



## 'Life Is Unfair'

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He would have been 50 years old today. It is a reasonable assumption that he would have been in the third year of his second term and that political writers would have long ago begun agitated speculation on his choice of a successor.

But any dogmatic description of what things would be like if John Fitzgerald Kennedy had lived would be an irreverence as well as an irrelevance. Above all things he had a sense of the inscrutable quality of history, and a skepticism about his own capacity—or that of any man—to reverse overnight all the manifold causes of world unrest. In apocalyptic terms he saw himself engaged in a holding operation against forces that seemed oblivious to the perils of the nuclear age. He did not expect to achieve any total peace and quiet on earth during his tenure; he was fighting for sanity, not salvation.

It is hard, of course, to resist the temptation to imagine what might have been if he had survived. Those who shared his intimacy recall that he often privately vowed that he would never sanction a major escalation in Vietnam; yet no one can state with certitude that he would have resisted the entrapment.

He was apparently resolved to find a new Secretary of State in his second term; would it have been Robert McNamara? And would McNamara—exercising what are said to be his dove-like instincts—have emerged as a major Presidential prospect? Or would JFK have defied the cries of "dynasty" and picked Robert F. Kennedy as his heir? Would Hubert Humphrey have amassed so much prestige as a fighting liberal Senator that the legions of progressivism were already rallying to his side for a convention battle in his behalf? Would J. Edgar Hoover have been awarded gracious retirement?

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The "ifs" are infinite and tantalizing but their pursuit is a melancholy exercise in fantasy. The same deadly element of accident in human affairs that ended John Kennedy's life could have altered the course of his Administration for better or worse.

But there is one dimension in which it can be said with some confidence that his continued presence would have produced a different American atmosphere than the one now prevailing. It seems almost inconceivable that there could have emerged during his Presidency so deep a degree of estrangement and alienation among so many American undergraduates of diverse backgrounds as now confronts President Johnson.

The unprecedented scope and seriousness of this gap was underlined for me once again in a note I received the other day from Strobe Talbott, the chairman of the Yale Daily News, whose involvement in the peace activities of student leaders has been described here before. He enclosed an article he had just written for the Yale newspaper describing the efforts of the Campus Coordinating Committee to set up a summer peace program that will enlist the energies of students who belong to no anti-American sects but whose conscientious concern about Vietnam is steadily rising.

In the article he called for an opposition that is "responsible and effective politically" and observed: "As the war heats up and as hopes for negotiations dim, sincere concern has been turning into disaffection and outright distrust of the government; reasoned dissent seems to be more and more in danger of exploding into defiance or, worse, whimpering into cynicism."

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Talbott, it may be recalled, is the son of a Republican investment banker; he grew up in the plush Cleveland suburb known as Shaker Heights. In the Kennedy time such young men were far more likely to be stirred to service in the Peace Corps by the voice that addressed them from the White House than to find themselves in an adversary relationship with their President.

It is not easy to define the nature of the relationship Kennedy established. He was a young President by traditional standards, but he was hardly a youth. He was an intensely pragmatic, undoctrinaire figure, with no congenial resistance to compromise or even retreat.

Yet he somehow imparted to the young a sense that he identified himself with bold dreams and rejected the tired counsel of stalemate. Perhaps most of all he evoked the confidence that a rational intelligence was at work, groping for new ideas, spurning cant and ritual, somberly aware of the potential finality of any crisis, cherishing excellence, impatient with pompous mediocrity while tolerant of human frailty.

Conceivably the glow would have faded if he had allowed himself to be drawn into the Vietnam escalation; I suppose it is my article of faith that at least somewhere along the road he would have finally halted and asked searching question of those who had led him into a succession of booby-traps. But that I can not prove. Surely he would at least have conveyed to all of us—no matter how large the troubles—a capacity for ultimate admission of error (as after the Bay of Pigs) so that there would have been no wide dread that he would compound folly by acquiring a vested interest in justifying it. Possibly a cooler hand in Vietnam would have given us larger margin for stabilization moves in the Middle East; but that, too, is beyond any realm of proof.

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In Kennedy's phrase, "Life is unfair." It was unfair to Lyndon Johnson when it obliged him to serve and then succeed a man who became a legend in so brief a lifetime. It was unfair to a generation of Americans which, despite Kennedy's wry disclaimers of any miracle formulae, identified his name with hope and a restless striving for reason, decency and equity on earth. It was unfair to John F. Kennedy, who faced so much private pain so gallantly, and whose children must learn much about him from faded clippings and history books.