

A Thousand Days and 30 Years

From Man to Martyr to Myth



The Charm And the Power:

John F. Kennedy in
the Oval Office, 1961.

Paul Schutzer/Life Magazine, courtesy Time Warner

By TOM WICKER

THIRTY years after John Fitzgerald Kennedy's murder in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, Americans continue to hold the 35th President in improbably high regard — not just as a man of star quality, whose life was cut short in a moment whose origins are still debated, but as a national leader ranked in some polls with or above Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Yet John Kennedy's "Thousand Days" in the Presidency were marked less by historic achievements than by continual crises — the Bay of Pigs fiasco; Berlin; the world's first nuclear confrontation; the beginnings of the war in Vietnam; the heated collisions of white authority and black civil rights demonstrators in the Southern states. Nor were Kennedy's responses always sure.

In his last months in office, for example, he concluded the first nuclear test-ban treaty with the Soviet Union. But in his early months he had ordered a massive military buildup that contributed heavily to the Soviet-American arms race. He was reluctant to expend political capital on behalf of black demonstrators, whose persistence made him impatient, and was forced mostly by events into his clashes with Southern recalcitrants like Governors George Wallace of Alabama and Ross Barnett of Mississippi.

The overall record of his Presidency, though in many respects admirable, hardly accounts for Kennedy's high standing three decades later — a standing all the more unlikely because the years since his death have seen continuing assaults on his personal and political reputations.

His dalliances with women before and during his White House years have become public knowledge. Books like "A

Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy" by Thomas C. Reeves and Nigel Hamilton's "J.F.K.: Reckless Youth" have pictured him as privileged, pampered, often irresponsible and insensitive. Inadequately answered charges persist that he and his brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, repeatedly sought the assassination of Fidel Castro. The author Richard Reeves makes it clear in "President Kennedy: Profile in Power" that Kennedy consistently deceived the public about his health, enduring almost constant pain and sometimes resorting to "feel good" injections during his campaign and Presidency.

Changes in Atmosphere

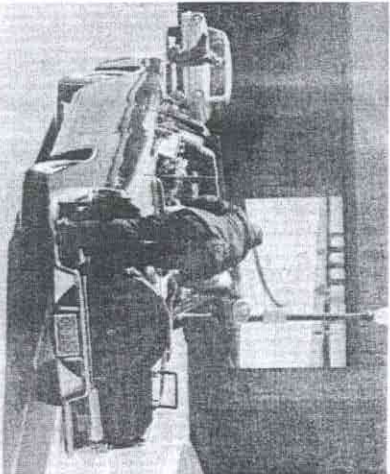
The nation's political and social atmospheres, moreover, have changed greatly since John Kennedy's time. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 signaled a national embrace of conservatism after decades of the New Deal liberalism that Kennedy was mistakenly believed to exemplify (his party, save its Southerners, was further to the left than he wanted to be). And the growth of the urban underclass, with the rising incidence of urban crime, has chilled attitudes toward black Americans, with whose improved status the 35th President is indelibly linked.

All this, or less, would have dulled the public's regard for any other former President. How has John F. Kennedy, while not exactly a candidate for Mount Rushmore, prevailed over predictable eclipse? The most important reason, undoubtedly, is the almost mythic manner of his death.

The hero cut down at the height of his glory (though Kennedy was in something of a political slump in the fall of

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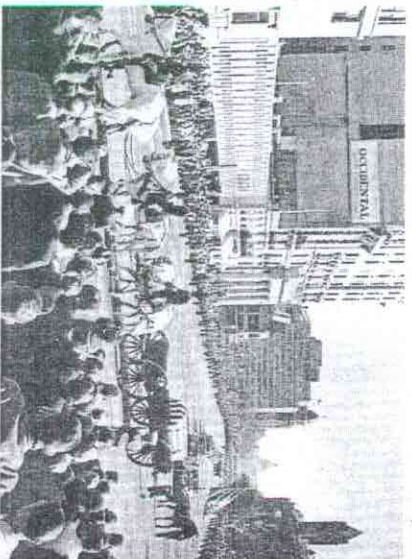
In Death, J.F.K. Continues to Loom Larger Than Life



The speeding limousine, Lyndon B. Johnson's swearing-in, and the funeral procession were images of the assassination imbedded in the consciousness of Americans who lived through those long days.



