

Eternal flames mark JFK era

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ARLINGTON, Va. — Mesmerized by the commanding view of Washington from a hill atop Arlington National Cemetery, John Kennedy remarked in 1963 that he could stay there forever. Later that year, an assassin would strike him down, and he would be buried near the site he admired so.

In a city filled with monuments and memorials, the Kennedy grave site, striking in its simplicity, remains to many the nation's most emotional symbol of life and death, of hope and lost dreams, even 25 years after his violent death.

"Kennedy's grave brings out a lot of emotions in people," said Kerri Childress, the cemetery's historian, who was a second-grader when the president was gunned down in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.

"A lot of memories come back. People don't just remember Kennedy's assassination. They remember that whole period of their lives, their families, their friends. People tell me they remember smells, sounds."

Adults weep openly at the grave. Admirers silently leave flowers on the granite bed. A blind woman, after visiting the cemetery dozens of times, cried when she "saw" it for the first time as she was allowed to run her fingers over the stones and feel the heat from the eternal flame.

Another eternal flame burns in the memories of those who knew and served with Kennedy.

Life after service

"Without question, he would have continued to be an extremely active, public-spirited, heavily involved person in all matters that would have to do with social progress and world peace," said Lawrence O'Brien, who served as the Kennedy White House's liaison to Congress.

He recalls the late president occasionally referring to life after the White House — he would have been only 51 if he'd served the maximum eight years — and the talk revolved around academic life, per-

haps at his alma mater, Harvard University.

Harvard renamed its government school in Kennedy's honor as a "living memorial" to the 35th president.

David F. Powers, one of Kennedy's closest confidants from his first campaign for Congress to that tragic November day, envisioned a post-presidential Kennedy as a roving ambassador of sorts.

Kennedy used to wonder why former presidents "weren't put to better use," according to Powers, who

served as a special assistant to JFK. "I think Kennedy would have gone to the Soviet Union or wherever was necessary."

Childress recalls a delegation of Soviet generals visiting JFK's grave. In minute detail, they told where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news that the president, who had confronted their own leader over Cuba but later joined Nikita Khrushchev in a nuclear Test Ban Treaty, was dead.

Like many Americans, they wondered what might have been.

O'Brien and Powers doubt Kennedy would have run for political office after serving two presidential terms, but others wonder.

Adams' example

"It's just possible he might have stayed in politics, going back to the Senate," said Dean Rusk, who served as Kennedy's secretary of state.

Author and former Kennedy aide Richard Goodwin agrees, saying that the late president would have followed the example of John Quincy Adams. The sixth president was the only one to return to a lower public office after serving in the White House. Adams served in the House for 18 years after his single term as president.

"He would have run for office and would have stood for a continuing voice on national affairs, and would now be the senior senator from Massachusetts," Goodwin said. Kennedy's youngest brother, Edward M. Kennedy, is the state's senior senator.

"He talked about two things: a Kennedy library and writing, but that wasn't his life," Goodwin said, suggesting such academic pursuits were too sedentary for a man of action.

McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's national security adviser during such tumultuous times as the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban missile crisis, took the idea of Kennedy holding public office after the presidency a step further.

"He'd probably agree with Ronald Reagan on exactly one subject: that the 22nd Amendment is a nuisance," Bundy said, referring to the constitutional amendment that limits presidents to two terms. "I think by now he'd be ready to try again."

If JFK had lived, Rusk thinks he would still be revered, but the Kennedy years would not have taken on mythic proportions.

"He would not have given any thought to the idea of Camelot," Rusk said. "His time in office was a serious time. There was nothing 'Camelot' about it. His life was filled with serious crises."