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WHY CAN'T WE FORGET

30 years later, the memory of JFK and Camelot continues to haunt us

By Brett Pauly
Daily News Staff Writer

Thirty years after his death, Americans still can't bury JFK.

Martyred by an assassin's bullet, his youthful image, vigor and promise are seemingly frozen in time. Most believe it will allow him to live forever as a legacy.

Others say President John Fitzgerald Kennedy's premature death may have spared him the political rigors of Vietnam, the social strife

of the later 1960s and a closer look at his personal life.

"Time and again, people have posed the question: Had JFK lived, wouldn't this have been a better country?" said Frank Smist, assistant professor of political science and director of global studies at Rockhurst College in Kansas City, Mo. "The evidence is ambiguous."

"There are potential evolutions that had they exploded during a

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Kennedy

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Kennedy presidency, could have caused some real problems."

Historians and political scientists point to Kennedy's health as a circumstance that could have drastically altered the president's vital appearance.

Back problems and Addison's disease — failure of the adrenal glands marked by extreme weakness — may have taken their toll had he finished his term or been re-elected.

"The images of vigor and touch football would have been changed if the president was confined to a wheelchair," Smist said.

Kennedy's relationships with women other than his wife, had they been reported, could have spoiled his strong family image, the experts contend.

There are those who doubt whether Kennedy would have fared any better than his successor in the Vietnam War.

And the political developments following Kennedy's death may have forever changed America's rose-colored view of the presidency — a change he was spared.

"There was a great deal of cynicism about the presidency issuing from Johnson's Vietnam policy and from Nixon's Watergate fiasco. That ushered in a new era of 'gotcha journalism,'" said James Hodges, professor of history at the College of Wooster, Ohio, who specializes in presidential leadership. "True believers could always look back and romanticize the Kennedy years in relation to these two presidents."

Hodges said a 1990 Gallup poll found that 84 percent of Americans approved of Kennedy's handling of the presidency, a higher approval rating than when he was



"The state of the U.S. has deteriorated so greatly since his death," said Karen Hendrickson, 47, an educational aide at Graceland Hills High School. "I've noticed nothing but negative things — the economy, the crime, the racism, the morals, the separatism. Had he lived, things might be different."

"He represented patriotism, family, youth involvement. I wasn't a separate individual. I wasn't a separate religion. I was a separate race, a separate religion. I felt that we were one."

"There isn't a time when his name is mentioned that I don't reflect on the feelings I had when he died — great sorrow and fear. I just can't shake this thing. We've never recovered, certainly not the people of my age group."

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., agreed.

"I think that for young people, of which I was one at the time, he spoke to the best of our instincts," Feinstein said. "He brought people together. He didn't drive them apart. His spirit, clan and charisma were uniquely American. For those of us who remember, it is undying."

Feinstein, who was 29 and a member of the California Women's Board of Terms and Parole in 1963, recalled the impact of hearing about Kennedy's death.

At the time, she was on her honeymoon with husband Bert Feinstein in Hong Kong, being interviewed by a magazine reporter.

"The person doing the interview said that the wire service had just sent a message that Kennedy had been killed, and that they had sent word back to knock it off, that that was a cruel joke," she said. The newswreeds dismissed the news as a hoax.

Many Americans agree that the country has been on a downhill skid since that fateful day in Dallas, Nov. 22, 1963. And many still hark back to the good ol' Kennedy days.

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"But after the interview, we drove to Reptoise Bay and saw a flag at half-mast," she said. "Then I knew instinctively, what had come over the wire service was correct."

The couple cut their honeymoon short and caught the next flight home.

"It was like my dream had been crushed, like a member of my family had died," Feinstein said. "I didn't want to be in a foreign country. I wanted to be home, to be with my family. I didn't know what was happening. How could a president get shot? I didn't know about assassination. It had never happened in my life."

Delia Lopez, 50, of Sylmar, still hasn't recovered from the despair she felt after Kennedy's death.

"They compared him to Camelot, that beautiful era, and it symbolizes the end of an era that many people feel will never come again," Lopez said. "It ended abruptly with a few bullets."

"Back then, we looked up to our presidents as role models, as symbols of what good citizens of this country should be. We had them on pedestals; they're on our level now, which is a more realistic view. It just goes to show how Kennedy was idealized. It almost seemed like a dream, and dreams that have an impact are memorable."

Lopez, a page at San Fernando Public Library who also is majoring in English at Mission College,

believes the generation that matured under Kennedy's impact is responsible for sustaining his legacy.

"The people who are keeping it alive are the baby boomers," she said. "We do the same thing with Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe; we keep their memories alive. My kids don't feel that way. And once we're gone, the legend will be gone."

