

# Kennedy magic vibrant after

*Historians may quibble about his leadership, but the public still reveres*

By Martin Merzer  
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Family scandals persist and historians chip away, but the mystique endures. Those grainy films seem dated now and the images suspect, but the legend flourishes.

Thirty years after the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, three decades after the end of Camelot, memories of this martyred president still radiate warmth and anguish.

For many Americans, particularly those old enough to remember, tomorrow — Nov. 22 — will be a day of reflection.

Few can think of the date without also thinking of Dallas and Lee Harvey Oswald and three shots from a mail-order rifle that cost \$21.45, telescopic sight included. Few can think of the date without also pondering the haunting might-have-beens.

"This is always a tough time for me," said David Pearson, a Miami marketing executive who served Kennedy as a White House aide. "We were on our way. We were changing everything. And then we lost so much.

"You know, they say 'larger than life,' and that is sort of an empty phrase. But for Kennedy, it wasn't an empty phrase. He was larger, in a sense, than his own life."

Such is the foundation of any legend. And Kennedy's magic — brewed from fact and sentiment, carefully tended by his family — is surely the stuff of legend.

Its durability repels all assault on his character. It reaches beyond all demographic borders. It resides in the national consciousness.

Public opinion polls still reflect an enormous reservoir of affection and respect for Kennedy, although the proportions have slipped a bit as time passes and the "don't know" response grows.

According to surveys conducted during the last five years, one in four Americans believes Kennedy was one of our best presidents, one in three considers him our most effective president since World War II, three in four think of him favorably.

Some historians disagree, criticizing him as morally suspect, as ineffective with Congress, as an overeager Cold Warrior — too rash in playing nuclear brinkmanship during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, too quick to send military advisers to Vietnam.

But the popular vote keeps flowing in: In a 1991 poll, Americans ranked Kennedy as the second greatest president, behind Abraham Lincoln.

The Kennedy fascination is so deep

and so profound that it touches many too young to remember him.

Nearly half the current population was born after his death; it is a shock to realize that, had Kennedy lived, this dynamic young man — frozen in time with a glamorous wife and two adorable children — would be 76 years old now, just six years younger than Ronald Reagan.

Kennedy was only 43 when he was elected, and many people saw him as much more than a political leader. They discovered someone whose youth and charisma attracted them to public service, convinced them that the United States could do better.

One of those people was Bill Clinton, who once met Kennedy and regularly taps into the legend.

"The 21st century can be our century if we approach it with the vigor, the determination, the wisdom and the sheer confidence and joy of life that John Kennedy brought to America in 1960," President Clinton has said.

Kennedy raised expectations, and he rallied the support of common Americans.

He spoke of a New Frontier and of a new generation of U.S. leadership. He spoke of a Peace Corps, an Alliance for Progress with Latin America, a civil rights initiative, a crusade to land an American on the moon within 10 years.

He was energetic and telegenic and determined to lead the nation with, as he said in his Boston accent, "vigor" after the sleepy 1950s.

And he did.

Those who shared those times remember a man they called Jack or JFK, a man with a toothy grin and a

right arm jabbing the air to emphasize a point. They remember his glamorous wife, Jacqueline, who spoke in a breathless whisper. They remember Caroline and John-John, so young, so innocent.

They remember, most of all, a sense of purpose and limitless possibility.

"The presidency can be a spiritual office as well as a political office," said Pearson, the former Kennedy aide. "The spiritual side lasts a lot longer in America, and it's something we've been missing a long time in our leaders."

That spiritual component of Kennedy's leadership still inspires diverse elements of a nation known for its fleeting attention span, its skepticism of politicians, its glee in toppling idols.

"When you look at all the controversies involving Kennedy, you expect them to tarnish his image in history and in the minds of Americans," said Marvin Dawkins, a University of Miami professor of sociology and a specialist in African American studies.

"But if you look at black Ameri-

# 30 years

*the fallen president.*

cans, John F. Kennedy is as revered today as he was during that period. You still find in the homes of many, many black people a picture of Jesus, a picture of Martin Luther King and a picture of John F. Kennedy."

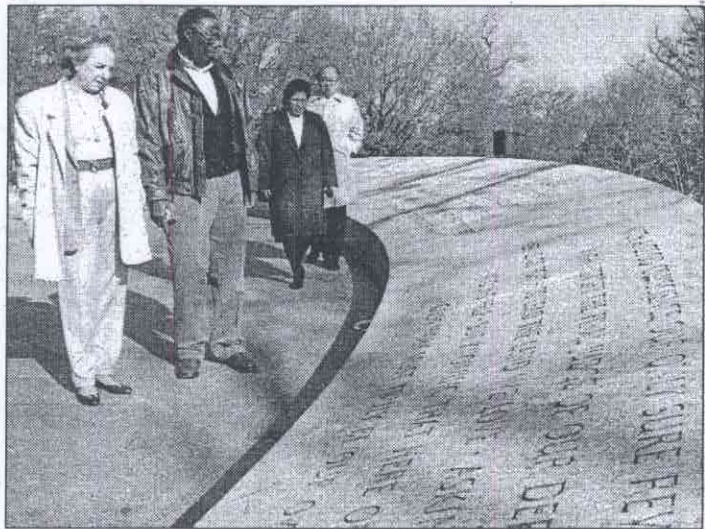
Sen. Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts, John's only surviving brother, said recently:

"Of all he did, my brother would take the highest pride in the legions of young Americans he inspired and whose lives he touched and changed. ... The truth was, he relit the torch for a whole new generation and more."

The continuing fondness for John Kennedy does not extend to the entire Kennedy clan, often called the U.S. version of royalty, but the nation remains largely obsessed by everything involving the family.

Hundreds of books have been written about the Kennedys, scores of movies and television shows produced — the works ranging from scholarly to adoring to exploitive.

That is only one measure of the phenomenon that began with the



Associated Press / JOE MARQUETTE

**Ethel Kennedy** visits the gravesites of her husband, Robert F., and President John F. Kennedy at Arlington National Cemetery. With her is Chakufwa Chihana, leader of a human-rights group in Malawi.

1,037-day administration of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, a time and a life and, for some, a dream brutally abbreviated.

When it was over, Kennedy's widow mentioned that his favorite lyric came from the Broadway show

*Camelot*, about a benevolent leader who ruled with a sense of style and who became the stuff of legend:

"Don't let it be forgot,  
That once there was a spot,  
For one brief shining moment  
That was known as Camelot."