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The Kennedy Delusion

We have come through another orgy of Kennedy remembrances, and I confess that, finally, I am fed up. It is not just that his life and his assassination have been overdramatized, transforming him from a political figure into an entertainment phenomenon with a place in pop culture closer to Elvis than Harry Truman. The dissent goes deeper. Our Kennedy obsession obscures something crucial. He was, at best, a mediocre president or, less charitably, a lousy one.

I admit that Kennedy had gobs of wit, charm, style and class. At age 14, I was captivated by him when he ran for president and then shattered when he was killed. Watching old TV clips now, I am still stirred by his rhetoric and still amused by his quick humor. We gloried in the energetic and self-confident image that he projected for us all. The clips can still touch emotions, but I am no longer 14, this is no longer 1960, and we do not pay our presidents to be witty, charming, elegant or funny.

Every president succeeds or fails—in the harsh light of history, though not necessarily in popularity polls—on the quality of a few critical judgments, where presidential actions make a difference. It is not true, as Kennedy's defenders say, that he didn't have the time to show his leadership potential. His judgments did make a difference, but mostly for the worse.

It was Kennedy who blessed and promoted an ambitious economic agenda (dubbed the "new economics") that launched an era of rising inflation and permanent budget deficits. President Eisenhower had adhered to the old idea of balanced budgets. Three of his eight budgets were in surplus; his net deficit over two terms was less than \$19 billion. Eisenhower also thought that inflation must be checked, even if that meant occasional recessions. In 1961, inflation was one percent.

Kennedy's economists ridiculed these ideas and argued that economic growth could be increased—and the economy kept at "full employment"—by relaxing, just a bit, the taboos against budget deficits and inflation. The rest is history. Once these useful disciplines were gone, government lost control of its budgets and let loose what became double-digit inflation. Bad judgment.

It was Kennedy who made the critical commitment to Vietnam. All the subsequent speculation about whether he would or wouldn't have increased that commitment, as Johnson did, is really irrelevant. We can

never know what Kennedy would have done, only what he did. And what he did was make a major military (and political) commitment to a country whose survival was not a vital national interest and, thereby, involve us in a conflict that politically we could not sustain. Once this happened, there was no easy exit. Bad judgment.

The point is that many of the country's political and economic traumas over the past three decades trace their origins to Kennedy's errors. No one doubts that Kennedy was intelligent or, as David Broder observes, a consummate politician. Had he lived, he had the skills to be reelected and, quite probably, pass much of his legislative agenda. But political skill and intelligence are not substi-

tutes for wisdom or good instincts.

These Kennedy lacked. His own experiences were limited. The pictures of him in the White House frequently show him agonizing over decisions. The histories of his administration often have him complaining (as after the Bay of Pigs) that he was poorly served by his advisers. Unwittingly, these moments reveal a man who, for all his outward self-confidence, often did not have the background or values to make good decisions by himself.

Our continuing fascination with Kennedy says more about us than it does about him. We feel that we were unfairly deprived of the future we deserved and that Kennedy, had he lived, would have provided it. The Kennedy myth, as aptly summarized by Broder, is that he would have spared Americans "the agony of Vietnam, supplied them with a thriving economy and a sense of public service and inspired them to break the bonds of racism."

This is more than a myth; it is a fantasy. Hard as it is to say, Kennedy's reputation was preserved, and possibly even made, by his death. It meant he didn't have to face the consequences of his own decisions. It made him a tragic figure who commanded our sympathy and distracted us from the thinness of his record. If you doubt this, try a thought experiment. Visualize Kennedy as a small, pudgy man with all the charm and charisma of, say, Richard Nixon. Assume that he simply decided not to run in 1964. What, then, would you think of his presidency? Not much. You probably wouldn't think of it at all.

Kennedy's enduring appeal lies in the tragedy of his death and his powers as a public performer: someone with good looks who made memorable speeches and radiated a zest for living. His constructive leadership was modest. On civil rights, he was dragged along (as was Eisenhower) by events. His greatest foreign policy triumph was probably the limited nuclear test ban treaty with the Soviet Union. In fairness, many of Kennedy's errors reflected the climate of the times. Americans believed fervently in their own power and in their capacity to organize progress. Some of Kennedy's errors (for example, his fondness for economic engineering) were also made by leaders abroad. But Kennedy could not see through or temper these prevailing illusions.

It is possible that he would have grown. He faced down Nikita Khrushchev in the Cuban missile crisis—probably the world's closest brush with nuclear holocaust. But the crisis partly resulted from Kennedy's previous foreign policy blunders, which led Khrushchev to think that the new president could be had. Kennedy botched the Bay of Pigs; he should have scrubbed the invasion or supported it. When the Berlin Wall went up, he did virtually nothing. At the Vienna summit in 1961, Khrushchev bullied him. "Too intelligent and too weak," Khrushchev said.

I still mourn Kennedy's death. I regret his illusions and my own. But we need to measure our presidents better, not just to judge the past but also to function in the present. The Kennedy who lives beyond the grave commands neither my sympathy nor my interest. He is simplified, romanticized and exploited. He is not a person but a popular delusion.