

November Memories

As our campus celebrates its fifteenth birthday, it is a time of great excitement. Everyone at Capitol can look with pride at how far the school has come in such a short time. And, along with this sense of accomplishment, there is a real enthusiasm for the future, an anticipation of great things to come.

Yet, as November wanes and the cold, silent winter approaches, we are again reminded of that awful day eighteen years ago. And, as always, its memory serves to illustrate how quickly such enthusiasm can turn to despair, how brutally all our anticipation and hopes can be dashed. When John Fitzgerald Kennedy, 35th President of the United States, became the victim of an assassin's bullet, the entire world fell to mourning. It mourned the senseless death of a man in the prime of his life; it mourned the loss of a wise and dedicated leader of his people; it mourned for the wife and two children he left behind; it mourned because of all he had done, and all he had planned to do. As one reporter put it, on November 22, 1963 "the future was betrayed."

Much has been written over the years about "the Kennedy style." His wit, elegance, youthful good looks, and exuberance combined to make John Kennedy one of the most charismatic presidents of all time. His innate charm captivated people, and his rapport with the press seemed almost magical. His storybook rise to power, which ultimately made him the first Catholic president and the youngest man ever elected to the office, is the stuff of which legends are made. And yet we should not let this mystique overshadow the many accomplishments of Kennedy's thousand days in office. His was an administration of great vision, of high ideals, yet cynics maintained that it was his personality, not his program, that made him popular. Ted Sorensen, a member of JFK's "Irish mafia" and author of a book about Kennedy, feels that such criticism is unjustified. "In emphasizing the youthful promise left unfulfilled, his detractors overlook the promises he kept. But what mattered most to him, and what in my opinion will matter most to history, was the substance--the strength of his ideas and ideals, his courage and judgment," writes Sorensen.

Kennedy believed in an active presidency, and act he did. In stark contrast to his predecessor, Dwight Eisenhower, his strategy was to keep moving, looking for any openings, hoping to make the breaks fall his way. Within a few months of assuming office, he set the tone of his administration by enthusiastically plunging himself into the midst of two "races." In May of 1961 he fanned the fires of the "space race" by pledging that U.S. astronauts would be on the moon by 1970. Later in the year, before a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, he challenged the Soviets to a "peace race." In effect, these commitments symbolized the "New Frontier" that Kennedy was striving to establish. He was off and running, and he expected the American people to join him.

Under JFK, a series of aggressive domestic measures were implemented. The Alliance for Progress, the Peace Corps, the Trade Expansion Act, the Food-for-Peace program, and a revamped Foreign Aid Agency, coupled with his ardent support for the unification of Europe, showed the genuine concern he had for people abroad. At home, the vast number of programs were the most started by any administration since the days of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. The Mental Health and Mental Retardation Acts, the Manpower Development and Retraining Act, the Higher Education and Medical Education Acts, the Tax Reduction Act, the Community Health Facilities Act, and the Civil Rights Act all were initiated by Kennedy and, though some weren't signed until after his death, all are rightly credited to him.

In the four years following Kennedy's inauguration, the country's economy experienced its longest and strongest expansion in modern history. Throughout the presidential campaign of 1960, with the rate of economic growth at less than three percent, Richard Nixon had derided Kennedy's economic principles as being unsound. By 1964, the economic growth rate had risen to nearly six percent. There was a record rise in labor income, and some 2.5 million more jobs had been provided. The projected recession had simply not materialized.

In addition, Kennedy presided over major improvements in such areas as pollution prevention, Social Security, family farm assistance, and housing and urban renewal. He took strong measures to avert a disastrous nationwide rail strike, and he forced Big Steel to rescind its excessive price increases. Granted, JFK was not perfect; like all of us, he had his share of faults. Still, even his harshest critics must give him credit for the things he accomplished. And when reviewing the long list of achievements, one thing must always be kept in mind: Kennedy did all of it in less than one full term.

And yet, beyond all these tangible accomplishments, there is something of which John Kennedy was most proud. It was the thing that he worked hardest for, the thing that he devoted the most time to. To him, it was his most crucial task as Chief Executive. Namely, he kept the country out of a deadly nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union.

"I do not hold out any magic hopes for a sudden thaw or a certain timetable," Kennedy had said shortly after his inauguration, referring to increasing Cold War tension. He made it clear that, while Americans did not want war, we would be always ready for war if others provoked it. During the missile crisis of 1962, with the United States and the Soviet Union faced with their first direct nuclear confrontation, Kennedy agonized over what to do in response to the Soviet missiles in Cuba. In a nuclear war, there could be no winner; thus, it was not a rational alternative. Sorensen, in recalling those pressure-packed days, writes, "Now, war loomed large on the horizon. Weakness would only insure it, and strength was not certain to avoid it. A single misstep on the President's part could extinguish the lights of civilization, but even all the right steps could turn out wrong." Kennedy's eventual decision to set up a naval blockade proved successful, as Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev backed down and removed the missiles.

Throughout this ordeal, and earlier during the Berlin crisis, Kennedy expressed deep concern for the safety and well-being of children. The fact that it was the children of the world who would bear the burden of death and devastation in the event of a nuclear holocaust weighed heavily on his mind. When faced with such vital decisions, his mind always came back to the children, including those as yet unborn. "If it weren't for them," he once said, "for those who haven't even lived yet, these decisions would be easier." To Kennedy himself, his finest and proudest hour came in July of 1963, when he announced to the American people the conclusion of the nuclear Test Ban Treaty. After months of arduous negotiations, an agreement had finally been hammered out in Moscow banning all nuclear tests in the atmosphere, under water, and in outer space. "Now, for the first time in many years, the path of peace may be open," he declared, buoyed by this latest victory. Things were clearly looking up.

And then, just four months later, he was dead.

The man dubbed "the one authentic hero of the post-war world" by *The London Times* was cut down in a savage act of infamy. The man whose youth and vigor symbolized the start of a new era in America was denied the chance to turn his grand vision into reality. The man who firmly believed in the principles of freedom, equality, and brotherhood--and who worked so tirelessly to achieve them--was martyred in the sunlit streets of Dallas.

There is no denying that the memory of John Kennedy lives on in 1981, nearly two decades after his death. Schools, libraries, streets, and stadiums across the land bear his name as lasting memorials. He is mentioned, along with names like Washington, Lincoln, and Roosevelt, as one of the greatest presidents of all time. And while all these accolades are tremendous, they are not enough. We must always keep in mind the dream John Kennedy had for mankind, a dream that is best revealed in the concluding words of the speech he was to have given at the Dallas Trade Mart on that fateful day in 1963:

"We in this country, in this generation, are--by destiny rather than choice--the watchmen on the walls of world freedom. We ask therefore that we may be worthy of our power and responsibility--that we may exercise our strength with wisdom and restraint--and that we may achieve in our time and for all time the ancient vision of 'peace on earth, good will toward men.' That must always be our goal--and the righteousness of our cause must always underlie our strength."

To make his dream a reality is the greatest tribute we could give to the memory of John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

--Dave Caruso

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