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JFK: Leader and Icon

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We have become so absorbed in the technics of John Kennedy's killing that we are in danger of forgetting both the death itself and the man. The scuffle over the Warren Commission Report has been mounting until it has become a pitched battle where ignorant armies clash by night.

It is a historic irony that, three years after Kennedy's shooting, while the scene of his memory is still the street in Dallas, it has become an arena on which the great political mystery of our time is being constantly re-enacted. Possibly this is our sacral way of paying homage to the dead hero: the ritual is not the laurel wreath and votive stone, but a permanent murder trial.

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My own non-expert view of it can be put quite summarily. It was Edward Jay Epstein's "Inquest" (Bantam paper), the first (and still the best) of the anti-Commission books, which shook me and compelled me to re-open my mind on the finality of the Commission's work. I am certain that the Commission staff still believes in its findings: note that Wesley J. Liebler, a law professor in California and a leading author of the Report, has again accused Mark Lane of distortions and dared him to file a libel suit. Increasingly the mood of the Warren fracas is becoming that of the tangle over the Hiss case. But with all my respect for the harried and overburdened Commission staff, I feel they should have waited and weighed the evidence longer, to resolve the questions that have stubbornly resisted being pushed aside.

What is happening, I suppose, is a struggle for the possession of Kennedy as icon. The only thing that both sides in the battle agree upon is JFK's greatness and the fact that he was killed. If it can be shown that there were more killers than Oswald, or that he was not among them, it will be a blow to the liberals who claim him but want the life of a liberal American society to go on. If the Commission findings are re-affirmed, it will be a blow to the scattered rebels who feel that everything stopped with his killing, that American life is somehow enveloped by a conspiratorial suppression of the truth, and that only a wiping clean of the whole social slate can continue

Kennedy's work in the spirit he intended.

As a non-cultist admirer of Kennedy I have no stake in the outcome, but I do want to see an effort (perhaps by a commission of law school deans) to settle the big questions if they can humanly be settled. Then we can go about our more affirmative work.

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One segment of that work will be to reassess John Kennedy as a leader, rather than as an icon made out of a frozen legend. The important question is what kind of man and President he was and what place he is likely to hold in the cool assessment of history. To compare him constantly with Lyndon Johnson, as partisans of both have been doing, is to do damage to both: Kennedy lacked Johnson's effectiveness as a political manager; Johnson lacks Kennedy's political grace and his incandescence.

If you look only at Kennedy as a decision-maker, then I fear he doesn't rank with the top few presidents. Harry Truman, for example, comes through much better by that test than anyone in our time. But Truman's was a limited mind and personality, and there was a tawdriness about many of the people around him. Kennedy had the feel of excellence, along with the tang of command and an extraordinary openness to experience.

Not strangely, he was at his very best in that Cuban missile encounter and the test-bomb ban treaty that followed, for he was fiercely competitive, and at the same time his reflectiveness gave depth and perspective and an edge of irony to his speech and thought. In the end he must be seen almost from an aesthetic dimension. Under him, more nearly than under any president since Jefferson, American leadership showed something like the quality of a work of art.