

John F. Kennedy

Would the World Be Different If Lee Harvey Oswald Had Missed?

by Jack Anderson

WASHINGTON, D.C. It was all over in six seconds. Three shots in rapid succession cut down President John F. Kennedy, shattered Camelot and changed history. Fourteen years, have now passed since that dreadful day in Dallas. One news shock has followed another from Vietnam to Watergate. These depressing events have raised a tantalizing question: Would the world be any different today if the presumed assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, had missed his target?

Had Kennedy lived, he would have been 60 years old now. Those who knew him best, the aides and advisers who were familiar with his plans, believe the world would have been brighter. For, in their opinion, more than a President was killed in Dallas; a promise for the future died with him. I have questioned them in depth about what might have been. Their answers are revealing.

Skeptical of military

• Would Kennedy have kept us out of the Vietnam War? Kennedy had lost confidence, his associates agree, in the military advisers who later promised Lyndon Johnson victory in Vietnam. The Bay of Pigs fiasco left him skeptical and suspicious of the military. His close friend, ex-Sen. George Smathers (D, Fla.), remembers hearing Kennedy declare angrily: "Those dumb bastards in the military don't know what they are doing. They will tell you things that will snarl you in things, because they like war. That's the way they have of getting ahead, of getting promotions." Concludes Smathers: "I think because of his bad experience in Cuba, Kennedy was not being persuaded by them. He was beginning to get sick of the war. He said to me that this thing wasn't going well. He said Eisenhower, whom he didn't think very bright, was right when he said we shouldn't get involved in a land war in Asia. Kennedy told me: "Old Eisenhower had more sense than these people. They didn't get him suckered in." Aides who worked for both Presi-

dents agree that Kennedy resisted a military solution but that Johnson was "suckered" by the Pentagon. Kennedy's top assistant, Ted Sorensen, recalls that the military brass "repeatedly urged him to send troops in" but that "his answer was always 'no.'" Explains Sorensen: "Kennedy was a highly rational human being. He knew what was working, what was not working."

Other aides remember, in contrast, that Johnson was impressed with the military brass and was easily persuaded by their advice. Recalls Myer Feldman, White House legal counsel under both men: "I was shocked when the Joint Chiefs decided and Lyndon Johnson went along with sending 550,000 troops into Vietnam. It was inconsistent with the discussions we had."

Rusk unsure on Vietnam

The only uncertainty comes from Kennedy's Secretary of State, Dean Rusk. "During much of 1963," he says, "we were optimistic about the way things were going in Vietnam. [Kennedy] had made no decisions as to whether the U.S. should withdraw." Rusk contends that "nobody can possibly know" what Kennedy would have done about Vietnam. But Sorensen is emphatic: "We would not have sent in combat forces. We would not have bombed North Vietnam. The Marines would never have landed."

It is possible, however, that Kennedy would have kept the special forces in Vietnam. He once told me that conventional warfare was the wrong way to defend South Vietnam. It required a

President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy received warm welcome at Dallas airport Nov. 22, 1963. Within hours, he fell victim to an assassin's bullet.



crack counter-insurgency force, he said, to cope with the Communist guerrillas. He formed the special forces to train the South Vietnamese how to combat guerrilla warfare, he added.

Associates agree this was the Kennedy concept; he felt the Joint Chiefs were pushing the wrong strategy. Smathers recalls this Kennedy comment: "It isn't that kind of war. Hell, how can you fight a war when everybody looks exactly alike?"

• *Would Kennedy have been reelected?* The political pros generally agree he would have won a second term easily. "He looked in good shape," recalls his political manager, Larry O'Brien. "We were confident about 1964."

Bay of Pigs boner

His biggest boner, the Bay of Pigs disaster, did him no political damage. He faced up to it at once. "I'm going to the American people and tell them I've goofed and pledge that I'll do better in the future," his aides remember him saying. Recounts O'Brien: "We were amazed at that kind of candor. But the polls reflected an upswing. We thought it would be a disaster, but it turned out to be otherwise."

The late President's brother, Sen. Ted Kennedy (D., Mass.), says JFK used to speculate about the ticket the Republicans would put up against him. "He thought their dream ticket would be a combination of Nelson Rockefeller and Barry Goldwater," the Senator says. As O'Brien remembers the speculation, they thought Rockefeller would be "a worthy opponent" but that Goldwater should be "easy to defeat."

• *Would Kennedy have dumped Lyndon Johnson?* Johnson went through a political menopause during his Vice Presidency, and it began to get on Kennedy's nerves. As George Smathers tells it, "Johnson was pouting, moping all over the place. Kennedy called and asked me what the hell to do. I said send him on a trip." Smathers recalls Kennedy's response: "That's a damn good idea. How far away can I send him?" Not long afterward, Johnson was dispatched on a goodwill mission to the far ends of the Far East.

Feldman remembers "some mention of dumping Johnson in 1964" but doubts that Kennedy would have abandoned his Vice President. Most White House aides recall that Kennedy treated Johnson with respect and insisted they do likewise. "They didn't socialize," recalls O'Brien. "Their relationship was

a professional association, one of mutual respect."