She feels that little could alter the baby boomers' shining image of Kennedy — not the sex scandals, not his health problems, not Vietnam, not the confusion over the details of his assassination.

"We're getting so many distorted views of his life and death that the American public is starting to get leery," Lopez said. "But there is very little that will shock our generation. I think all of us felt a part of that Kennedy history, a part of that moment in time, and nothing could change how we feel about him. That's how close we felt to our president."

Others believe the legacy will continue as strong as ever even after the baby boomers are gone.

Maybe forever, said USC professor Dekmejian, because Kennedy is viewed as a hero.

"A sense of martyrdom seems to give Kennedy a retrospective charisma," Dekmejian said. "He's looked upon as a young man, who, in a sense, was a sacrificial lamb to a bullet. He gave his life to his country. Plus, he was a hero before, in the World War II PT boat incident, when he saved several people. He's a genuine hero on both of those counts, and heroes aren't soon forgotten."

Nov. 22 forever etched in their memories

Daily News readers were asked in the Nov. 14 L.A. Life section to give their memories of the day President Kennedy was assassinated, 30 years ago today in Dallas. Here is what some of our readers had say:

Jane Bradford, Winnetka
 "Nov. 22 was one of those days in history that you remember as if it just happened. I was making cookies, and over the radio came the announcement that Kennedy had been shot. The spatula was in mid-air and I don't know how long I stood there. I then walked to the kitchen window and I looked out at the apartment next door and the tears were streaming down my face. I said, 'My God, he's gone. He's gone.'"

Richard Schilling, Studio City
 "I was 16 when it happened. I was a junior in high school. It affected me greatly. I was going to a USC-UCLA game that weekend, and I remember there was dead silence when they played the national anthem. Every time I go to a football game, I always remember that."

Karen Hendrickson, Granada Hills
 "I can remember the day President Kennedy was assassinated more vividly than any other day of my life. I can remember that I was sitting in a home-ec class in high school, the exact seat, the direction I was facing, the expressions on everybody's face in the classroom."

Deña Lopez, Sylmar
 "I was working in South Central L.A. My mother had a hamburger stand there, and one of our customers ran over to tell us about it. We turned on our radio and couldn't believe it. Everybody started crying that was working

there. Everyone was in shock. All day long, our customers were in shock. We were numb. We couldn't help thinking about how close it was to Thanksgiving and how awful for Jackie and her children and the rest of his family.

"I guess it was the first time in American history that we realized how vulnerable our president really was. We never thought that this could happen here in this country — that a president of the United States could be assassinated."

Myron Groch, Valencia
 "When President Kennedy was assassinated, I remember being in gym class at U.S. Grant High School in Van Nuys. I was in the 10th grade and I remember them bringing all of us into the gym. We were outside at the time and the (public-address) system was playing throughout the school announcing that the president had been assassinated. I was supposed to have a test in biology that day, and my biggest concern was whether he would cancel the test or not. And now that seems so silly since I'm a 45-year-old teacher myself."

Jacqueline Rock, Burbank
 "I lived in Kinoshia, Wis., at the time JFK was assassinated. It was in the morning. I believe I was watching Chet Huntley and David Brinkley on Channel 4. It was the most devastating thing I ever encountered. We loved that man so much. We voted for him. He was the first president I ever voted for and I just could not believe our country could do this. I still miss him."

Todd Anthony, North Hollywood
 "I was living in Bridgeport, Conn. I was 18 years old and was cleaning my car for a date. I was very excited about that evening

when the mailman came by and asked if I had heard that the president had been shot. My date's mother wouldn't let her go out that night so I was very disappointed. It seemed like the whole world and everything just came to a sudden stop."

Virginia Strubling, North Hollywood
 "I managed a small shop in Lake Borris Park in Seattle. I closed the shop and went home and was glued to the TV for three days.

"On Sunday, we were exhausted, so we left to go to our cabin in the mountains, about 50 miles away. We stopped at a small grocery store in Sparta Town to get some groceries. When we went in, there was no one there. Finally we went in the back room. Everyone was glued to the television. Ruby had just shot Oswald. I began to cry and I cried all the way till we got to our cabin. My husband was exhausted also. The man who was in the store wouldn't even come out to wait on us."

Sidney Chriqui, Van Nuys
 "On the day Kennedy was killed, I was stationed with the Army Corps of Engineers in Livorno, Italy. I was stationed as a civilian employee. The news of President Kennedy's murder was just tremendous in that area. Most of the Italian people in the area immediately reported to the base where they signed the book of condolences with a big portrait of the president draped in black. The entire city was very shocked, and when we drove with the U.S.A. plates on the vehicle, people would stop us to offer their condolences."

