

Where were you? Everyone remembers that day

BY JOANNE JACOBS

My sixth-grade science class was almost over. We'd seen a movie, and I still remember that somebody in the movie was electrocuted and turned cyanotic blue. The teacher spelled "cyanotic" on the blackboard. Then the principal's flat voice came over the PA speaker, saying President Kennedy had been shot in Dallas. We should stay calm.

I figured the president would be OK. After all, he was the president. Lincoln was history. This was 1963. You can't just kill the president.

Then the boys went to spelling and the girls to gym class. The gym teacher had a piece of paper from the office. He said the president was dead. I thought maybe it was some kind of mistake. You can't just kill the president.

But when the girls went to spelling and the boys to gym, I knew it was true. Mrs. Silverman said so.

Almost every American who was at least 5 years old when John F. Kennedy was assassinated remembers what he was doing when he heard the news, polls say, and 70 percent still feel personal loss.

What we lost was our innocence. The other thing I remember very well about that long weekend is my father picking us up from Sunday school. He had a shocked look on his face, the kind of look you never want a parent to have when you're a kid because you think your parents are in control of things.

He said Lee Harvey Oswald had been shot and killed. "I saw it on television," he said. "It was on television. I saw it on television."

That was what shocked him. People weren't used to seeing murders on television in those days.

Then we drove home, and I saw it on television too, again and again.



Kevin Keneck/Dallas Times Herald

It's not John F. Kennedy that I mourn, 25 years later, but my faith in an America in which things like that weren't allowed to happen. I didn't think you could kill a president. I learned that I was wrong.

Our elaborate ritual of democracy was nullified by one guy with a gun. Then our ritual of justice was nullified by another guy with a gun.

The TV specials this week are memorializing John Fitzgerald Kennedy as a halloo martyr.

The film clips are striking. Everybody seems so young in '60s hairstyles and '60s clothes, and so far away. But there is more halo than history in the Kennedy memorials. Because of his youth and grace, his style and wit, and mostly because he was shot down in the prime of his life, Kennedy is remembered as a greater president than he was, a

saint that he never was.

Or the TV sounds out the old conspiracy theories, teasing our desire for a reason more profound than Lee Harvey Oswald.

I don't believe in conspiracy theories. There is too much evidence that all it takes is a loser or a nut, and a rifle or a gun.

I think we glorify Kennedy's life and spin theories about his death because history is too ambiguous, random, unsatisfying and shabby. If the real Kennedy returned to life, we would shake our fingers and scold, "You're no Jack Kennedy."

Nobody could be. In a recent study, 846 American historians ranked Kennedy 13th among presidents, an "above average" rating, behind Lyndon Johnson and Dwight Eisenhower. But the general public considers

Kennedy the greatest president in our nation's history, polls show, ranking him above Franklin D. Roosevelt and Lincoln, Jefferson and George Washington.

Americans remember Kennedy's charisma, the sense of confidence in America's power and goodness. We forget that he was eager to intervene in Vietnam, reluctant to intervene in Mississippi. We remember the drama of the Cuban missile crisis and forget the debacle at the Bay of Pigs. We remember that he started the space race, forget that he escalated the arms race.

Since then, we've become accustomed to political assassinations.

A gunman crippled George Wallace, ending his presidential race, and killing the racist-populist movement. We were secretly relieved. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed, truly a great man, and Robert F. Kennedy, an opportunist who was growing into something else, and we were saddened — another Kennedy! — but not really shocked. Two crazy women even tried to kill Gerald Ford, surely the least offensive president in recent memory.

One day, when I was home with the baby, my husband called and said in a flat voice, "Turn on the television." The first thing that came to mind was that somebody had shot the president. I was right. John Hinckley had tried to kill President Reagan in order to impress a young actress.

I can remember when I thought that you couldn't kill a president, when I thought the grown-ups knew what they were doing, when I believed implicitly in American goodness and power and in a shining future. Then Kennedy was killed.

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