters to the Council focused on the disparities between programs offered for girls and boys. Invite students to conduct research on Title IX, The Educational Amendments of 1972, 20 U.S.C. Sections 1681-1688, and ask them to consider to what extent they think

the President’s Council on Physical Fitness of the early 1960s may have influenced this legislation.

5. During the Kennedy administration, the President’s Council on Physical Fitness developed a fitness test for young people. The physical fitness test was divided by age group and gender. The current physical fitness test for youth can be found at the following website: www.presidentschallenge.org. Work with a physical education instructor, and encourage the students to check their physical fitness based on the suggested fitness level for their age and gender using the test as a guideline. Suggest that they check their fitness level again at regular six-week intervals.

6. One of the reasons the President’s Council on Physical Fitness was so popular was its mass advertising campaign that included posters, brochures and pamphlets, radio and television advertising, and even comic strips. Ask students to research recent data about current physical fitness issues, rising rates of obesity, and overall health of Americans. Encourage the students to create a poster, comic strip, a brochure, a video, or a public service announcement for a current physical fitness campaign. Share the projects with the class and school community.

MISSY MCNATT is an education specialist at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C.

LEE ANN POTTER serves as the editor for “Teaching with Documents,” a regular department of Social Education. You can reproduce the images that accompany this article in any quantity.