

An Appraisal

Kennedy Didn't Transform America, But He Left It Better Than Before

MICHAEL HARRINGTON

National chairman of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee and author of "The Other America," which was influential in starting the War on Poverty.

JOHAN F. KENNEDY grew in office. That is the key to his tragically brief Presidency.

I did not vote for Kennedy in 1960. I stupidly repeated an old leftist cliché, that Democrats and Republicans are peas in a pod, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, and refused to vote for either major candidate. I recall that blunder for a reason: to emphasize that I do not look back on the Kennedy years as a nostalgic exile from Camelot.



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John F. Kennedy, in short, must be judged, not as a shining knight or as a failed hero, but as a man of his time and place. He did not, by my standards, move nearly far enough in confronting the problems of this society; but he did go so much farther than one could have expected. He was not, of course, a radical and it is silly to accuse him, as some of his disillusioned followers have, of not having carried out basic transformations of the system. That was never his intention and had it been the people would not have elected him President.

And yet, within the context of his political and personal limitations, John F. Kennedy grew enormously. He arrived at the White House a young, and not terribly distinguished, senator from the Eisenhower years with a tiny margin of victory and a Dixiecrat-Republican majority against him in the Congress. The America which inaugurated him in January, 1961, still

believed in the verities of the Cold War (as did Kennedy in his speech on that day), in the sanctity of the balanced budget, and it had not begun to come to terms with that great mass movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. The America which mourned John F. Kennedy in November, 1963, was different. It was not transformed — but it was better. That was Kennedy's modest and magnificent achievement.

IN FOREIGN POLICY, he began with a disaster: the Bay of Pigs. It is true that, new and untried, he endorsed a truly incompetent (and immoral) plan on the grounds that it had been approved by every one of his military experts. That mitigates his responsibility but it certainly does not absolve him of it.

That fact affects how I look upon Kennedy's most portentous and destructive error, the escalation of the American presence in Indochina. That was done in consonance with the standard liberal position on the Cold War (which, because it was liberal, often had to represent itself as even tougher and more realistic than conservative anti-communism). However, there

were those within his administration—the then ambassador to India, John K. Galbraith, among them—who warned the young President of the mortal danger in committing American power to a reactionary dictatorship in Saigon. Here, too, Kennedy listened to his military advisers who had begun their annual sighting of light at the end of the Vietnamese tunnel. He was wrong to do so and his mistake cost this country and the Vietnamese and the world quite dear.

Yet I believe that Kennedy, had he lived, would have reversed his course. I have no historical evidence on this count. Rather, I base myself on his reaction to the Bay of Pigs.

I F I AM THUS at least understanding with regard to his two most dramatic failures. I do not share the conventional judgment that the Cuban missile crisis was his finest hour. That this terrifying episode was handled with skill and great coolness is obvious. But that it took place at all is proof of how flawed our foreign policy—Kennedy's and Eisenhower's and Truman's—was.

There is one other Kennedy foreign policy initiative which is relevant to this analysis: the Alliance for Progress. It was, I thought at the time and think now, basically flawed in its strategy. It assumed that there could be a liberal capitalist revolution carried out non-violently in Latin America by a united front of oligarchs, workers and peasants encouraged by financial aid from the United States.

That seriously overestimated the reform potential of the Latin upper classes as well as their commitment to democracy and social change.

On domestic issues, the crucial question during the Kennedy years was civil rights. In 1960, there had been the sit-ins; in 1961, the Freedom Rides. During the 1960 primary campaign, Kennedy had been the first (and only) Democratic hopeful to make personal contact with Martin Luther King Jr., and during the general election he had made his famous intervention to help get King out of jail. But between 1960 and the March on Washington of 1963, he moved most cautiously in this area. There were the confrontations in the school house door and support from the Justice Department, under Robert Kennedy, for the Freedom Riders. But there was not that "stroke of the pen" which Kennedy had said would allow the President to put all the power of the Federal Government behind the drive for racial equality.

Kennedy's argument in defense of

his moderation was that his hands were tied by the Dixiecrats and their Republican congressional allies. That, I am sure, was an element in his conduct, yet it does not alter the fact that he responded much too slowly in 1961 and 1962 to the most decisive moral and political issue of the decade. In 1963, however, the President began to move. In response to King's struggle in Birmingham, the White House became much more positive

and in August, 1963, when the delegation from the March on Washington came to Kennedy, he was prepared to move on a fair employment practices provision in the upcoming Civil Rights Act.

In economic management, John Kennedy was the first President to talk a modicum of sense to the American people. It is hard to remember, now that President Nixon is a Keynesian (albeit, a shamefaced and therefore bumbling Keynesian), that in the

early Sixties most of the citizens had a pre-modern view of the economy. In a famous speech at Yale, and in his pushing for a tax cut, Kennedy began to explain that the United States of America is not a household to be run on a balanced budget, but a complex society in which a tax cut could, by setting off economic growth, actually result in larger tax revenues. To be sure, Kennedy did not live to see the fulfillment of his interim goal of reducing unemployment to 4 percent, but he clearly was the man who began the economic education of the American people and who laid the foundation for Lyndon Johnson's full-employment policy.

I N ANOTHER AREA, putting a man on the moon, almost all liberals and leftist would criticize, if not condemn, Kennedy. I do not. First of all, it is glibly assumed that the monies spent on space technology could easily be transferred to, say, the struggle against poverty and urban decay. In fact, that is not the case. Secondly, I believe there is an imperative for mankind to live up to its fullest potential, to move forward, to penetrate the unknown.

But finally, I cannot conclude my assessment of the Presidency of John F. Kennedy as if it were a matter of balancing accomplishments and failures in a kind of political cost accounting. For the reason those years are remembered with nostalgia by the American people transcend the details of what went on during them. It has more to do with a spirit. The nation was happier then. It had, God knows, problems, but they seemed solvable. And then, after John Kennedy was murdered, the war in Vietnam took charge of the nation's destiny and dragged down Lyndon Johnson's administration. And now there is an unpopular President presiding over the most shocking corruption the nation has ever known.

I do not want to sentimentalize the memory of John Kennedy. That might make it burn brighter for a moment or two, but it would not protect it from the merciless scrutiny of history. I only want to make my modest, major claim on behalf of his Presidency. He did not transform America; he left most of its problems unsolved; he committed some egregious errors. But he learned, he changed, he grew.

The country was better when he was cruelly assassinated than on the day he took the oath of office.