

Nation/World

Post-JFK generation recalls a different era

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DALLAS—What is there to say about John Fitzgerald Kennedy that really could be new?

Thirty years have passed since that clear autumn day, Nov. 22, 1963, 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 again.

A library of books—there are 506 titles on Kennedy in the Library of Congress—have poured from the pens of rank amateurs and conspiracy theorists as well as from those of Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Ted 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 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-parter called "JFK: Reckless Youth" and Larry King on TNT asking celebrities where they were when Kennedy died, both airing Sunday, and a sort of docu-drama 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."

Narvin, born three years after Kennedy's death, is part of the new generation of Americans with no conscious memory of the time some called America's Camelot.

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 age 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 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 regretted 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 anything like the same impact. The 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. 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.

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."

Field Notes

This column
Field's most
calendarNOW THROUGH NOVEMBER 24
MUSIC. WHITE. YOU SHOP!SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 21
TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 22