Papa Joe admired LBJ

Ted Kennedy notes that their father was "a strong admirer of Lyndon Johnson." The implication was that old Joe Kennedy would have influenced his son to keep Johnson on the ticket.

• *Who would have taken over the*

White House in 1968? A retiring President usually has the power to determine who shall replace him on the ticket. The likely contenders in 1968 would have been Vice President Lyndon Johnson and Attorney General Robert Kennedy, most insiders agree.

It's no secret that the two men despised one another. "They did not have a close relationship," concedes Larry O'Brien. "You might term it mutual suspicion. Lyndon would wonder what was motivating Bobby. Bobby felt the same way about Lyndon. The situation grew in intensity."

President Kennedy was sensitive about establishing a Kennedy dynasty, but he could hardly have favored Johnson over his own brother. The men around JFK believe he would have had no choice. Smathers puts it bluntly:



Scenes like this, with the Marines in action outside Da Nang, might not have occurred if JFK had lived, say his aides. Ted Sorensen, for one, says, "We would not have bombed North Vietnam. The Marines would never have landed."

"Bobby would have pushed; his mother and sisters would have pushed; the White House staff would have pushed."

Most Kennedy intimates agree that brother Robert would have inherited Camelot. "Assuming that the Camelot aura continued," adds former press secretary Pierre Salinger, "then Bobby would surely have beaten Richard Nixon" in 1968.

- *Could Kennedy have kept his Administration scandal-free?* Several Kennedy aides have mentioned that he believed in playing by the rules, whether it was sports or politics. They insist, therefore, the White House never fixed government contracts or cases for the political manipulators.

Swears Feldman: "Under Kennedy the attempted ITT fix would never have occurred. Kennedy resisted the pres-

ures. Bobby was the same way." Ted Kennedy recalls that Nixon tried to justify his own ITT shenanigans by implicating the Kennedys in similar practices. "The Nixon Administration turned the Justice Department upside down during the ITT investigation to find some evidence that the Kennedy Administration had also tried to fix cases," says the Senator. "They came up without a scintilla of evidence that anyone in the Kennedy White House had ever made a single telephone call."

'A different atmosphere'

- *Would the Watergate scandal have been averted?* Ted Sorensen answers this way: "If Kennedy had lived, there would have been a different atmosphere in the country. The passions of the late '60's would never have built. There would have been no unrest over Vietnam. The black people felt he understood them; they would not have resorted to violence. Young people identified with him. People had a respect and liking for him. The relationship with the press was one of mutual respect. All this went sour with Vietnam. An atmosphere of hope and idealism went sour in the country as well. And it was that sourness which produced Nixon and Watergate."

Kennedy aides insist that their man would never have resorted to Watergate tactics himself. Contends Feldman: "Kennedy would never permit break-ins and blackmail."

- *How would Kennedy have handled*



Bobby Kennedy campaigning in California for the Presidency in June 1968. An assassin later gunned him down. Kennedy intimates feel JFK would have chosen Bobby as a successor over Lyndon Johnson because of strong family pressure.

the FBI? President Kennedy's first move after his inauguration was to reappoint J. Edgar Hoover as FBI director. But Ted Kennedy now claims both his brothers became disturbed over the FBI's operations.

Hoover to get boot

But Hoover was too formidable a public figure even for Presidents to challenge. President Kennedy intended to wait until after the 1964 election, therefore, to deal with Hoover. There is no question, Senator Kennedy maintains, that his brother would have removed Hoover after the election.

- *Would Kennedy have stopped the CIA abuses?* Privately, he blamed the CIA for the Bay of Pigs invasion, which he called the blunder of all blunders. He declared afterward that he "wanted to splinter the CIA in a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds."

When he cooled down, Kennedy called in White House adviser Clark Clifford, who had drafted the legislation establishing the CIA. Clifford remembers the late President's words vividly: "I made some bad decisions on the Bay of Pigs," said Kennedy. "I made these bad decisions because I had bad in-

formation. My information was bad because our intelligence was poor. Something is gravely wrong inside the CIA, and I intend to find out what it is. I cannot afford another Bay of Pigs."

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Kennedy wanted someone he could trust to keep an eye on the CIA and selected his brother Robert as his unofficial overseer. But associates recall that Bobby Kennedy became fascinated with the CIA's cloak-and-dagger operations. Sources who would rather not be identified say Bobby had full knowledge

of the attempts to knock off Cuba's Premier Fidel Castro.

Some associates believe the late President would have taken action in his second term to curb the CIA. Larry O'Brien offers this assessment: "Kennedy had a particular annoyance with the advisers and counselors he inherited, the CIA and military. He anticipated—it was a probing sort of thing—

making some significant moves in the CIA, Pentagon and in the recesses of the State Department. The basic thrust was that he knew a lot of changes had to be made."

• *Would Jacqueline have walked out on JFK?* It is no longer a secret that President Kennedy had a weakness for women. This became a strain, intimates now admit, on his storybook marriage

to Jacqueline. These intimates believe, nevertheless, that the marriage would have withstood the stresses.

