

11/21/93

# JFK's vision and style

By **RON JAVERS**

**O**f course the man can tell you where he was on the day the world got the bad news about Kennedy.

He can remember the aroma of stale coffee and the smoke in the quaintly named Pie Shoppe on the campus of his first university. The students stared at the television screen in the corner and the smooth skin of their faces played back the horror they were seeing: The President had been shot. In Dallas. Maybe he was dead.

Funny, he thought, I can hear him speaking.

*We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution ... No one has been barred on account of his race from fighting or dying for America — there are no "white" or "colored" signs on the foxholes or graveyards of battle*

Someone had started the church bells tolling — their dull thuds sounded through the walls like so many mortars raining on the soul. The students, some of them crying, slowly began making their way out of the building and toward the chapel on the hill.

He found himself walking silently beside a classmate, black and thin and intense. "If Kennedy dies," he said, his words coming in small, tight-chested gasps ... "If he dies, then that's it. I mean, that's just it if we find out there's this race stuff behind it. We will go crazy."

Race riots. A country coming apart. It seemed suddenly very possible. He looked at the young black man, his carefully pressed dark suit, his clear, intelligent eyes. It seemed impossible.

*However close we sometimes seem to that dark and final abyss, let no man of peace and freedom despair. For he does not stand alone. If we all can persevere ... If we can look beyond our own shores and ambition, then surely the age will dawn in which the strong are just and the weak secure and*



For The Inquirer / BARRIE MAGUIRE

*the peace preserved ...  
Those who make peaceful  
revolution impossible will  
make violent revolution in-  
evitable.*

He found himself remembering the first time he had seen John F. Kennedy in the flesh. It was in a motorcade during the hard-fought campaign and the tousled-haired candidate smiled and waved from the back seat of the long black convertible as it swept down Aramingo Avenue trailing glamour and possibility. By his very presence he seemed to expand their universe as he asked them to be a part of his.

*The New Frontier of which I speak is not a set of promises — it is a set of challenges. It sums up not what I intend to offer the American people, but what I intend to ask of them.*

It seemed to the man that Kennedy had made his generation believe that politics could be exciting, that real progress was possible — even in the smoke-blown and grit-stained factories of North Philly. Beyond was Kennedy country, and this aspiring President had the courage to suggest that it was a land we all shared.

People were different, surely. There were rich and poor and black and white and red and yellow, and there were all the shades of religious and philosophical complexity to deal with as well. But we had more in common than we knew: We were Americans.

*Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans, born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage, and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.*

*Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.*

So that was it, the man thought. That was Kennedy's secret. He wasn't giving anything away, he was asking for something. He wasn't promising. He was challenging. He wasn't saying that anybody was entitled to anything. Only that everything was out there, and that if we were brave enough and strong enough and tenacious enough, we might have it. And, if we were wise enough and compassionate enough, we might willingly share it.

*If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.*

He had heard Kennedy's marvelous inaugural speech on Jan. 20, 1961. The new President stood smiling, hatless

and coatless in the Washington winter. His love of the language made his prose rise and soar that day.

*Now the trumpet summons us again — not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need; not as a call to battle, though embattled we are; but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, "rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation," a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.*

*The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it, and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.*

---

*Kennedy had made his generation believe that politics could be exciting.*

---

The big picture! How many of our presidents really saw it? So many other modern presidents seemed mired in their own parochiality: LBJ, whose Southern strategy bogged down in Vietnam; Nixon, at war with his enemies and with himself; Ford, happiest on the golf courses; Carter, carrying his own suitcase — nowhere. Bush, ever behind the curve on "the vision thing." But this man, flawed as he was, as all men are, he saw the world with cinematic vision.

*It is our task in our time and in our generation to hand down undiminished to those who come after us, as was handed down to us by those who went before, the natural wealth and beauty which is ours.*

Again, the notion of duty, of responsibility to the past and to the future, and the theme of hard work for its own sake. One hardly hears this kind of thing anymore, the man thought.

*All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days, nor in the life of this administration, nor even perhaps in our life-*

---

*The notion of duty, of responsibility. . . . One hardly hears this kind of thing anymore.*

---

*time on this planet. But let us begin.*

And so he had begun. Barely, and then he was killed. In the intervening years, the man reflected, the nation seemed to have changed and so had he. The words now had a hollow quality and he wanted to crawl into them and scream to see if he could hear some echo: Hellooo, America! Was that really you? Before Martin and Bobby, Vietnam and Kent State and Cambodia? Before Agnew? And Watergate? And that old fool Wilbur Mills chasing after that stripper right there in the tidal basin of Washington, D.C.? And can we ever explain all of those disparate, nation-shaping experiences to our children and hope they can understand from where, exactly, we have come? What is it that we have won? And what is it that we have lost? And what is it that we have to hand down to them, here in 1993?

The man thought all of these things just a few weeks ago as he stared at a haunting collection of photographs published in *The New Yorker*. The photographer Richard Avedon had produced an album of pictures of the people of "Camelot." The pictures took him in. He gazed at the now-jowly, wrinkled faces. There was Kennedy's pet writer, Ted Sorenson, still looking buttoned down, but

somehow also battered by the years. There was plucky Pierre Salinger, with his Gallic grin and flyaway eyebrows. And there, most moving of all, were several of the sad, staunch, long-suffering Kennedy women, all beyond middle age now, and so safely beyond the traitorous thrusts of their faithless men.

As he gazed at those faces the man understood something about another America, a place that once existed and now does not. The curtain came down on far more than Camelot when it came down on Kennedy. It came down on an entire generation of Americans and on many of their once most deeply cherished beliefs — about themselves and about their country.

It seemed to him that his was no longer a nation of believers, but had become instead a country of expecters: Expecting that the

American standard of living will continue to rise, but not believing it will; expecting our children to learn to read and write and to develop a proficiency in math and science that will ensure their legacy as leaders of the Free World, but, given the condition of our schools, not believing this will necessarily happen; expecting government officials to conduct themselves in a manner above reproach, but not believing they do; expecting our fellow Americans to be honest, civil and law abiding, but not believing they will.

It seemed to the man that American life, and his own, had grown incredibly complex since the simpler days of Camelot, and that the challenges that now surround us are more daunting and the courage to face them less abundant than JFK ever dreamed.

*The courage of life is often a less dramatic spectacle than the courage of a final moment; but it is no less a magnificent mixture of triumph and tragedy. A man does what he must — in spite of personal consequences, in spite of obstacles and dangers and pressures — and that is the basis of all morality.*

Perhaps all that was required, the man thought, was simple courage and the will to believe again, not in some frilly fantasy of America, but in ourselves, and to ask ourselves, and not our country, what we can do, now, in the time of our lives.

*I look forward to a great future for America, a future in which our country will match its military strength with our moral restraint, its wealth with our wisdom, its power with our purpose. I look forward to an America which will not be afraid of grace and beauty, which will protect the beauty of our natural environment . . . an America which will reward achievement in the arts as we reward achievement in business or statecraft . . . I look forward to an America which commands respect throughout the world, not only for its strength, but for its civilization as well. And I look forward to a world which will be safe not only for democracy and diversity, but also for personal distinction.*

When Kennedy shared those bright expectations for America in a late-October speech at Amherst College in 1963, the nation's 35th President had little less than a month to live. He was younger then than I am now, the man thought. I can tell you exactly where I was the day he died. But now both the world and I are in a different place, a place where courage doesn't seem so easily come by. Certainly, I remember Kennedy. And, yes, you can bet I'll tell the children.

Ron Javers teaches journalism at Syracuse University.