Associated Press



The New York Times

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1963) is a staple of legend-making. And when such a fate befalls a figure of youth and beauty, the legend becomes even more of a romantic drama — heightened, in Kennedy's case, by the unadmitted fact that few Americans in 1963 had witnessed, even then, in the man on a President.

By then, in fact, the President was an office exalted almost beyond mortality — by the personality and prominence of Franklin Roosevelt in Depression and war; by Truman's and Eisenhower's cold-war leadership of the so-called free world, and by the President's command of nuclear weapons. As the inheritor of that exalted place, John F. Kennedy became something like a young American emperor: it could hardly be imagined by a fascist or a prole that he or any President was vulnerable. The inevitable fact that spawned dozens of conspiracy theories for a people unable to accept the idea that a deed so momentous did not have equally momentous origins.

The assassination in Dallas, moreover, marked the real arrival of television, history's mightiest conveyor of unforgettable images and moments. Only that autumn, the two major networks, all relatively primitive, had inaugurated a daily evening news program (the Kennedy family, accordingly, the first to see on each program). But from the moment the shots rang out in Dealey Plaza through the funeral services three days later, the networks stayed continuously on the air, steadily focused on the searing drama — bringing the nation

together, as perhaps never before, in the time of shock and grief. Television, blurring the events of that weekend on the memories of most Americans then living, became the national nervous system. Kennedy, then in his third year of office, was beloved by many to be growing in stature, moving toward a higher status, an impression since cultivated in the numerous memories of his ascensions. The limited test-tube frenzy, conducted

It is the man and his myth, not his record, that resist memory's eraser.

only weeks before the fatal shots were fired, seemed ample evidence. So more than a few Americans believe today, some passionately, that a President growing in office would not have taken the nation so deeply into Vietnam as his successor did. Nor does Vietnam provide the only such wishful idea. Even if Nov. 22, 1963, is taken only as a benchmark in time and what followed a catastrophe, it is not the only time when the nation's youth began to go wrong for Americans. The night's youth began to drop out and turn on, the war in Vietnam became an endless nightmare, cities burned in the "long hot summers" of black revolt, Robert Kennedy and

Marlin Luther King fell before other assassins, world economic stagnancy trickled away, crime turned cities into huddles of fear, Watergate destroyed and faith in Presidents, beliefs and burning helicopters in Iran shattered the status of American might.

Ironically, all that culminated the Kennedy legend. Many Americans believed, on faith rather than evidence, that John Kennedy had not been cut down nearly had been there to fall with it. He, they could somewhere have been avoided. The worse things seemed to become, the more such Americans missed something, they identified with the Kennedy brothers. If it boiled rather than fact, John Kennedy had declared in his inaugural address that "a new generation of Americans, born in this century," had come to power with him. After the sixth year of the 60's and the Eisenhower Administration, the change seemed welcome to that new generation, the change seemed welcome to that better. In a time of political revelation, many of the older men still mourn a lost leader and the idea of a new age that never came. They will never know if it ever would have.

His most dedicated opponents, moreover, conceded that Kennedy was an engaging man — not the least of the political assets. His Presidential mere conferences were the first to be believed the nation's future. Of the hundreds of voters they established. The nation's future was the man's assignment — his irrefragable mastery of the details of government and diplomacy. No President ever

had had the exposure in action that television gave him, and to Americans he has been finer, than the local mayor or Congressman.

Frequently as idealists often overstate, detractors frequently underestimate the Kennedy record in office. It was by no means negligible. He broke, for instance, the centuries-old taboo against a Roman Catholic President, exposing other taboos to the light of reason. He became the first President to hold a press conference. He held a press conference for full equality "a moral right." He held a press conference for full equality of black Americans.

And though Kennedy's cold-warrior inaugural address is more widely quoted, his most memorable words came in the last months of his life, in his speech on June 10, 1963, at American University. He called on the nation, in what was then a risky and challenging change from years of hostility, to re-examine the attitude toward the Soviet Union. "In the past, the United States has followed a policy of containment, not of alliance. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal." So we all are, as was John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Despite the imperial trappings of the Presidency and his own glittering aura, he knew that well enough, that in the sun-shaking years since his death, as between disillusionment and legend, the man remains chosen legend — as if to hold the nation together, as if to hold their country as they must withhold them in 86, as they used to believe they were.