



John Kennedy

PETE HAMILL

The limousine never stops. It is still moving across the mind's eye, very slowly, like a morning dream. We see the long gleaming body, the blur of scattered spectators, the fading green strip of autumn grass behind. John Kennedy is sitting in the back of the open car, in a neat gray suit, waving at the crowd, the brown thatch of hair blowing in the wind. His wife, in pink, is beside him. That, and the hands reaching for the throat, and the crimson smear and the car moving past us: that won't go away, even now. It was the last we ever saw of John Kennedy alive.

Now, three years later, we are just beginning to realize that we will live with this all our lives. The book depository, the chicken lunch, the puffs of smoke on the grassy knoll; Lee Harvey Oswald, the hidden culvert, and who hit whom with what bullet in how many fractions of seconds. That's ours. That's part of being an American now. We must wake every day and somewhere, walking a street, hearing the fragment of a voice, remembering a face, it all comes back, and the limousine never stops.

The trigger finger in Dallas murdered a lot of things in this country. We have not even added them up yet. Who will ever really know whether riots in the cities and mass murders across the country can be traced to that day? What do you unleash when you give us a piece of monstrous public violence and then atone for it by dropping napalm on farmers?

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That day the rock was rolled back and all the wormy infections revealed at last. To kill a President is bad enough; for some of us, killing that President was blasphemous, murder most foul, an ultimate submission to our talent for destroying anything that is fine.

I do not mean that John Kennedy was a combination of Plato, St. Francis and Billy Budd. He was not. But, for that time at least, it was possible to say about this country that the best we had to offer was as good as anything any other country on earth had to offer, and was a hell of a lot better than most.

It was the only time in this century when all of us could feel young. Perhaps we would blunder. But it would at least be the blunders of young men we would pay for, and not the dirty, deceits and hardened lies of the old.

Congress, of course, hated Jack Kennedy for this. The leaders of Congress are a collection of men grown old in the ways of national politics. Nothing is spontaneous for them. Nothing has much meaning beyond motives of being elected. You have a dam built because the voters will send you back to Washington. You fight a war because you have been using Communists as devils for so long in your speeches that the voters finally believe even you. Power, money, prestige; the rest is sentiment. They didn't very much like Jack Kennedy. Their idea of a great man is Lyndon Johnson.

So that day, a lot of us just walked away from it. A great nation went out to present a choice of leadership and tone by giving us Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater. Waiting in the wings for the next trip out are such beautiful people as George Romney, Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon and, of course, Lyndon. No one yet gives Robert Kennedy a real chance and even he would say, I'm sure, that it won't be the same. We just might not have enough time.

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Maybe we all kidded ourselves and Jack Kennedy was just

a mediocrity with a sense of irony. But I don't think so. I look around, and I just don't think anyone laughs as much any more or that, given choices, we find much need to choose something even faintly noble. In the places I go, there is still, today, especially on this day, an open wound in the country's heart. I might be wrong; but try spending some time in Washington these days, and you will know what I mean. There is not much excitement, and nothing very edifying, in charting the progress of a boor.

But I just wish there were a way to clear out the gift shops, to scatter the Kennedy chocolate bars and the Kennedy tie clips to the wind. I wish there were some way to get to the *shlock* houses and break up the printing plates on all those rotten books, some way to erase Kennedy's face from the souvenir handkerchiefs, some way to put those phonograph records back in the storage vaults. I wish Lyndon Johnson would leave John Kennedy's name out of his speeches and I wish the name of the airport was still Idlewild.

Maybe then there would be some way finally to let this down. Perhaps if more politicians in this country had the guts to ask for a new investigation of the assassination, we might at least have the final macabre public examination of that day, and with some luck we would finally be rid of it. Lacking that, we could at least let the dead rest alone, without strangers making a buck off the body.

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But I suppose this will not go away that simply. We're going to live with Dallas a long, long time; we're going to see Oswald's mother's oatmeal face; we're going to remember Jack Ruby's hunted eyes; we'll have that Texas cop's startled face and Oswald's whooshing face as death slams into him. That's a part of us now.

That is why all over this country today, we're paying for Dallas still. It has made it easy for us to go to football games while young men kill strangers on the other side of the world. It has made it easier to look at mass murder, digest it and then fold the clips later and send them to the morgue. The death of Kennedy is still with us, and the limousine never stops.