According to Smathers, "Jackie knew he was playing around. It upset her, but never enough to divorce him. Jack learned from his old man, who had a few flings in his day. But Rose Kennedy never gave up on old Joe. Of course, Jackie was more high-spirited. But Jack loved Jackie, and she loved him. Cer-

tainly, he would never have left her."

Wanted more children

Ted Kennedy confides that his late brother wanted more children but that Jacqueline had medical complications with the baby who died. "It may not have been possible for them to have a bigger family," he says quietly.

• *Would violence have exploded in the black ghettos?* Former aides believe the Kennedy style, with the goodwill he inspired, might have kept the peace. Myer Feldman explains it this way: "Kennedy always understated his objectives, made sure they were within reach, made good preparations. I'm sure he would have gone as far as Lyndon Johnson on civil rights. But it would have been in a different way. I think the Kennedy method is better, less calculated to excite the people. The change would have come and come quickly but not, I think, with such dramatics."

Larry O'Brien claims Kennedy was "at the breakthrough point on civil rights" before he died in Dallas. The assassination spurred the legislation through Congress, in the opinion of Kennedy aide Lee White, "because Congress wanted to give Kennedy some kind of tribute."

But it was Lyndon Johnson who caused the civil rights explosion. Dean Rusk offers this observation: "To me, JFK's interest in civil rights came out of his mind. With LBJ, it came out of his guts. When LBJ no longer faced the necessity of being elected Senator, [civil rights] came out like a volcano."

Had Kennedy lived, Rusk suggests, "blacks might not have gotten their civil rights so quickly," but the improvements might have stirred less violence.

Save Vietnam's billions

• *Would Americans have been more prosperous under Kennedy?* Ted Kennedy believes his brother would have withdrawn from Vietnam and, therefore, would have saved the \$155 billion that was sunk into the Vietnam war. This is money that could have been used to strengthen the domestic economy, the Senator suggests. The wasted military money caused such a strain on the economy, he contends, that it precipitated "many of our problems at home and abroad."

The late President would have used the powers of government to stimulate the economy, his aides further agree. Recalls Larry O'Brien: "He felt that the government should get involved. The

thrust was that the government has to take action, that things must be done at the federal level."

• *Could Kennedy have duplicated Lyndon Johnson's legislative achievements?* Most observers agree that Kennedy alienated Congressional leaders, that it took his assassination to solidify the Democrats on Capitol Hill. His closest advisers dispute this report but acknowledge he would have fallen short of Johnson's legislative record.

• *Could JFK have achieved peace in the Middle East?* Kennedy used his legal counsel, Myer Feldman, to seek an out-of-channels settlement. Recalls Feldman: "We came within a millimeter of solving that problem. It failed. I think we would have attempted it again in a little different way, using the full power of the Presidency. He was developing a correspondence with the Arabs. I also made sure the Israelis knew what was going on, outside of channels. Both the Security Council and the State Department got sore about it."

Ted Kennedy also remembers that his brother started writing personal, confidential letters to leaders in the Middle East. In Ted's opinion, JFK "would have continued this innovation and would have been successful in bringing the Israelis and Arabs closer together."

• *Would the Chinese and Americans have gotten together?* Foreign affairs was President Kennedy's dominant in-



Although JFK and Vice President Lyndon Johnson "didn't socialize," says an aide, their relationship was "one of mutual respect." The Texan sometimes got on Kennedy's nerves but would not have been dumped as his running mate.

terest, and he looked ahead to opening a dialogue with the Chinese mainland. But he probably would have taken the slow diplomatic boat to China.

Recalls Dean Rusk: "Kennedy had a near unanimous resolution from Congress objecting to the seating of Peking in the United Nations. Eisenhower also told him he could not support him on the recognition of Peking."

• *Would there have been a detente with Russia?* The late President's foreign policy advisers agree unanimously

that relations with Russia would have been repaired. Says Rusk: "We didn't go around shouting detente, but we made some very important agreements with the Soviet Union."

Pierre Salinger remembers that John Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev started off as hostile adversaries but grew closer together after the Cuban missile crisis. Speculates Salinger: "I do know that Kennedy and Khrushchev were on the same wavelength. I think Khrushchev would have survived if Kennedy hadn't been killed. The will was really

between them for agreement."

• *What would Kennedy have done after leaving the White House?* He once spoke to me about the problem of retiring at age 51. As a former President, he mused, it might be awkward to start a new career.

'Didn't want to retire'

Jack Kennedy told his close friend George Smathers that "the Senate is the best job, with the most power and the least answering to do." Smathers, therefore, concludes: "In the Senate, he could have been an elder statesman with power and influence. The idea of two Kennedys from Massachusetts in the Senate appealed to him. He could have swung it. I think he would have run for the Senate. He certainly didn't want to retire and become a recluse."

But all these hopes and dreams exploded in Dealey Plaza in Dallas on a sunny Nov. 22, 1963. What final speculation can we offer about the man and the future? Ted Sorensen sums it up: "It wouldn't have been Camelot. He would have had strong opposition in 1964, especially from the South. He would have had continuing problems with Congress. I don't mean to imply that everything would have been easy and wonderful. But things would have been different, better. He wouldn't have been a myth; he never wanted to be a myth. But he would have been a good President."