

JFK's killing proved watershed in U.S. life

Many today see Kennedy as the 'last president people trusted'

By Vincent J. Schodolski
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DALLAS — What is there to say about John Fitzgerald Kennedy that really could be new?

Thirty years have passed since Nov. 22, 1963, that clear autumn day when gunshots echoed off the brick walls of the buildings around Dealey Plaza.

Television news, which came of age with its coverage of the assassination, preserved the moment and all the sights and sounds that followed, to be watched over and over again.

A library of books — there are 506 titles on Kennedy in the Library of Congress — have been produced by rank amateurs and conspiracy theorists and the likes of Arthur Schlesinger, Theodore Sorensen and other members of Kennedy's inner circle.

To mark this year's anniversary, two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Norman Mailer will weigh in with a detailed account of the short time Lee Harvey Oswald lived in Minsk, then part of the Soviet Union.

Hundreds of conspiracy theory devotees gathered in Dallas last



AP FILE PHOTO/1962
President John F. Kennedy posed at his desk in the Oval Office.

week to examine the evidence yet again and clamor for the release of still-secret government files that they are convinced will reveal who really killed Kennedy.

Television has made its contribution with various and assorted offerings, including an ABC two-partner called "J.F.K.: Reckless Youth" and Larry King on TNT asking celebrities where they were when Kennedy died, both airing Sunday, and a sort of docudrama last week about Oswald's wife, Marina.

So what new is there to say? Maybe 27-year-old Paul Narvin has something to offer.

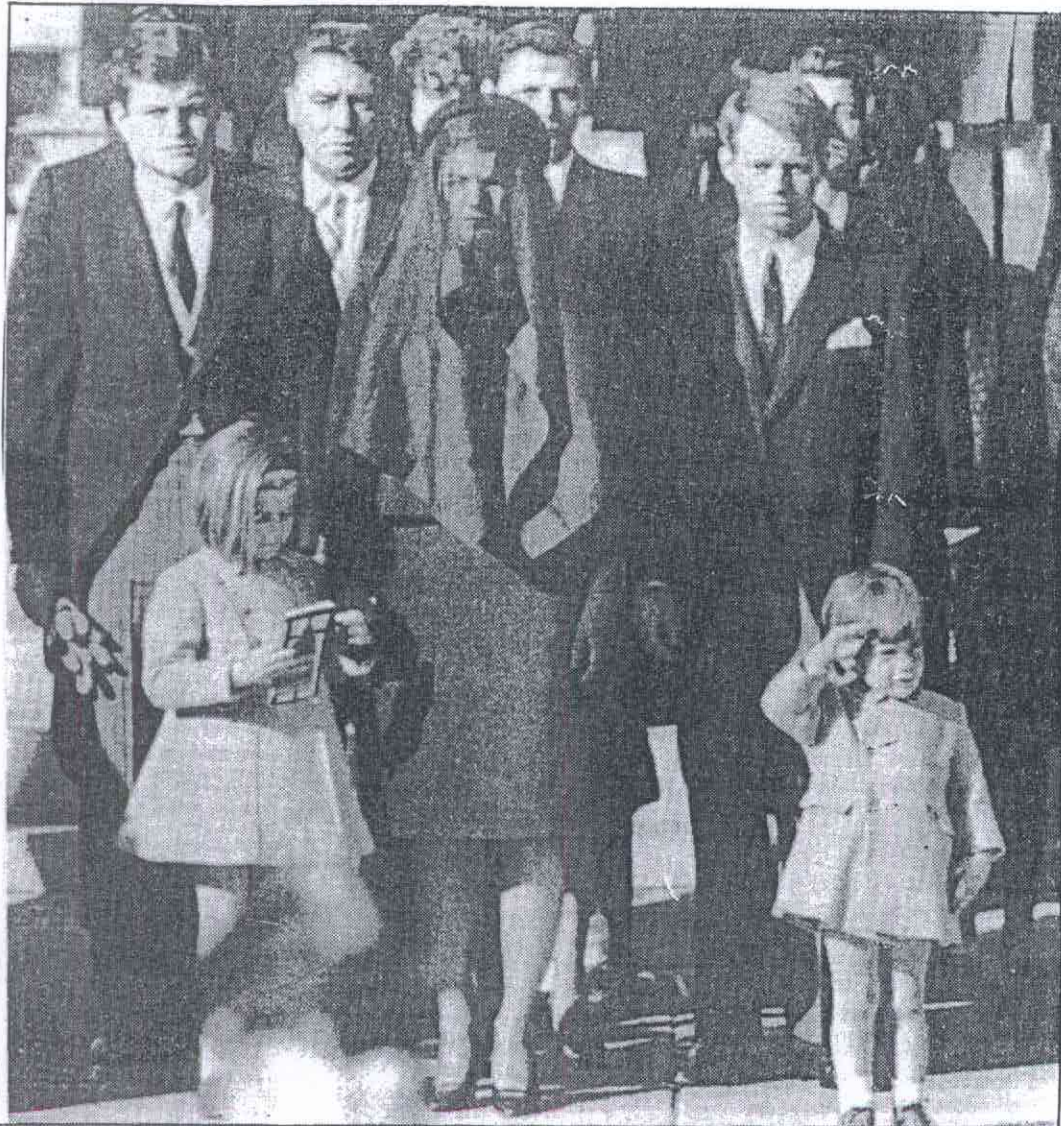
"He has always represented a kind of divide between that America and this America," he said, standing beneath the sixth floor window of the former Texas School Book Depository, the window from which the Warren Commission said Oswald fired. "It has always seemed to me that the country had a cohesiveness, a sense of purpose and an identity that disappeared after Kennedy."

