THOUGHTS ON JFK TEN YEARS AFTER DALLAS

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BOOK AWARD RECIPIENT

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The Presidency of John Kennedy is no more than a dream to me. Most of what I remember about him is very blurred and probably comes from books and old magazines which I read in great volume after he died. I was unaware of him during his administration, although after the killing in Dallas I tried hard to remember what the Kennedy years were like and came up with a few scattered memories: our second grade class voting for him in our own "raise-your-hand" election, a TV news conference where he smiled a great deal, a newspaper picture of him kneeling at the grave of his dead son.

The assassination itself was different. Like most people I can remember very well the events that took place that day. I was in fifth grade and our class was in the middle of some arithmetic problems, fractions, I think. I hated them passionately, so, when Mr. Cahill, one of the eighth grade teachers at our school walked into the room without knocking, I was glad and watched him whisper something to our teacher. She said, "Oh, no," out loud and the class looked up at her expectantly. She shook her head and Mr. Cahill went out. We asked her to tell us, but she told us to go back to work. Mr. Cahill returned a minute later and confirmed what he told her before and she again protested with an "oh, no," at which he answered, "oh, yes, look out the window." Our row was near the window; we looked out and saw nothing. Then one of the boys said, "They're taking down the flag," and our teacher burst into tears. President Kennedy was shot and dead in Texas.

The loudspeaker came on and the principal asked us to say a prayer.

My sister and I found each other after dismissal and walked out in a daze. Most of the teachers we passed were crying, our principal had red eyes and other kids were crying too. We knew we should feel some shock, but we started to walk home without much feeling, as we quietly told each other how our respective home rooms learned of the news. A neighbor picked us up and between sobs in her kleenex informed us that Vice-President Johnson had been shot too. She let us off down the road from our house. Walking up, we met some kids who told us that Johnson had had a heart attack Later of course, we discovered that both stories were untrue. I decided I hated both Johnson and Texas: Johnson just for being alive, and Texas because he came from there. It must be an awful place to have people living there who would shoot President Kennedy.

After the assassination, I began to buy all kinds of magazines, books, pictures and even bubble gum cards which told the story of President Kennedy's life, his family, his war adventures, his sense of humor. I began to measure everything by the assassination year: I was born ten years before 1963, my brother two years after it. He would never know a President Kennedy as I began to believe I had. He would never know a time of security and confidence and peace as I had, and I marveled at how he would even be able to live. It was impossible: the world wasn't right and wouldn't be until President Kennedy was back.

Looking back now from the vantage point of the seventies, historians have begun to discuss JFK as a cold warrior willing to risk nuclear war with Russia, too eager to prove himself a tough opponent to Krushchev. He is criticized for his part in the Bay of Pigs and for embroiling the United States in Vietnam. His

Inaugural Address helped form America's image as policeman of the world. Some say his term was too short to do much, but that what he did do was not good.

The criticism might be justified. It is difficult for me to be objective: the whole idea of Kennedy, the early sixties and his administration is an emotion-packed topic that evokes thoughts of idealism in politics, the good man can do for his fellow man, the Peace Corps, humor, vitality, vigor, a new start, youth. Separating Kennedy the man from Kennedy the office holder, the martyr from the policy maker, the hero from the administrator is difficult because of the illusions, the myth, the legend that surrounds the reality.

Contrast JFK and his presidency to those men immediately preceding and following him. Dwight Eisenhower's terms in office spanned the fifties, seemingly a lax, even dull, inactive time characterized by a good natured grin and a golf bag. Lyndon Johnson, a big man with good intentions, elected by one of the greatest landslides in history, found his war policy opposed first by the youth in America, and later the greater populace, and voluntarily left office after one term. Another great winner by a wide margin in 1972, Richard Nixon became the great deceiver, with no apparent good intentions for anyone but himself, and he too has met his Waterloo.

Against these men, John Kennedy had a style, grace, vitality: a golden boy with personality which came across on the television set. He seemed to stand out as a new kind of politician--no wheeler-dealer he, with cigar clenched between teeth, making deals in a smoke-filled backroom for votes. Kennedy gave the illusion of being above dirty politics, and through television, appealed

to what many people wanted to see, hear and believe about politics, politicians and the American way of life.

When I think of Kennedy now, I think of his drive for excellence, his ideas of ambition and competition, his striving to be the best. Not just for him personally, but for his staff, young, vigorous men like him, and for the nation as a whole. Kennedy raised hope that America could be a giant among nations, strong and benevolent, firm and just, supportive to her friends. Kennedy made us believe that politics could be idealistically motivated, and that the U.S. was the greatest nation of the world. We believed him because we wanted to believe him, and in doing so, overextended our reach in foreign affairs, leading to a big shock and disillusionment when we failed in Vietnam. By giving us illusions, allowing us to hope, filling us with images of things that were not but could be, Kennedy left us a legacy of despair, futility and disillusionment.

He, the image of super-leader was destroyed and the image of super-America he helped to create was destroyed too. Not exactly by the men who followed him, but by the men who followed his policies, who advocated what he seemed to advocate. If he hadn't died, would we be as confused and misdirected as we are now? Perhaps he would have pulled back in Vietnam instead of getting mired there as Johnson did. Perhaps we misinterpreted his ideals and policies: things needn't have gone so badly. Maybe it took a Kennedy to succeed in Kennedy inspired dreams. Probably not, the record seems to point the other way. One of the tragedies of the Kennedy killing is that we will never know.