R.F. van Daalen Wetters, Burbank
 "It was a bitterly cold, dark morning, with a blistering wind blowing and snow-laden clouds hanging in the sky. 'Unheimisch,' as they say in German; ominous. The place was Carolinensiel, a tiny little village at the North Sea in Germany and the date was Nov. 22, 1963. It took me half an hour to wrestle my faithful little DAF (Dutch Automobile Factory) over the treacherous roads, feeling my way through a snowdrift to the airbase. A knock on the door and in walks the base commander; usually I was asked to come to his office.

"Have you heard the news?"
 "What news?"
 "About your President Kennedy? Yes, they shot and killed him."
 "Killed?"
 The bottom fell out. I just could not believe it. I was shocked and at the same time embarrassed, that such a thing could happen in our country. OUR COUNTRY!

My telex machine started rattling off. There it was. Lockheed confirmed it, plus some technical information I had requested but, at that time, couldn't care less about."

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Have A Happy And Healthy Thanksgiving Holiday

JFK assassination coverage forever ingrained in Cronkite

By Frank Swertlow
Daily News Television Writer

Announcing to the nation that President John F. Kennedy had died in Dallas was one of the most difficult moments in Walter Cronkite's long career as a journalist.



Cronkite

"When you have to say, officially, that President John F. Kennedy died, it's a jolt," the former CBS anchor said. "It is an emotional jolt."

Cronkite was in the CBS newsroom on the east side of Manhattan when the first United Press International bulletin from Memman Smith brought the news that shots were fired as the presidential motorcade rolled through the streets of Dallas.

Smith, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the assassination, filed only bulletins, several from the press car in the motorcade, including that the president was hit and was going to the hospital.

News of Kennedy's death came to Cronkite from a CBS stringer, Eddie Barker, who worked at KRLD, the CBS affiliate in Dallas.

"Barker had covered the city for a long time, and he got a tip," he said. That tip was relayed to Dan Rather.

During CBS' coverage of the tragedy, Cronkite insisted that he broadcast, not from a TV studio, but from the nearby CBS newsroom.

"I did not want to lose control of the broadcast," he said. "I wanted the (wire service) printers all there. I didn't want to put anything on the air that I hadn't read first. I didn't want to be in a remote studio."

Although Cronkite fearfully read to the nation the news of Kennedy's death, he had to wait until CBS technicians moved the cameras from the studio, a process that could have taken more than an hour had it not been for the efforts of the news crew.

"The cameras had to be brought up on an elevator," he said.

Then, there was a technical delay. The big, cumbersome studio cameras, giants compared to today's transistorized mini-cams, needed to be warmed up before they could broadcast a signal to viewers.

"When this story broke, they rushed me into a radio booth where we did voice-overs for 10 to 12 minutes," he said. "Thanks to the heroic efforts (of the news crew), we got on the air."

Celebrities remember death of JFK

Marking the anniversary of the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the latest New Yorker notes that "no one feels emotion as deeply as the stars."

Some celebrity remembrances of Nov. 22, 1963:

Michael Douglas

"I was a freshman at UC Santa Barbara, and I was walking between classes, and I heard somebody had a radio to his ear. And before I even heard what they were saying, I knew the president was shot. I can't really explain how or why, but I'll never forget it. I cried. That was my first experience of the loss of somebody I felt I knew, even though I didn't know him."

Barbra Streisand

"I was in a jewelry shop buying my first piece of important jewelry, a beautiful antique choker. I never wear it, this most beautiful, beautiful thing I have... It's hard for me."

Sean Connery

"I was filming 'Marnie' at Universal Studios, and I had two hours free, so I went to the golf driving range. Usually, there's an awful lot of noise going on, and suddenly it stopped, and there were a lot of people standing around crying. A woman who was serving hamburgers came running up to our place and told us. I jumped into the car and went back to the studio. (Alfred Hitchcock called it a day.)"

Jack Lemmon

"I was shooting one of those two bombs — either 'Under the Yum, Yum Tree' or 'Good Neighbor Sam.' — they were both back to back. The news came and I just started wandering around the set. I went home, and I just sat. I was just stunned. I had known Jack Kennedy from Harvard."

Christopher Reeve

"I was in sixth grade in Princeton, N.J., Country Day School in study hall. The word came and one of the teachers came in and told us. We were sent home for the day. Even at 11, I was old enough to understand what we'd been through with the Cuban Missile Crisis. I was very frightened, because the world now seemed very unsafe."

Robert Merrill (From his 1976 memoir, "Between Acts")

"The waiter said, 'Sir, I must tell you that your President Kennedy has been killed.' I choked. His shaking hand dropped the chocolate on Marion's white dress."

—Daily News staff and wire reports