
In J.F.K., Afro-Americans Saw a Difference

By LES PAYNE

It has been 25 years since that bullet rang out from the Texas Book Depository, or wherever, and dramatically began to change America.

The 1960s were nasty times, and on Nov. 22, 1963, they got infinitely nastier. It was the first of the assassin's hits that would fix in strangers' minds for years to come just what they were doing when the slugs hit their target.

On that bleak autumn day 25 years ago, I was a newly minted second-lieutenant swaggering to lunch at the Ft. Bliss officers' club, when the rifle slug in Dallas struck home.

Starved and pressed in my tropical worsted uniform, I had taken the oath to defend strangers' human rights that neither I nor my forebears had ever enjoyed in our own country. Such cruel contradictions are the birthright of those born into the oppressed classes of this Republic.

After graduating from college, I had sought a job as a reporter, but that possibility for me, in those days, was as remote as the Oval Office. There were two newspapers in Hartford, Conn.—the Times and the Courant. Neither had ever hired a black reporter.

The Evening Times has ceased to exist, thanks to the forces of good. Had it continued to exist, the Times would no more have hired me than the Klan would have taken me on as its imperial wizard.

The white male graduate, in the main, got the upscale jobs and all the other benefits of citizenship. My generation of blacks was expected to make peace

with the obligations of citizenship. We were not rewarded in the civilian job market for aspiring to excellence.

Not many of us, two decades ago, got out of the wretched conditions of the ghetto. Some took refuge in the church, others in the bottle, still others made their stand in the pool hall, on the street corner, behind the switch blade—candidates, as Richard Wright wrote, "for the clinics, morgues, prisons, reformatories and the electric chair of the state's death house."

Those of us who escaped had to find a lever. I took my English degree into the Army to hone my leadership skills and learn how to shoot down enemy bombers with Nike Hercules missiles.

My commander-in-chief was John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

The Irish had never struck me as racially enlightened. I grew up in a partly Irish and Italian neighborhood in Hartford and found the former, on the issue of race, to have attitudes similar to their cousins in Tuscaloosa, Ala.

But this Irish-Catholic Kennedy, this President, many Afro-Americans said, seemed different. He spoke eloquently enough, but when pressed, there was something more. What the oppressed saw in him was a quality rare in white males and absent in every other President since, save Jimmy Carter.

Kennedy's humanitarian synapses were open; he had a substantial capacity to change. This quality, more than any other, endeared him to Afro-Americans. They gazed on him and saw not so much what he was, but rather what, if worked on, he could become.

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in a President They've Rarely Seen Since

Coming out of the Eisenhower years, blacks were afforded a new, though exaggerated, sense of the possible humanness of the enemy they were up against. As Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. heightened blacks' sense of dignity about themselves, Kennedy, in words at least, hiked their expectations of the federal government.

It was never so much what Kennedy did during his short sojourn; it was his style, his boldness, the things he said. On Feb. 28, 1963, in a message to Congress on civil rights, Kennedy diagnosed the effects of racial illness in America:

"Through these long 100 years, while slavery has vanished, progress for the Negro has been too often blocked and delayed.

"Equality before the law has not always meant equal treatment and opportunity. And the harmful, wasteful and wrongful results of racial discrimination and segregation still appear in virtually every aspect of national life, in virtually every part of the nation.

"The Negro baby born in America today—regardless of the section or state in which he is born—has about one-half as much chance of completing high school as a white baby born in the same place on the same day, one-third as much chance of completing college, one-third as much chance of becoming a professional man, twice as much chance of becoming unemployed, about one-seventh as much chance of earning \$10,000 per year, a life expectancy which is seven years less, and the prospects of earning only half as much.

"No American who believes in the basic truth that 'all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights,' can fully excuse, explain or defend the picture these statistics portray. Race discrimination hampers our economic growth by preventing the maximum development and utilization of our manpower. It hampers our world leadership by contradicting at home the message we preach abroad. It increases the cost of public welfare, crime, delinquency and disorder. Above all, it is wrong."

No President, including Abraham Lincoln and Lyndon Johnson, has ever spoken this way.

Kennedy went on to lay out a blueprint to make things more equal in the areas of voting, education, employment, public accommodation, housing and civil rights overall.

In his introduction, Kennedy cited the Emancipation Proclamation as a "first step." He praised the President who signed it and noted that Lincoln "unhappily did not live to follow up."

Nor, of course, did Kennedy.

On that bleak November day as I swaggered into the officers' club, Walter Cronkite gave us the word that the commander-in-chief had been shot dead in Dallas. The crowd of officers gathered around the television broke out into mild applause and scattered cheering.

That afternoon, my first sergeant, from Mississippi, smiled for the first time since I had met him.

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