"SINCE KENNEDY: HOPES AND FEARS"

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DR. HERBERT JANICK

In December 1969, journalist Richard Rovere, bold enough to venture into the recent past, a thicket avoided by historians, looked back at the expiring decade. He pictured the 1960's as a grim period of imperialistic greed, racism, violence, vulgarity, hidden poor and alienated youth. The contempt for the democratic process shown by all segments of society in the previous ten years convinced Rovere "that we may never achieve the civility and the stability that makes a society tolerable." The title of his New York Times Magazine article (December 14, 1969), "This Slum of a Decade" contrasts sharply with the hopefulness that underlay John F. Kennedy's inaugural challenge "ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." While realists might temper both the pessimism of Rovere and the image building of Kennedy, few will disagree that the optimism of 1960 had soured long before 1973.

America's fall from grace must be placed against the backdrop of the brief Kennedy presidency. The hard side of his one thousand days in office, measured in legislation and treaties, was marked by continuity with the Eisenhower past. A confirmed cold warrior, Kennedy jolted recklessly from the Bay of Pigs, through the Berlin crisis, into escalation in Vietnam, and finally to the brink of nuclear war over the Russian missiles in Cuba. Only in his last year did Kennedy adopt a policy of restraint with the opening of the hot line with Moscow and the signing of the nuclear test ban treaty. At home his track record was equally drab. Wary of the clout of Southern Democrats he did not champion Negro rights until

forced to by events. When he acted he did so decisively by ordering troops to assist James Meridith become a student at the University of Mississippi, and, a few months later in May 1963, to control the police in Birmingham, Alabama. Until Kennedy reluctantly accepted the need for a tax reduction to stimulate a faltering economy in 1962, New Frontier economics was comfortably orthodox.

Yet to judge the Kennedy presidency in strictly quantitative terms is inadequate. It is also necessary to recognize the mystique surrounding the Harvard aristocrat. Handsome, sophisticated, zestful, Kennedy exuded confidence that America was able to control its destiny. The inheritor of a liberal tradition with roots deep in New Deal soil, he brought into government intellectuals who shared his belief that rational thought, scientific method, technology, education, and economic growth could ameliorate social ills. The Peace Corps, federal support for the arts, defiance of Roger Blough of United States Steel were more important as spiritual barometers than as practical accomplishments. Kennedy the symbol was larger than Kennedy the fact.

Martyrdom added a potent dimension to the Kennedy image, and gave Lyndon Johnson, an accomplished legislative tactican, the opportunity to weld substance to slogans. Between 1963 and 1965 major laws were passed in the areas of civil rights, education, health, and urban problems. A Southern President guided the first Civil Rights Act in almost 100 years through Congress. A rural President declared war on poverty in city ghettos. Medicare, extending health care to the aged, was enacted over the objection of the American Medical Association and other vested interests. Job Corps, VISTA, Model Cities became hallmarks of the Great Society. In foreign affairs LBJ moved just as deftly. Armed with a carte

blanche from Congress in the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution Johnson hunted victory in Vietnam by ordering the bombing of the North in February 1965, and, six months later, sending American ground troops into combat.

By 1967 the liberal consensus began to come apart, the victim of one glaring failure and some limited successes. The Tet offensive in January 1968 proved to many that the United States could not win in Vietnam. Democratic Senators like McCarthy, Fulbright, and McGovern demanded a reappraisal of our Asian policy. Intellectuals like William Sloane Coffin presided over draft card burning ceremonies on college campuses. The massive social legislation of the Great Society heightened awareness and stimulated expectations of minority groups. In the latter half of the decade summer riots in major cities, and the growing appeal of Black Power spokesmen testified to the continuing gap between the ideal of equality and the reality of second class citizenship. Cultural minorities borrowed the rhetoric and tactics of the civil rights movement to press demands for greater sharing of power. Liberated women challenged traditional sex roles. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) riled campuses from Berkeley to Morningside Heights. Fragmentation of society into hostile units reached panic proportions in the summer of 1968. The murder of Martin Luther King in April and Robert Kennedy in June, followed by what Connecticut Senator Abe Ribicoff termed the "Gestapo tactics" of the Chicago police at the Democratic National Convention which sent shivers up the national spine.

Steadily the national mood shifted. A belaguered middle class resentful of pushy minorities, burdened by taxes, appalled by "alternative" life styles which incorporated drugs, rock, and

sexual permissiveness, lashed back. Richard Nixon and George Wallace, appealing to this fear, were rewarded at the polls in 1968. Nixon in the White House set out to reassert old-fashioned values. The Supreme Court was shaped in a more conservative image. Black Panthers were brought to trial while Ohio National Guardsmen were not. As part of A Southern strategy civil rights were soft-pedaled. The war on poverty was terminated, and was replaced by what Gary Wills called a "war on the OEO, busing, and welfare." Withdrawal from Vietnam and detente with China were arranged without admitting defeat or a change in policy.

The notion that history repeats itself is a popular one. Economists have long argued over the 20 year boom-bust cycle. Arthur Schlesinger Sr., thirty years ago, wrote that American history alternated between liberal and conservative eras. In a recent book on the Presidency his son, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., remarked that corruption returned to American government every 50 years. This brief glance at what happened to the United States since Kennedy suggests the possibility of another cyclical pattern, this time a psycholgical one. Could it be that the national temper alternates between confidence and apprehension? If the hope-fear cycle does have a basis in fact, other intriguing questions occur. What are the durations of the swings? Where are we now? going down? in the trough? or on the way up?