

Ten Years Later

The shot that claimed the life of John F. Kennedy shortly after noon in Dallas ten years ago today will be remembered for more than the murder of a charismatic and promising young President; it marked the beginning of the end of an era filled with the ebullient optimism and confidence identified throughout the world with the spirit of America.

In retrospect, as remembrance of that tragedy coincides with Thanksgiving 1973, some of the Kennedy glitter may have been naively exuberant. The upbeat certainty that "we shall pay any price . . . to assure the survival and the success of liberty" around the globe seems extravagant today. A sadder but more realistic people has learned to question whether the world will ever again be this, or any, nation's oyster—or can be made to conform to man's noblest ideals and aspirations.

"The world is very different now," John Kennedy said in his inaugural address. "For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life."

More than a decade seems to separate John F. Kennedy's world from today's realities. The nuclear threat remains as great as he perceived it then, but to it have been added more subtle threats of an environment abused by man's thoughtlessness and greed. The abolition of human poverty is a goal as elusive as ever.

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This is not to say that the idealism with which a young President captured the imagination of so many young Americans failed to leave its imprint on national policies and individual lives. Many seeds of racial justice planted during the short Kennedy years were brought to fruition by Lyndon Johnson's landmark civil rights legislation. When President Kennedy refused to surrender to Governor Wallace's defiant stand in the schoolhouse door, he could hardly have envisioned last week's ceremony during which Mr. Wallace presided over the coronation of Alabama's first black homecoming queen.

Progress toward racial equality at home has been matched by dramatic changes in America's posture abroad. President Nixon has removed the diplomatic blindfold that for so long ignored the existence of 600 million Chinese. A constructive new pragmatism governs relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. These are no small accomplishments to mark on this Thanksgiving Day.

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It would nevertheless be hypocritical to fail to recognize the deeply disturbing changes that have reshaped this country in the post-Kennedy decade. The brutal gunfire in Dallas was to become symbolic of an increasing resort to violence. Riots and fire ravaged urban ghettos. Political appeals to ignorance and selfishness needlessly divided the nation and substituted neglect for compassion.

If America is different now, the change needs to be measured and defined in terms of mood rather than of specific events and policies. Some of the exuberance has drained away. Years of a debilitating war have sapped American self-confidence and even self-respect. No nation is likely soon again to dominate the world's economic scene or to hold out a credible promise to make the world safe for an ideal.

Americans have come up hard against inevitable limits. Even more jolting than the limits of power are the suddenly discovered limits of resources—energy, food, raw materials, everything. Americans face for the first time the possibility of an end to growth and expansion.

America is confronted, worst of all, by a debilitating loss of confidence in its institutions. The descent from the idealism and, perhaps, the euphoria of Camelot, gradual at first, has gathered precipitous momentum. The recent political scandals have shaken the country's faith in itself.

John F. Kennedy could still call for "a grand and global alliance" in the "struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself." The nation's mood now calls for a more limited goal—a return to its basic principles. There are special grounds for thanksgiving today in the fact that the search for the road back has at least begun.