

WASHINGTON WENT about its business yesterday with little to indicate that it was a notable anniversary. It was eight years ago yesterday that John F. Kennedy was murdered in Dallas, eight years since the gunshots at the underpass by the grassy knoll cut a brutal gash through the history of our era.

Eight years is the equivalent of two presidential terms. The eight years since John Kennedy's death have been dominated by two men who were his great rivals in life—Lyndon Johnson, who fought him for the nomination, and Richard Nixon,

who opposed him in the election of 1960.

Johnson held the presidency for more than five of those years, and Richard Nixon yesterday afternoon had occupied the White House precisely as long as Kennedy was allowed.

The verdict of history is still some time distant for Kennedy's successors, and yet it seems fair to say that as of today, there is little reason to think that either the Democratic delegates or the nation's voters made any mistake in 1960 in judging that Kennedy was the best man of the three.

This is so, despite the fact that Johnson as President passed a massive liberal domestic program likely to be felt and remembered far longer than Kennedy's few bits of New Frontier law.

And it is the case, despite the fact that Nixon's accomplishments in foreign policy—given time and good luck in liquidating the Vietnam war and pursuing the negotiations with the Russians and Chinese—may dwarf Kennedy's handling of the Cuban missile crisis, the passage of the trade expansion act and the negotiation of the nuclear test ban treaty.

KENNEDY'S STANDING rests not on the specific accomplishments of his brief tenure, but on the qualities of national leadership he embodied. They are qualities which, if anything, are better understood today, after eight years of absence, than they were in his lifetime.

John Kennedy was a man of reason, a man with a love of public debate, a man who saw politics quite literally as the arena for public testing and public determination of national policy.

As a candidate, Kennedy turned instinctively to the public forum and to open debate—with Johnson, with Nixon, and with anyone else who cared to test his political worth. Confronting prejudice—the fear of his Catholic faith—he did not shrink or hide, but boldly faced the purveyors of that prejudice and disarmed them with cool reason.

As President, in times of crisis, whether economic, political or military, his in-

stinct was to invoke the public wisdom. It may be foolish to ask what he would have done had he been confronted with Johnson's choices, in Vietnam in 1965, but it is not foolish to ask how he would have done it.

He would not have led the country into massive war by stealth and indirection, as Johnson did, for he would have known, as he had always known, that a policy that cannot be enunciated openly and defended in public debate is almost certainly bad policy.

But if Kennedy was a man of reason, he was also a man of passion, who felt injustice and was not ashamed of making moral distinctions between the strong and the weak, the oppressors and the afflicted, in America and the world.

ONE REMEMBERS him quoting, on so many nights in that campaign against Richard Nixon, the words he loved from Franklin Roosevelt's 1936 acceptance speech: "Governments can err, Presidents can make mistakes, but the immortal Dante tells us that divine justice weighs the sins of the coldblooded and the sins of the warmhearted in a different scale. Better the occasional faults of a government living in the spirit of charity than the consistent omissions of a government frozen in the ice of its own indifference."

Those words have more force now—in this city of frozen-faced men—than they had then. As Lyndon Johnson feared the free play of reasoned debate, so Richard Nixon seems to fear the consequences of concern, compassion and a generous spirit. His is government by the grim; Johnson's was government by the sly.

Because Kennedy was neither grim nor sly, neither dour nor devious; because reason and passion coexisted so comfortably in his person; and because he made us all believe, at least for a short time, that politics could be a rich adventure, an exercise of the best that we possessed in mind and spirit; because of this, and much more, he is mourned today, eight years and two Presidents after he was struck down.



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Recollections of JFK

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