

THE ASSASSINATION OF JOHN F. KENNEDY:
PERPLEXITY IN RETROSPECT

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Comparing my feelings on the assassination of John F. Kennedy when the event occurred to my attitude toward the tragedy now, I come to the realization that in some respects youth is an extravagance of time. On November 22, 1963 I was a ten-year old member of the fifth-grade class at Hayestown Avenue School in Danbury, Connecticut. On that fateful autumn day I remember being exceptionally cheerful. In the afternoon the three fifth-grade classes of the school were to unite in one room for a song festival. As a fifth-grader I took delight in singing, and even if I did not enjoy singing, the atmosphere of the whole afternoon was buoyant. The teacher informed the students in my class to bring chairs to the meeting room in order that all participants of the event would be assured of a place to sit. Upon hearing this news we thirty, bubbly, noisy, ten-year-olds gathered up our chairs and proceeded to file chaotically out the door to the meeting with our classmates. Once all ninety fifth-graders were packed into the small room we shouted, screamed, laughed, talked, and occasionally sang, for the next hour and a half. At the end of the jubilant event, my classmates and I filed back to our room in our usual unorderly fashion. As the teacher attempted to quell the clamor of the class a guidance counselor entered the room. He walked directly to our teacher and whispered something to her. Because of our curiosity for the secretive nature of our guest's visit, my classmates and I quieted ourselves and directed our attention to the front of the room. The guidance counselor delivered his message and exited

from the room. Soon after our guest's departure, our teacher turned pale and started sobbing. I recall seeing perplexed expressions on the faces of my classmates, yet everyone was quiet. Observing the grief and heartache my teacher was experiencing, I thought that a relative of hers had died. For several minutes my classmates and I stared at our teacher in profound confusion. I then recall a boy suddenly shouting, "Hey look, the flag is being lowered!" We all rushed to the window to view the vice-principal of our school lowering the American flag. All these strange events with no explanation in one afternoon became unbearable for a group of thirty ten-year-olds. We started demanding a vindication of the occurrences from our teacher. "What had happened?" demanded one girl. "Who had died?" inquired another. The teacher, gaining her composure yet obviously irritated by our questions and noise, told us to be silent so that she could explain the day's events to us. She then stated bluntly that President Kennedy had been shot that afternoon. Soon after her announcement, the principal of our school spoke to us through the public address system. His voice, deep, dignified, and uneasy, reiterated the news which was just given to our class. After he announced the death of the President, the principal requested us to stand, and engage in a minute of silent prayer. I remember standing, but not praying; instead I was wondering. I was wondering why so many people were becoming so upset over the death of someone they did not know personally. For the next few days, as I watched the television coverage of the funeral and as I witnessed the personal agony of those around me, my sentiments on Kennedy's death remained the same. I realized that death meant the end of any good a person could achieve, so when a loved-one died, sorrow was a natural sentiment. Yet Kennedy

had not affected my life in any manner that I could recognize, therefore his death meant little to me as a ten-year old.

Reflecting back on my initial sentiments toward Kennedy's assassination I feel as if I was deprived of an opportunity to comprehend an outstanding personality. Kennedy is now a controversial figure among historians. Some argue that Kennedy was the uniting force for a country looking for direction in a time of confusion. His ideals of benevolence to the needy, maintenance of liberty, and prevention of war appealed to all classes and ages of American citizens. Yet some historians now contend that Kennedy was the source of great American disunity. Kennedy is often viewed as a man who was laden with a fear of the communist menace, and thus plunged the United States into massive involvement in the Vietnam war. No matter how one perceives Kennedy's presidential policies, favorably or unfavorably, one must concede that the man himself received the admiration of the American public during his presidency. The proof of this contention is not only the grief exhibited by United States' citizens when Kennedy was assassinated, but also the admiration displayed by people for Kennedy today. Not long ago, a history professor in preface to a discussion on Kennedy cited an excerpt from Kennedy's Inaugural Address. As this man read from the speech, his voice was solemn as if he were pondering the ideals of the address and its author. Kennedy had obviously left a favorable impression on this professor. Looking back on how I listened in awe to this man recite the passage I realize that my feelings toward the assassination of President Kennedy are the same now as they were ten years ago. I still wonder why people became so upset over the death of Kennedy.

Kennedy had the ability to generate enthusiasm for his ideals among the American people. Many people who became familiar with

the man during his life agreed that he was a dynamic and charismatic figure. When Kennedy became President of the United States I was seven-years old. When Kennedy died I was ten-years old. Because I was so young when Kennedy lived, I did not appreciate the eminence of the man. I am now classified as a young adult, but Kennedy is dead, and so I will never gain first-hand knowledge of this man's greatness. Granted, I can listen to people talk respectfully about Kennedy, but I will never be able to hear Kennedy speak live about a major world problem, nor will I ever be able to see for myself how Kennedy would calm an hysterical American public during a period of international crisis. In retrospect, the assassination of John F. Kennedy still brings a question to my mind. Why did the American public grieve so much when Kennedy died?