

JFK Had Substance As Well as Style ^{Post} 10/17/87

Charles Krauthammer's column [op-ed, Oct. 2] was remarkably shallow in implying that President Kennedy is remembered mainly for his style. He had that, to be sure, but even his staunchest political foes conceded he had substance as well.

As a journalist I covered John F. Kennedy's 1960 campaign, and I probably have read as much about him and his political career as anyone. He had a solid grasp of history, the keenest of intellects, a capacity for introspection that facilitated personal growth and a pragmatism cognizant of the strengths and frailties of the political process.

Of great importance was Kennedy's ability to truly move and inspire people of all ages at home and abroad. As presidential essayist Hugh Sidey once wrote, when John Kennedy descended the steps of Air Force One and began to speak, Americans were proud of their chief executive even though some of them might not have agreed with his views.

So there was more than imagery to John Kennedy. He surely was not infallible and said so. He took full responsibility for the Bay of Pigs, although the scheme for that operation was conceived in the prior administration. Clearly the Berlin Wall went up on his watch, but one wonders whether the Russians would have been serenely receptive if American forces had gone in and torn it down. All the revisionist thinking notwithstanding, the Kennedy administration acted with deliberate calm and resourcefulness in resolving the Cuban missile crisis. The American military advisers already were in Southeast Asia when Kennedy took office; he increased their Vietnam involvement but came to reconsider his commitment later. Those closest to him

say Kennedy would have exited Vietnam if he had lived and won reelection in 1964—something that would have involved great political risk.

As for Krauthammer's view that JFK started what he calls "generational politics," I never heard that term used by anyone in 1960. Kennedy successfully deflated charges during the campaign that he was too young and inexperienced to be president. He did so by demonstrating—in TV debates and other forums—that he was mature, had a solid grasp of the issues and had the ability to articulate an agenda for the nation. Considering the issue made of his age in the campaign, it was not inappropriate, as Krauthammer suggests, for Kennedy to note in his inaugural remarks that a new generation had taken the reins of power. Surely a president who counseled with men like Averell Harriman never intended to denigrate the accomplishments of his elders.

John F. Kennedy probably has had a profound influence on candidates seeking the presidency. After all, 24 years after his death, current opinion polls suggest the public wants his kind of strong leadership in the White House. I agree, however, that a new generation of candidates should stand for what they believe in. But it is a bit much for Krauthammer to blame President Kennedy for the actions of others he characterizes as imitators of the one and only original. That smacks of psychojournalism gone awry.

—A. J. Linnen