Born three years after Kennedy's death, Narvin is part of the new generation of Americans with no conscious memory of his 1,000 days. Almost half of the Americans alive today are either too young to have their own recollections of Kennedy or were not yet born at the time of the assassination.

"It may sound strange," said Narvin, a doctor who is finishing his hospital residency, "but I have always been kind of jealous of older people who really remember Kennedy."

Perhaps it is nothing more than the rosy glow of supposedly simpler times. Yet more than a score of people under 35 who were interviewed outside the old book depository portrayed the Kennedy presidency as a kind of national historical divide.

"He was probably the last president people trusted," said Anne Vanek of Michigan, who was 2



AP FILE PHOTO/1963

Kennedy family members — the slain president's children Caroline and John Jr. and widow Jacqueline, who is *DURING MASS IN WASH. HINDON, D.C.*

years old when Kennedy died. "People still trusted presidents then."

Many of those interviewed likened Nov. 22, 1963, to the day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, a

TIME THAT BROUGHT AMERICANS TOGETHER IN A SPECIAL WAY.

many said that they had not having shared that unity of purpose, and most believe such a national cohesiveness could not occur in contemporary America.

"The country will never be the way it was then. I mean that 30 years ago we were much more alike than we are today," said Nancy Lavine, a 22-year-old legal secretary in Dallas.

"We are so diverse now, from so many countries. So many people have come so recently that I don't think a national moment like the Kennedy assassination would have meaning would be lost on so many

now."

The old book depository on the corner of Houston and Elm streets now houses government offices, except for the floor from which the Warren Commission said the shots were fired.

What Oswald saw

That portion of the building has been converted into a Kennedy memorial called The Sixth Floor. It is part-museum, part-photo gallery and wholly a chilling walk through perhaps one of the most infamous rooms in American history.

Using photographs, television footage and newly produced short films, The Sixth Floor offers a crash course in Kennedy from his days as a youth to that day in Dallas.

A visitor can stand next to the corner where Oswald crouched and fired from behind a pile of book boxes shipped from Chicago and look out the window and see what he saw — the hairpin turn off of Houston Street onto Elm, the triple overpass, the grassy knoll.

The tree that deflected his first shot is there, taller by 30 years.

And of course there is the chance, if one so desires, to watch again and again the familiar home movie of the assassination shot by Abraham Zapruder from the grassy knoll.

The effect the memorial has on those with no memory of Kennedy can be profound.

"The speeches are still compelling. They make you feel like you should go out and do something, not just find a way to make money," said Mark Fontaine, 30, a business executive from Arizona who brought his wife and two children to visit Dallas on the anniversary.

Civil rights battles

Among the clips reconstructing a portion of the Kennedy presidency are some depicting his role in the civil rights struggle. These include vivid images of police dogs and fire hoses being turned on black demonstrators.

Although Kennedy backed the civil rights movement belatedly, and reluctantly at first, the films offer an image of him as a champion of the poor and oppressed.

"He was a good man," said Andrea Powers, a 16-year-old student from south Texas who cried as she watched the film. "I wish he was still alive. A lot of what (President) Clinton is doing now looks like he is just imitating Kennedy."