

JFK: We still wonder what might have been

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AFTER 40 years, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy continues to ignite countless conspiracy theories, rising from the strange circumstances and seemingly inexplicable actions surrounding it.

Only one thing is certain. Kennedy's death remains an emotionally charged mystery for millions of Americans who lost their idealism, and perhaps their faith in government itself, on that sunny autumn day in Dallas in 1963.

In an inaugural address that has become a poignant reminder of the idealism of the 1960s, JFK challenged his hearers to ask not what their country could do for them but what they could do for their country. By issuing such a challenge, he inspired a strong sense of national purpose and pride, especially among young Americans. His New Frontier programs ushered in a refreshing spirit of volunteerism by urging citizens to commit themselves to solving the problems of poverty and social injustice, both at home and abroad.

Kennedy's agenda proved both ambitious and energizing. He advocated such programs as a higher minimum wage, the creation of new jobs, greater federal aid to education and increased Social Security benefits. In foreign policy, he sought to counter the communist threat by supporting democratic movements in Third World nations and to land an American on the moon before the end of the 1960s. But it's important to remember that few of these efforts were achieved without failure or suffering.

JFK came late to the civil-rights struggle. Fearing that the fight for racial equality would divide the Democratic Party, he stalled for two years on his campaign pledge to ban discrimination by executive order in federally financed housing. Instead of attacking segregation head-on by supporting congressional liberals who pushed civil-rights legislation, Kennedy quietly pursued desegregation through litigation. His reluctance earned him harsh criticism from black activists, whose nonviolent resistance to segregation often resulted in injury and imprisonment.

JFK's initial ventures into foreign policy were also marred. His misguided attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro in the April 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion led to a critically dangerous showdown with the Soviet Union over Cuba, while his continued support of South Vietnam resulted in the initial American casualties in that conflict and ultimately to the escalation of a U.S. presence there.

But Kennedy also learned from his mistakes and grew as a leader because of them. The sobering drama of police dogs and high-powered fire hoses unleashed on schoolchildren who vol-

untarily joined the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to protest segregated public facilities in Birmingham, Ala., forced Kennedy to reconsider the morality of his civil-rights position.

"If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch at a restaurant open to the public," he said in a June 11, 1963, television address, "if he cannot send his children to the best public school available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who represent him, if, in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place?"

Eight days later, Kennedy introduced the strongest civil-rights measure proposed up to that time. Not only did the bill guarantee the rights of blacks to vote and to use public accommodations, but it charged the Justice Department with enforcement and cut off federal funding to those states that refused to uphold the new measure.

Kennedy demonstrated similar growth in his foreign policy. After he led the world to the brink of a nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962, he pursued a more open dialogue with the Soviet Union, which resulted in the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963. In fact, some misguided conspiracy theories maintain that it was Kennedy's decision to pursue détente that provoked the CIA into engineering his assassination.

There are also indications that the assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem in early November 1963 made JFK realize that the United States could not control events there and that a gradual withdrawal of American special forces would be necessary. Unfortunately, his successor, Lyndon Johnson, did not share Kennedy's growing doubts about American involvement in South-

east Asia.

While it is futile to compare John F. Kennedy with the presidents who have held office in the subsequent 40 years, a special affinity for him still remains among the American people. Perhaps his appeal rests more with the potential he demonstrated to grow in office and with what might have been had he lived longer, rather than the reality of his achievements, which have tended to fade over the years.

Even so, it's hard to find among his successors anyone else who has inspired us as deeply or challenged us as passionately to act on the selfless idealism that we find so wanting today.

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