

JOHN F. KENNEDY--10 YEARS LATER: A PERSONAL EVALUATION

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A fourteen-year old high school freshman hardly expects to have anything unusual or disruptive occur at an ultra-conservative school such as Portland Sr. High School in Portland, Connecticut. Each day is similar to every other day; the only thing worth noting Monday through Friday during the school year is the 2:30 dismissal bell. But this student would have thankfully welcomed that sameness, even dullness, had she known ahead of time what November 22 held in store. Sitting in an art class, struggling with a project that showed zero ability, I had no idea that the industrial arts class next door had just finished repairing a dusty old radio. And I had less of an idea that the first words the boys and their teacher would hear would be the jumbled, frantic words of a newsman saying something about the President being shot.

But those things happened. The industrial arts teacher reported the news to my art class, left the room, then returned to signal a thumbs-down verdict: the President had sustained a bullet to the brain; there existed little cause for hope. I remember thinking that maybe everybody was wrong. Maybe Kennedy had only been slightly wounded, shot in the shoulder perhaps. After all, that's the way it was on television--the hero often shot, but never seriously. What happened next is still (somewhat surprisingly) too personal and painful to include in a college essay. Those events belong to me personally, and I will not reveal them for strangers to examine. Perhaps it is still too soon for that. Suffice it to say that I could not have felt more grieved and inconsolable than if my best friend had died. Worse still was the overpowering need

to stay "chained" to the television in the days that followed. The funeral services were incredibly painful to watch, yet I literally could not turn away from them. Why that was so is a still unanswered question.

Ten years later I find it is possible to feel less subjective about Kennedy as a president. Evaluating his administration, one finds contradictions. His administration brought much promise and much danger. His administration brought political skill and failure. The Bay of Pigs, the Kennedy/Khrushchev Vienna conference, and the Cuban missile crisis are cited as Kennedy's major downfalls. I will leave it to the historians and political scientists to wrestle with that problem. For me it is enough to realize that the United States came miserably and terrifyingly close to nuclear war. (I can remember my junior-high school science teacher saying that all would die soon at the hands of the Russians and Kennedy.) Then there is Kennedy's Asian policy. Regardless of how historians and political scientists evaluate it, one must remember that Kennedy expressed the strong belief that to withdraw U.S. forces from Asia would constitute a grave mistake. And regardless of speculation as to what Kennedy would have done regarding Vietnam had he lived, one must acknowledge that Kennedy's policy widened the U.S. role in Vietnam.

It is, then, almost simple to criticize Kennedy's political weaknesses. Simple until one remembers that with four words one man endeared himself to thousands and transmitted real hope to a stricken nation. When Kennedy told a West Berlin crowd "I am a Berliner", I believe many Americans felt almost as touched and hopeful as the Berliners who cheered him. And one must remember too that Khrushchev, that Eastern dictator who never could convincingly fill the tyrant's role, eventually came to respect the young U.S. President.

Most clear is the fact that the line between objectivity and subjectivity remains very narrow when rethinking Kennedy's influence. Why was he so special to so many? Why was he so special to me? When Kennedy campaigned for the presidency, I was an eleven-year old sixth-grader. A class project required a candidates scrapbook. Well, maybe because the Kennedy/Nixon campaign was the first of which I was truly aware, I tackled that project with total joy and enthusiasm. Maybe because I was an eleven-year old girl who appreciated a handsome face, Kennedy's picture section far outweighed Nixon's. And maybe the fact that I was Catholic and, even at that young age, strongly aware of anti-Catholic prejudice in my WASP hometown also influenced my feelings.

But that was thirteen years ago; the assassination, 10 years ago. Now comes the time to ask, how would I react to Kennedy today? Playing hypothetical question and answer games is harmless enough; let me indulge myself here. If Kennedy was to be a 1976 presidential candidate, would I vote for him? Probably not. The reason is simple: I have changed. I am 24 now, not eleven. I'm no longer Catholic. I'm active in the women's rights movement. Working for an organization such as Zero Population Growth or Planned Parenthood is an increasingly attractive possibility. This last point may not appear relevant but Kennedy was Catholic, a devout Catholic. I would have to ask myself: How would he react to nationwide abortion law liberalization? Would he help hinder such legislation? This may be a small, even insignificant point to some; it is an extremely vital point to me. A presidential version of Thomas Meskill would be intolerable considering my feelings regarding abortion and women's rights. I would have to ask myself the question above and base a voting decision on my own answers. Finally, I've changed in that I no longer easily practice

the kind of hero-worship that I undoubtedly felt as an eleven-year old.

That I would not vote for Kennedy today only reflects my own subjectivity; it in no way reflects a disrespect for Kennedy the man. When Kennedy was shot, I grieved mainly because an appealing and hope-inspiring man had been brutally murdered, not so much because the United States had lost a president. (Besides, all American children at that time knew assassinations only happened in foreign countries or so many years ago in America.) Watching documentaries on Kennedy brings back the horror and often the tears. But more apparent now is the stark realization that Kennedy never had a chance to prove himself capable of presidential responsibilities; he was senselessly denied that chance. It is illogical to glorify Kennedy as a reaction to a brutal assassination; it is equally callous to condemn him, knowing he cannot offer a defense.