

How kids see JFK



A LASTING LEGACY: On the 25th anniversary of his death, John F. Kennedy rates with Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt in the minds of today's schoolchildren. Pictured: Kennedy with his brothers Ted and Bobby; wife Jackie; JFK as mesmerizing orator.

"He was a man of ethics and great courage. He did save men's lives but the courage I'm talking about is the courage from inside. . . ."

Michele Blanchard,
13, Plymouth, Minn.

Visual resource: JFK Library

By Web Bryant, USA TODAY

COVER STORY

For students, the aura never fades

They say
Kennedy was
great; to
historians, he
was 'above
average'

By Christopher Farley
USA TODAY

John F. Kennedy's image may be a little tarnished in the eyes of scholars, but it's as shiny as a new half-dollar in schoolchildren's minds.

Today marks the 25th anniversary of Kennedy's assassination, and in those 25 years academics have taken another, harder look at JFK's judgment in key political

situations and in some aspects of his personal life.

But despite re-evaluations in the media and academia, President Kennedy seems in little danger of becoming a Trivial Pursuit question to the nation's grade-schoolers. Two recent surveys, one of schoolchildren and the other of historians, spotlight the differing attitudes.

This November, *Scholastic Search* magazine wrapped up its essay contest "The Best U.S. President Ever." Almost 4,000 students from all 50 states, fourth through 12th grades, sent in submissions on their favorite chief executives. Results:

► Abraham Lincoln was picked as "the best" by 18 percent of the essay writers.

► JFK finished a strong second with 15 percent — outdistancing Franklin Roosevelt (14 percent), Theodore Roosevelt (9 percent) and even George Washington (9 percent).

"I picture him more as a leader than a president," says Michele Blanchard, 13, a seventh-grade essay winner from Wayzata East Junior High in Plymouth, Minn.

Adds Blanchard's social studies teacher Jim Hoffman: "When JFK's name comes up, there seems to be a special place in kids' hearts for him."

But in *Greatness in the White House*, a new book out this month, Pennsylvania State University historians Robert Murray and Tim Blessing report data from their 1982

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survey of 970 historians, who were asked to rank and evaluate USA presidents. Findings:

► Lincoln finished first and was rated "great."

► Kennedy ranked an "above average" 13th, behind, among others, James Polk (12th), Dwight Eisenhower (11th) and Lyndon Johnson (10th).

Explains Murray: "The best thing history can say about Kennedy is that he had the potential for greatness unfulfilled."

"For schoolchildren, the fact that he was young and had children himself makes an impression — more so than an elderly gentleman like Washington."

Blessing predicts a continuing downward trend for Kennedy's rating among historians: "Kennedy's place in history is declining instead of increasing ... it will take about 20 or 30 more years to get an analytical viewpoint on his era."

"However, anybody that hears (Kennedy's inaugural address) and doesn't have some stirring in his soul is probably lacking poetry in his heart. Kennedy's symbolic stature is never going to decline — no one can take that away from him."

Forecasts Graham Allison, dean of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government: "I think for the broader society, the Kennedy era will always hold forth the promise of intelligence, hope and excitement."

Camelot is alive and well and living in grade schools: Kennedy still gets the red carpet treatment from teachers, who ignore or at least don't dwell on the martyred president's mistakes: The failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, an alleged romance with Marilyn Monroe.

"We know that Kennedy was a ladies' man — as adults, as teachers, we know that — but we don't tell our kids that. We don't need to tear such people down. We need symbols, we need heroes. Kennedy still provides that for many of our young people," says Joseph Gilbert, principal of Brooks Middle School in Detroit.

Thus, the picture of Kennedy that many schoolchildren get is more storybook than textbook, one children can easily place alongside those of Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt.

Says Marsha Turbovsky, 15,

a junior at Central High School in Philadelphia: "What comes to mind when I think of Kennedy is his image. When he came on, people didn't just turn off the TV, they wanted to hear him speak."

"He had to be good. To be that young and be president he had to be smart," says Yvette Jones, 14, a ninth-grader at John F. Kennedy Junior High School in North Miami Beach, Fla.

"I know he was assassinated, and that his boat PT-109 got destroyed by the Japanese in World War II," says Jason McNeal, 10, a fifth-grader at the 81st Street school in Milwaukee, Wis. "He stood for good things and he was a good president because he started the Peace Corps to send people to other countries to help out. The people that assassinated him didn't know all the good stuff he did for other people."

A common complaint from

schoolchildren is that history classes focus too narrowly on Kennedy's death and his surface image, and that little attention is paid to his actual accomplishments and policies: laying the groundwork for Civil Rights laws, starting the space race, averting nuclear war in the Cuban missile crisis.

Class discussions on Kennedy are often hurried through, in favor of longer examinations of the war in Vietnam. As a result, when asked to explain their admiration for JFK, many high schoolers find themselves at a loss.

"He's got an honest face. It seems like his words are pretty sincere. He doesn't seem like he would put one over on you," says Ray Yaquinto, 17, a senior at Richardson High School near Dallas. He adds: "Most of the books I read in school dwelled on his assassination — there wasn't much about his politics."

"I've always perceived him

as one of the best presidents, and a family man," says Kieran McGrath, 16, a junior at Central High School in Philadelphia. But because her images of Kennedy are vague, "his speeches don't move me as much as (Martin Luther King's) or Jesse Jackson."

Some schools, however, aren't shying away from touching on JFK's other side — judgment errors in his political and personal life, including alleged extramarital affairs.

"The kids know that presidents are liable to dally from time to time and they ask me about it," says Arthur Goodearl, head of the history department at Choate Rosemary Hall in Wallingford, Conn., Kennedy's old high school. "If Kennedy is demythologized that's good; that's healthy."

"I've taken a lot of courses on him and I've seen he's not as perfect as everybody said he was — he made a lot of mistakes," says Wendy Osweiler, 16, a junior at East Anchorage High School in Anchorage, Alaska. "He didn't really have a chance to prove himself. He was still young and he had a little more to learn."

All said, children may be getting only half the controversy and all the mythology, so JFK generates more excitement than any other modern president.

Frank Farley, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin who has interviewed more than 5,000 young people about their heroes, says JFK consistently ranks in the top 10 of all heroes, not just presidents, and is seen as a member of a select group that includes Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Lincoln. Farley says JFK's popularity isn't just a reflection on him, but a comment on today's youth.

"The entertainers and the sports stars that kids look up to fade in and out — but Kennedy remains. There's still a tremendous amount of idealism out there — it's not just a me-generation. If a JFK-type was to come around today, he'd have a tremendous impact," Farley says.

And even 25 years later, there are many children who feel a sense of loss.

Says Marsha Turbovsky of Central High: "When I think of someone like that and to know someone actually killed him — I'm just sorry. I'm sorry I missed him."