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Walter Lippmann: A Reminiscence

By Walter Lippmann

IN THE YEARS since John F. Kennedy was murdered we have had a chance to see a legend in the making, and I, for one, have learned a new respect for the myth-making process. The popular legend treats him as the new man who, coming to power as the old order of things dissolved, foresaw the shape of things to come.

The prosaic documentary record of his life and his opinions and his deeds has to be read with the eye of the imagination to discern this legendary figure. But a passionate multitude all over the world believe him to have been the herald of better things in dangerous and difficult times.

The artistic energy which is creating the legend has taken hold of bits and pieces of what really happened to compose a picture of what the new generation of our century wishes desperately were happening. Yet the actuality of the Kennedy Administration is a very mixed collection of errors and false

starts and brilliant illuminations of the future.

THUS, IN PROSAIC fact, President Kennedy's conduct of foreign relations was quite fumbling until a few months before he died. There was the fiasco of the Bay of Pigs. There was the fiasco of his first handling of European affairs, beginning with the misunderstandings and suspicions of the Vienna conversations with Khrushchev and going on to the miscalculation in which he was outwitted by the building of the Berlin Wall.

But the myth-making impulse has rightly passed over these mistakes and has reached out towards that period when, having played his cards so well in the second Cuban crisis, he was inspired to proclaim the beginning of the end of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. The legend of Kennedy the peace-maker rests upon what happened in the last few months of his life when

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Bronze bust by Felix de Weldon via UPI

John F. Kennedy
... slain 4 years ago today

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The Kennedy Legend Inspired Man To Become the Master of His Fate

in the last few months of his life when he was inspired to seize an opportunity which the course of history had offered him.

IN OUR internal affairs his reputation rests not on his realistic accomplishments, for they were few and he was in deadlock with Congress, but on the right choices he made occasionally. In his legend he will always be remembered for example, as the President who first adopted the teachings of modern economics about the management of the business cycle. In point

of fact he adopted them reluctantly and almost certainly with no great understanding of them.

He is identified also with what is becoming the vast enterprise of dealing with the remaking of the human environment, the adaptation of modern technology to men's needs. It would be hard to put together an imposing record of what he actually accomplished here. But there is the undemable fact that a whole generation of thinkers and experts in these matters were inspired by him, and swear by him now.

I was not, myself, an original truth which is most worth having.

This is the conviction, for a Kennedy man, and although I supported him in 1960, I was skeptical and often disappointed until the last few months of his life. But now, in retrospect, I am glad of the legend and I think it contains that part of

which he set the example, that a new age has begun and that men can become the masters of their fate.

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