

# Kennedy's Role in History: Some Doubts

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—However the public may remember John Fitzgerald Kennedy 10 years after his assassination, the scholars who will eventually fix his place in history are at loggerheads.

While most give him good marks for idealism, strength and style, many are coming to believe that Mr. Kennedy prolonged the cold war, that he was an incomplete politician and that he was the wellhead of a dangerous and unattractive cult of the powerful Presidency.

The brief Administration of the first President to have been born in this century will probably remain forever a frustrating enigma to historians, a source of endless questions and unsatisfying speculations about what might have been. Whether President Kennedy will be seen as a bright beacon or a slim flicker in the spectrum of human events is something only time will tell.

It will be exactly 10 years tomorrow, Thanksgiving Day, since John Kennedy was killed. Undoubtedly his fortunes, when subjected to the mercurial fashions of historiography, will

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# Kennedy's Place in History

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rise and fall as the perceived imperatives of scholars shift with time.

Seduced as much as the public and the press by the Kennedy charm, wit and intellect, the historians and political scientists whose chore it is to analyze the use and the misuse of power have tended to celebrate him in comparison with his declassé successors. And if there is anything the scholars are likely to agree on it is that the chief contribution of Mr. Kennedy was in the realm of intangibles — hopes, promises, inspiration, idealism.

"It was almost like the Greek plays—he personified the hopes and the goodness," said Thomas Cronin, a young political scientist at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. "It was precisely because he was slain so early that we allow ourselves to indulge in the idea that here was a hopeful sign and a hopeful man who, if he only had the time, could have done the things worth doing."

Wedge between the sleepy Eisenhower years and the dark, divisive Johnson-Nixon years, the Kennedy era has struck many intellectuals as singularly bright, even though its specific achievements were slim. The President, in the words of Henry Steele Commager and Allan Nevins, "combined gaiety with dignity, patience with ardor, compassion with courage, and poetry with power."

Such traits, in the view of James MacGregor Burns, the Williams College historian, instilled in the national psyche the notion that government could be exciting, uplifting and elevating. "I think it is still there to be invoked," he says, referring to the young adults of today who were imbued with the Kennedy geist as children. "Somebody, I think, will complete those years."

But what can be said in a concrete way about the Kennedy Administration? Was it mostly style and little substance? Was Mr. Kennedy an effective leader? Did he use power well? Did he lead us to the edge of the Vietnam precipice? How does what he stood for stack up against the needs

of the day as seen from hindsight? There are no unequivocal answers.

In a 1969 afterword to his now classic book, "Presidential Power," Prof. Richard E. Neustadt of Harvard argues that Mr. Kennedy was well on the way to fulfilling his promise. Though he recognized some failures, Professor Neustadt lauded Mr. Kennedy's "operating style," citing "a deliberate reaching down for the details, hard questioning of the alternatives, a drive to protect options from foreclosure by sheer urgency or by ex parte advocacy, and finally a close watch on follow-through."

"I think Kennedy was getting his feet on the ground," the political scientist said in an interview. "I am very much impressed by his sense of increasing maturity, perspective, priorities, a mastering of the details of the machinery. There was an enormous amount of promise; but it is all moot."

The Vietnam question and many other issues have fueled a growing revisionism, not only by skeptical journalists such as Henry Fairlie and Richard J. Walton, but also by many a liberal scholar, once close to the Kennedy spirit.

## 'Presidency Mentality'

The criticisms, which come from both left and right, are diverse. But basically Mr. Kennedy is said to have engaged in the politics of expectation, making exaggerated promises that could not be fulfilled, and he therefore invited frustration.

It is often said he pursued a kind of mindless activism, magnifying problems into unnecessary crisis and confrontation. And he is faulted for having exalted personal leadership, failing to recognize the importance of Congress, the bureaucracy and political party.

"You cannot be President of nearly six million people who are in the permanent government and have contempt for them," says Mr. Cronin, the young political scientist who is a former White House scholar under President Johnson. "In the short run it might serve to bypass the bureaucrats, but in the long run you are not going to get the bill you passed implemented if you do not win the respect of the permanent government. The Kennedy peo-

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ple deserve low grades on that."

Mr. Cronin views Mr. Kennedy as the victim of what he calls the "textbook Presidency mentality—that the President could be the wisest person in the nation, the most benevolent, the most omniscient, and could lead us to the Promised Land."

"This was the mentality of the liberal intellectuals of the nineteen fifties — that if only we could have a second coming of F.D.R. we would be able to fulfill the American dream. They built up the expectation that a strong Presidency could do far more than it could do. It was inviting the paradox of the downfall."

Prof. Erwin C. Hargrove of Brown University, author of a forthcoming book on the Presidency, is one of those who faults Mr. Kennedy for advancing the cold war mentality and for pursuing confrontation statesmanship. "He really had no theory of international politics, no coherent world view.

He was really quite imbued with this idea of an ad hoc approach to crisis."

Like many others, Professor Hargrove has come to see the Cuban missile crisis, generally regarded as a great triumph for Mr. Kennedy and a model of "multiple advocacy" decision-making, as an example of undue dependence on confrontation and military options.

Even Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., great defender of the Kennedy image, writes in his new book, "The Imperial Presidency," that one of the legacies of the missile crisis "was the imperial conception of the Presidency that brought the Republic so low in Vietnam."

But Professor Hargrove adds that such judgments relate not just to Mr. Kennedy but to basic revisionist thinking about the entire institution of the Presidency. "Did we liberals idealize power too much?" he asked, adding "we did—we had a progressive theory of American

history that virtue centered in the Executive."

"In a sense it is not fair to turn around and say 'aha, now I see' because people who are saying 'aha' are the people who were celebrating at the time. So it is really discovering ourselves. That is the important thing about the Presidency — you are really studying how Americans feel and react to things."

Whether Mr. Kennedy will stand the test of time is problematical. Prof. William Leuchtenburg, the authority on 20th century American history at Columbia believes that Mr. Kennedy will probably be "swallowed up in history" 50 years from now.

Professor Neustadt of Harvard rather sadly echoes this assessment. "He will be just a flicker, forever clouded by the record of his successors," he predicted "I don't think history will have much space for John Kennedy. History is unkind to transition figures."

**Nov. 23, 1963**

**KENNEDY IS KILLED BY SNIPER AS HE RIDES IN CAR IN DALLAS; JOHNSON SWORN IN ON PLANE**

**Nov. 24, 1963**

**KENNEDY'S BODY LIES IN WHITE HOUSE; JOHNSON AT HELM WITH WIDE BACKING; POLICE SAY PRISONER IS THE ASSASSIN**

**Nov. 25, 1963**

**PRESIDENT'S ASSASSIN SHOT TO DEATH IN JAIL CORRIDOR BY A DALLAS CITIZEN; GRIEVING THROUGHS VIEW KENNEDY BIER**

**Nov. 26, 1963**

**KENNEDY LAID TO REST IN ARLINGTON; HUSHED NATION WATCHES AND GRIEVES; WORLD LEADERS PAY TRIBUTE AT GRAVE**

New York Times headlines told the story 10 years ago

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