

On Campus, Magic of Camelot Fades

For today's college students, the glitter of Camelot has been dulled by textbooks and time.

Most were in elementary school when President Kennedy was killed. Many were in kindergarten when he was elected. Some were not even born when he first emerged as a Presidential possibility.

The Kennedy charm thus had little meaning for them at the time, and in the decade since then the academic atmosphere in which they have been educated has turned increasingly critical of the Kennedy record.

"I guess I've joined the historical revisionists," says Mike Silar, a sophomore at Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass. "What did it all mean besides glamour, Jackie and football at Hyannisport?"

Julie Ross, a freshman at Duke University, is similarly disillusioned. "Kennedy's major attraction was his charisma, not his political talent," she says. "As I've learned more

about him, I realize his faults. His initial charisma disintegrates in light of his faults."

For most of the 200 or so students interviewed by The New York Times on 20 of the nation's campuses, President Kennedy's most glaring faults were in his conduct of foreign policy. His greatest accomplishment, they feel lay in establishing a tone of optimism and high purpose in government.

The students say President Kennedy was a "hawk," a "cold warrior," a "model liberal imperialist," an "adventurist—a Harvard-educated, deliberate, thoughtful adventurist, but still an adventurist," and they cite the Bay of Pigs, the involvement in Vietnam and, to a lesser degree, the Cuban missile crisis to support these contentions.

Most take issue with the assertion in his Inaugural address that "we shall pay any price, bear any burden . . . to assure the survival and success of liberty."

"When it was put into practice during that decade, it was used to crush liberty in many corners of the world," says David Hollander, a student at Harvard Law School. "Since the current Administration and the previous two have used it to repress popular movements, I think the U.S. has no moral authority to intervene anywhere in the world."

While most students believe that President Kennedy committed the country to greater involvement in Vietnam, they are divided about his intentions.

Some, like Mike Berry, a

senior at the University of Arizona, question the Kennedy motives. "I believe Kennedy could have gotten us out of Vietnam," he says, "but his reasons for not doing it were very political. He was waiting for re-election before acting, but was killed before he could do anything."

Another student at the same school, Bruce Eggers, is more generous in his estimate. "I think he would have learned more quickly than our later leaders that Vietnam was a mistake," he said. "I think he would have gotten us out very quickly. I don't think he was wedded to his ego that he wouldn't have ended the war."

Students were divided about the Cuban missile crisis, some seeing it as the most successful achievement of Mr. Kennedy's foreign policy and others as more cold war confrontation.

But many agreed with Polly Miller, a University of Arizona law student. "After the dry spell of Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles' brinkmanship, I think Kennedy made us feel part of the world," she said. And the Peace Corps was praised for its idealism and appeal to youth.

The ideals of civil rights and social reform were most often singled out as praiseworthy in Mr. Kennedy's domestic policies, although students generally agreed that he was ineffectual in implementing them.

"He started us thinking about race. It's not so much that he really did anything himself, but he brought on a new consciousness of it," says John Nail, a University of Mississippi senior.

"It wasn't what he accomplished," says Larry Johnson, a graduate student at the University of Georgia. "But he was a dynamic person and some of his enthusiasm rubbed off on the country."

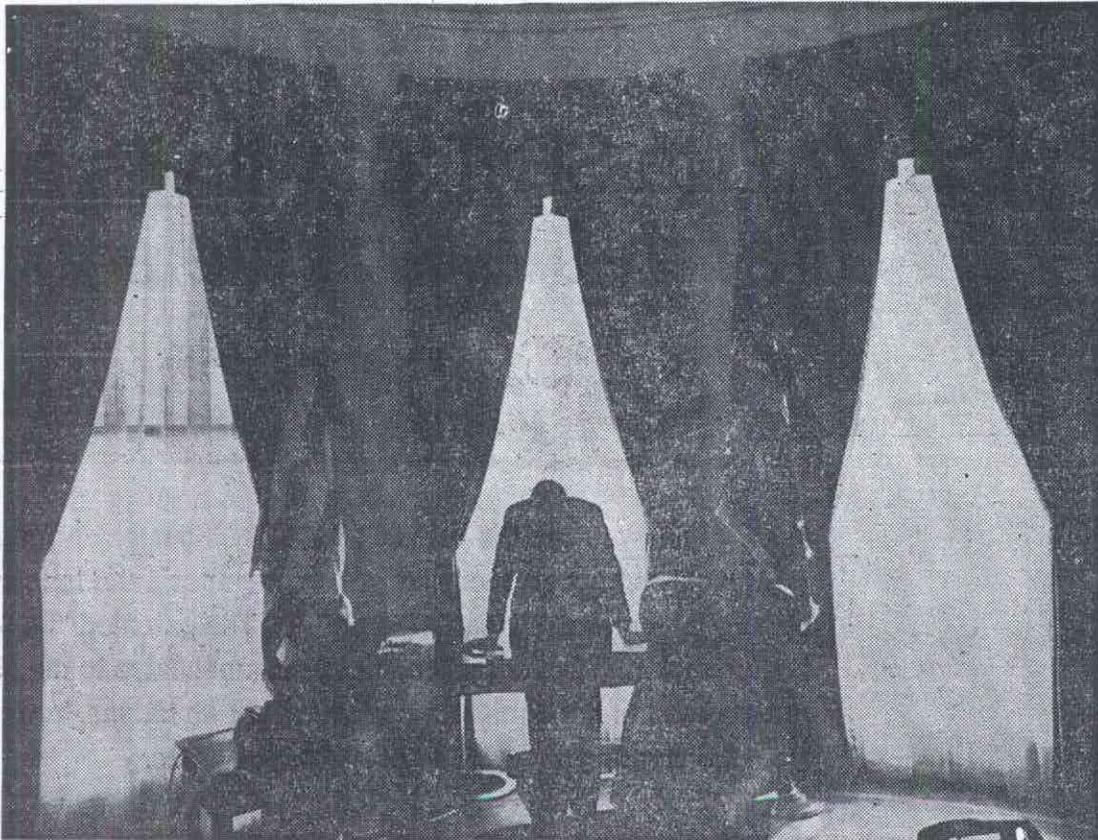
For today's students, it is this intangible tone, rather than legislation enacted, that is the major legacy of the Kennedy years. He is remembered as "youthful and vital," as "righteous and sexy," as a man whose "spirit revitalized the nation" and gave a "whole generation a model of what a public servant should be."

Indeed, the tone of the Kennedy years is often nostalgically contrasted with that of the present Administration.

"Kennedy was completely forthright, as politicians go," says Kenneth Gould, a 22-year-old graduate student at Boston University. "He seemed to be above the high politics that go into high office. He was very, very up-front with everything he did. He chose to surround himself with men of high intelligence, confidence and integrity."

"We were all so proud back then. We had so little to be ashamed of then," reminisces Bruce Eggers. "There was no chance that such a thing as Vietnam or Watergate could happen then."

Vietnam and Watergate have left many students disillusioned with politics. "Kennedy is not a hero any more," says Denise Madrid, a senior at the University of California. "Now we see the power of the Presidency and how it must corrupt everyone. How can I believe Kennedy was perfect?"



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