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Death of an Illusion

"Kennedy personified a self-deluded and self-intoxicated America."

Did Fidel Castro order the assassination of John F. Kennedy? That's just one of the questions asked by those who are convinced we have yet to get the full story of Kennedy's murder 25 years ago today. The Castro theory appeals to me—not because I especially believe it but because it symbolizes why that awful day in Dallas was a turning point for the United States. The end of a president's life marked the beginning of a new era for his country.

The Castro theory asserts that JFK was killed in retaliation for CIA attempts on the Cuban leader's life. There is no longer much doubt that the CIA was intent on killing Castro. And there is no longer much doubt that Castro knew of the CIA's intentions and possibly of Kennedy's approval. The question is whether the Cuban leader did anything about it.

The CIA's attempts to kill Castro reflected more than Kennedy's infatuation with Ian Fleming's James Bond books. It also reflected an American

delusion—the conviction that we were so strong that no nation, particularly one as small as Cuba, could ever retaliate. The entire CIA operation was predicated on an American conceit: Latin America was ours and the Caribbean was an American lake. The Monroe Doctrine said so, our history said so and our power said so. We could get our way.

No longer do we think so. Since 1963, a host of small countries have bedeviled us. We lost a war in Vietnam. We have failed to topple a leftist regime in Nicaragua. We sent Marines into Lebanon to help maintain order and had to take them out in body bags. Iran, our ally and the beneficiary of American aid, turned into an implacable enemy, and in Lebanon bands of religious fanatics, somehow impervious to American might, hold our citizens hostage.

At the moment, Germans and Japanese—two erstwhile enemies—determine the value of the dollar. The cars we buy, the stereos we listen to

and the VCRs we watch are made abroad. Foreigners control one-time American firms, and huge skyscrapers, once the very symbol of American dynamism, have their leases written in Japanese. The government is financed on money borrowed from abroad, and when it comes to oil, like Tennessee Williams' Blanche DuBois, we may yet have to rely on the kindness of strangers.

In short, around the time Lee Harvey Oswald squeezed the trigger, the world was changing on America. It was becoming less manageable, more contemptuous of an American power that for a variety of reasons could not be applied. The American century of Henry Luce's phrase—100 years of American predominance—came up nearly 50 years short. An American mentality, formed in the post-World War II era, when this country alone possessed the atomic bomb and was the world's preeminent commercial and industrial power, needed revision.

Kennedy personified a self-deluded

and self-intoxicated America. He entered the Senate when some Americans were still asking who lost China—as if a nation of a billion people on the other side of the world was ours to lose. Kennedy's very rhetoric, his bugle-call rhetoric ("pay any price"), exemplified an America heady on the stunning achievements of World War II. His words could only resonate in a country that felt it was master of its fate.

A Peace Corps of bright and idealistic Dale Carnegies could, by good deeds, win friends and influence people in the Third World. A closing of the (nonexistent) missile gap could intimidate the Soviets. The Green Berets could set things right in Vietnam, and at home war could be declared against poverty itself, and it would, like all America's enemies, be defeated.

All that ended with Oswald's bullets. It took some time for the realization to sink in—time for Vietnam (the war Kennedy began) to become a

disaster, for the ghettos to burn, for Peace Corps volunteers to come home from countries that turned, inexplicably, anti-American. America's supreme and bountiful self-confidence was shaken. We have come to realize that our reach has exceeded our grasp.

A bullet that kills a president leaves a wound as large as the nation itself. The act proves that random acts by little people can change history—that a world we once thought manageable cannot be brought to order.

It suggests that power and wealth have their limitations—that even a president, surrounded by the Secret Service and outwardly brimming with good health, can be struck down.

The event was a microcosm of what would happen to America. Lee Harvey Oswald represented and still represents a loss of control. Little wonder we still grieve. When John Kennedy died so did our view of ourselves. The act of a little man diminished us all.